

# TARGET APPROACH IMPROVISATION

The key to good improvisation practice is to focus on only *one aspect at a time* - often called the *target approach*. Because this approach will not necessarily yield improvisation that sounds complete, doing actual “performance practice” is also important.

**The topics below assume you know what scales to use in a given situation and have command of them.**

1] Choose a single topic below to work on;

2] Decide what material to work with;

- **SINGLE CHORD** - specific chord types (major, dominant 7th, etc.) or individual chords from a tune.
- **CHORD PATTERNS** - two or more chords in a progression (e.g. ii-V<sup>7</sup> or ii-V<sup>7</sup>-I).
- **TUNE PROGRESSIONS** - complete chord progressions from actual tunes.

3] Record, listen to, and critique the results.

## CHORD-TONE SOLOING

Improvise on the exercise or song progression you’re working on using only chord tones. Try to favor moving to new chords by half-step movement.

## LITTLE/BIG SCALES & ARPEGGIOS

- **LITTLE SCALE EXERCISE** - Staying within a random limited range of a 5th, play only the notes of each scale that fall within that range. Once that range of the keyboard starts to feel comfortable, use a different range. Start with half-notes at a slow tempo if necessary, gradually increasing to shorter rhythmic values at faster tempos.
- **LITTLE ARPEGGIO EXERCISE** - Staying within a random limited range of a 5th, play arpeggios only on the notes of the chord that fall within that range. Once that range of the keyboard starts to feel comfortable, use a different range. Start with quarter-notes at a slow tempo if necessary, gradually increasing to shorter rhythmic values at faster tempos.
- **BIG SCALE EXERCISE** - Play each chord’s scale starting at a random place in the scale going straight up the keyboard and coming back down once you reach the top. As you change into each new chord, begin with the closest possible note within that chord’s scale. Start with half-notes at a slow tempo if necessary, gradually increasing to shorter rhythmic values at faster tempos.
- **BIG ARPEGGIO EXERCISE** - Play diatonic 7th chord arpeggios in 8th notes from the first chord’s scale from the root. For each successive chord, continue playing the 7th chord that is built on the next chord’s closest scale note from the previous chord. Start at a slow tempo and increasing the tempo as you obtain mastery. This can also be done with the chords in inversions.
- **BIG ARPEGGIO EXERCISE 2** - Play the previous exercises again but instead of playing the chords ascending in Root-3rd-5th-7th order, change the order of the notes to something like Root-5th-3rd-7th or 7th-3rd-Root-5th.
- **BIG ARPEGGIO EXERCISE 3** - Improvise freely or with a set rhythmic pattern (e.g. ♪♪♪♪♪) using only chord tones.

*Once the above exercises are feeling comfortable, add chromatic notes to your scales to add interest.*

## THE “PLAY-REST” APPROACH

Purposely insert periods of resting into your solos. Don’t be afraid to rest longer than you play. Just when you think you must starting playing, rest even a little longer. When you do play, make your entrances surprising and unpredictable. During the resting period, think of the last idea you played and decide whether or not to develop it or go to something new.

Practice this topic using any one of these **EVEN-BAR** play-rest combinations:

PLAY 1 BAR/REST 1 BAR    PLAY 2 BARS/REST 2 BARS    PLAY 3 BARS/REST 1 BAR    PLAY 1 BAR/REST 3 BARS  
PLAY 4 BARS/REST 2 BARS    PLAY 2 BARS/REST 4 BARS    PLAY 2 BARS/REST 6 BARS    PLAY 6 BARS/REST 2 BARS

Then practice this topic using any one of these more difficult **ODD-BAR** play-rest combinations:

PLAY 1 BAR/REST 2 BARS    PLAY 2 BARS/REST 1 BAR    PLAY 3 BARS/REST 2 BARS    PLAY 2 BARS/REST 3 BARS  
PLAY 4 BARS/REST 1 BAR    PLAY 1 BAR/REST 4 BARS

Finally, practice this topic just simply by playing and resting anytime you want.

## MELODIC LEAPS AT CHORD CHANGE

Pick two different chords within a progression you are working on and practice making leaps from the last note you play on the first chord into the next chord.

## QUOTING THE MELODY

Memorize a tune's melody and chords using the "reduction method". After memorization is complete, work on the tune by:

- Playing phrases that consist of a couple of measures of the melody followed by improvisation.
- Playing a complete phrase of the melody followed by a completely improvised phrase.
- Playing a mostly improvised solo with occasional quotes from the melody.

## USING GUIDE-TONE LINES

Compose a guide tone line consisting of a single note per chord change. Move from each note to the next using mostly half steps or whole steps. Try to emphasize notes that differ from chord to chord with a preference for the extensions of the chord. Once you've created a line you're happy with, memorize it. If the tune's actual melody isn't too dense, it could also be used as a guide tone line.

Solo over the progression using the guide tone line notes as targets. Start out embellishing the entire guide tone line in a very simple manner and then get successively more complex as you start feel more comfortable. Also make an effort to precede playing the guide tone notes chromatically. Write out and play an embellished version of your guide tone line. You can also improvise further embellishments this written version.

Create a different guide tone line and repeat the process again.

## PHRASE LENGTHS

Using the play-rest approach, improvise while controlling your phrase lengths throughout the solo as follows:

- Short phrases only (approximately 1 - 4 beats of playing and then resting).
- Medium phrases only (2-4 measures each).
- Long phrases only (5-8 measures each).
- Rotate between one short phrase and one medium phrase.
- Rotate between one short phrase and one long phrase.
- Rotate between one medium phrase and one long phrase.

## RHYTHMIC DENSITY

Using the play-rest approach, improvise while controlling your phrase lengths throughout the solo as follows:

- Using only notes of long duration.
- Playing sparsely using notes of various duration.
- Using only notes of short duration.
- Playing densely using notes of various duration.
- Rotate between one sparse phrase and one dense phrase.
- Begin each phrase sparsely and end densely.
- Begin each phrase densely and end sparsely.
- Play each phrase going from sparse to dense back to sparse.
- Play each phrase going from dense to sparse back to dense.

## MELODIC AND RHYTHMIC EMBELLISHMENT

- Play the original melody while adding or deleting notes.
- Play the original melody notes while changing their rhythm by shortening, lengthening, repeating, or displacing them.

## RHYTHMIC DEVELOPMENT

Create a one or two-measure rhythm pattern. Select a group of notes from the appropriate scale and combine the note group with the rhythmic pattern. Expand on this idea by using *multiple* rhythms and/or using *any* notes from the appropriate scale.

## OVER-THE-BAR PHRASING

Over-the-bar phrasing occurs when a phrase ends with a sustained note of at least a quarter note BEFORE the next measure, and then holds into that measure.

- Improvise on a progression/tune with a number of pre-determined rhythms that hold across the bar line as described above.
- Repeat the same exercise incorporating the the Play-Rest approach