

Tools of Improvisation

1. Learn all 12 major and minor scales, played in 4 octaves, with arpeggios on the inactive tones (which is the tonic chord in every key).
2. Learn the sequence of keys, sometimes referred to as the Circle of Fifths, and understand what keys are closely related to each other. Understand the relationship between major and minor keys. What is the difference between relative and parallel minor?
3. Learn the differences between natural, harmonic, and melodic minor scales. Generally what styles of music uses these different scales?
4. Learn all the intervals within the octave. (Perfect, major, minor, diminished, augmented, tritone) What are compound intervals?
5. Learn how to play the pentatonic scale in every key. What is the difference between major and minor pentatonic?
6. Be able to play the chromatic scale both ascending and descending with both hands.
7. Practice octaves using both scales, melodies, with both right and left hands.
8. Learn how to build chords on every note with all 4 chord types (major, minor, augmented, and diminished).
9. Learn the special qualities of diminished chords, how many there are, and how they can be used in modulation.
10. Be able to understand and play the chord inversions of every chord in triads and full chords with octaves.
11. Play a melody in octaves filling in the chords in between. Play a melody in the bass using chords in the right hand.
12. Understand the stability of root position, first inversion, and second inversion chords, what their functions are, and how these concepts contribute to tension and relaxation in a piece of music.
13. Study voicing and doubling as it relates to a 4 part arrangement. Playing 4 part choral music (hymns or something similar) is a good place to understand these concepts.

14. Learn to analyze music to understand the structure of the pieces that you are playing.

15. Expanded chords – what are they and how do they work? (explain balance, voicing, etc.) Learn how to play all chords in the expanded form quickly. Play these chords in different octaves. Learn how to roll expanded chords. Recognize when pieces that we already play use these voicings. [Fur Elise]

16. Learn how to write a melody and understand how the active and inactive tones in a key contribute to the tension and relaxation of that melody. [Talk about tension and relaxation in a piece of music.]

17. What are chord tones, non-chord tones, passing tones, neighbor tones, anticipations (unaccented non-harmonic tones), and appoggiaturas (accented non-harmonic tones)? Use these tools to create variations in melody.

18. Learn how to simplify music by recognizing the chords in standard notation and then playing them as triads with a simple melody.

19. Can you play and use embellishments such as trills, mordents, turnarounds, etc. while improvising a melody?

20. Be able to name and recognize chords in modern nomenclature such as: C, G, Dm Em, Am7, Bm7, E7#9, F+, E_b[°], Dsus4, A7sus4, etc.

21. Chords are like trees. Roots, trunk, leaves - root, 3rd, 5th. What parts of chords can be left out and still have a complete chord? What parts of chords can be added to and still have a good balance? It is possible to have too much “root” in a chord?

22. What are dominant 7th chords? Where do the 7ths in these chords want to resolve?

23. What are secondary dominants? Can you play the secondary dominants for every chord in a scale? Can you play the secondary dominants in first inversion resolving to the root position of the target chord? [You're the Inspiration]

24. What are suspended chords? (Dsus4, Asus4, etc.) How do we resolve them?

25. What is a substitute chord? How do we figure these out? What are their functions?

26. Can you add 7ths, 9ths, 11ths, and 13ths to triads to create complex harmonies?
27. What are cadences? What are the main types of cadences? (Perfect authentic, imperfect authentic, plagal, and deceptive cadences.) Can you recognize them in a musical composition? Do you know how to create these cadences? Where do we find these cadences generally and what are they used for?
28. Use pedal tones when improvising.
29. Can you transpose a piece of music? Can you transpose a piece or song quickly (say, 10 minutes or less) and play it without writing down every note?
30. Do you know how to modulate to different keys? What is a pivot chord?
31. What are the musical rules for the Common Practice Period? Do we have to always follow these rules? What are the rules for, and what do they define? What happens when we “break” these “rules”? ie: the natural tendencies of the intervals, scale degrees, chord inversions, 7ths, etc.?
32. I use improvisation most regularly in hymn playing and popular music. Hymns are choral music, not organ or piano music, and popular music is most often conceived and played in an improvisational manner. Popular music has its roots in the classical traditions.

Useful rules in improvisation:

- No thirds below C3. (C below middle C.) Perfect 5ths and octaves are fine. [Exceptions - Chopin, Beethoven]
- Use complete expanded chords and their parts to embellish a piece.

33. Analyze music to learn what other composers have done.
34. Learn the chord progressions and sections of music of your favorite composers and songs.
35. “Just Play the Pattern.” A different perspective when playing. [Karrol Cobb]
36. Baroque, Classical, Romantic, Impressionist music, Ragtime, and modern pieces are excellent to learn technique and style so that we can improvise appropriately in any genre that we would wish. Other styles are Jazz, blues, country, etc.