

How Jazz Pianists Practice

by Ted Rosenthal

The jazz pianist is part pianist, part composer and part arranger. In addition to "traditional" pianistic skills, jazz pianists must also be able to improvise, harmonize melodies, instantly transpose, and create accompaniments in a variety of styles. They must also have highly developed rhythmic skills and be able to "swing." In a practice session, pianistic as well as creative resources need to be constantly challenged. Furthermore, the nature of performing in the jazz world often means little or no rehearsal time. The well prepared jazz pianist must be ready for almost anything!

There are a wide variety of methods jazz pianists use to perfect their art. Today's jazz pianist may well have a classical background and practice "traditional" scales, arpeggios, and exercises. However, working on technique with a "jazz point of view" includes a vast array of exercises and pianistic devices that are common to jazz performance style.

Scales and Arpeggios

Jazz pianists practice a variety of scales and modes. These scales and modes represent chord scales- - part of the raw material used in improvisation over jazz harmonies. Chord scales include all the modes (Dorian - ex.1, Phrygian, etc.) as well as many scales - the Blues Scale (ex.2), Diminished (1/2 tone - whole tone symmetrical -ex.3), Whole Tone (ex.4), Pentatonic scales, (ex.5) and others.

① Gm9

② C7

③ C13(b9)

④ C7(#5)

⑤ Cm9

Arpeggios in 7th chords of all types (major, minor, dominant, diminished, etc.) are also useful. These scales and arpeggios are practiced in both hands, separately and together. Scales and arpeggios in 2 keys at once (L.H. G augmented, and R.H. D Augmented) are other ways pianists "jazz up" their technical work (ex.6).

⑥

Pianistic Devices

Working on pianistic devices is also common. For the right hand, pianists often work on "runs" in the style of Art Tatum (ex.7), Teddy Wilson (ex.8) and the like. In addition to gaining speed and evenness, they also sound great!

The image shows two musical exercises, labeled 7 and 8, written for piano. Exercise 7 is in the key of C major and features a C7 chord in the left hand. The right hand plays a series of eighth-note runs. Exercise 8 is in the key of F major and features an F7 chord in the left hand. The right hand plays a series of eighth-note runs, with a dashed line indicating a specific fingering or articulation pattern.

For the left hand, work on accompaniment patterns of many types is very helpful. For example: Stride patterns (ex.9), walking tenths (ex.10), broken tenths (ex.11), walking bass (ex.12), and boogie patterns (ex.13), can all be made into exercises.

9 C Dmin G7

10 C Gmin7 C7

11 C Dmin E♭dim C/E

12 Dmin7 G7

13 C7

Two handed devices would include playing improvised lines two octaves apart in the style of Phineas Newborn (ex.14), or block chords (4 note close voicing in the R.H. with the melody doubled one octave below in the L.H.) in the style of George Shearing(ex.15).

14 Gm9 C7 FMaj7

15 FMaj6 Am7(♭5) D7(♭9)

Swing Eighths

Practicing technical exercises with a jazz feel (swing 1/8 notes) is also important. In addition to using the metronome on the down beat, jazz pianists also practice as if the metronome "clicks" were the 2nd and 4th beat (as the drummer might play on the high hat). For example, instead of practicing 16th notes at $\downarrow = 92$ on the beat, the clicks can be heard as beats 2 and 4 at $\downarrow = 92$ ($= \downarrow = 184$, = medium swing) (ex.16). The notes are the same speed, but are converted to swing eighth notes (the 2nd 1/8 note has a slightly shorter duration). Using the metronome on beats 2 and 4 is also valuable for developing good steady time.



John Coltrane practiced from Slonimsky's *Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns* and many jazz musicians have since followed his lead in exploring an almost endless variety of non-traditional scales and patterns. However, in the final analysis, practicing technique in jazz is really less about achieving the super-virtuosity required of today's concert pianists, but more about achieving the necessary *fluency* to improvise ideas freely without constraint.

Jazz Harmonies

No instrument can achieve endless harmonic variation like the piano. For this reason, exploring harmony is a big part of a jazz pianists practice. Many jazz pianists achieve a good part of their personal identity through their harmonic style. Pianists as diverse as Thelonious Monk and Bill Evans can often be easily identified by one chord voicing!

When I find a voicing I like, the first thing I practice is transposing it through all the keys (most often via the circle of 5ths) (ex.17).

(17) C13 F13 B♭13 E♭13

Then I play the voicing in different registers. If it is a one-handed close position voicing (often a left hand voicing used to accompany a right hand solo line), working on inversions also helps (ex.18).

(18) E♭Maj7

Through exploration and repetition I make the voicing part of *my* vocabulary. Jazz pianists explore both 2 and 1 handed voicings for both solo playing and "comping" (accompanying) behind a soloist. Transposition and repetition are the most common ways of knowing the chords cold.

There are many harmonic devices that the jazz pianist will practice to gain fluency. Practicing one device at a time within a tune is a useful method. All jazz pianists add chromatic alterations and extensions to a chord (ex.19).

(19) E♭M13(♯11) D7(♭5 ♯9) G+7 Cm9

These alterations and extensions are practiced until they are second nature. In addition, most jazz pianists will add chords to a basic progression (ex.20). Listen to Art Tatum, Hank Jones, or George Shearing; passing chords, tritone substitutions, and chromatic movement are common ways they "spice up" the harmony.

(20) FM9 (Eb7(#11)) Dm9 (Ab13(#11)) Gmin7 (B+7) C9

Understanding and practice of specific harmonic styles is an essential path jazz musicians take in forming their own style. These harmonic styles are often best represented by notable jazz pianists. Harmony in fourths (McCoy Tyner, ex.22), using a chord progression over a pedal point (Richie Beirach, ex.21), exploring moving inner voices from chord to chord (Bill Evans, Fred Hersch, ex.23), and dissonant harmony (Cecil Taylor, certain Thelonious Monk voicings, ex.24), are among the harmonic devices that jazz pianists explore.

21 $D\flat F$ $A F$ $G\flat F$ $G F$ $E F$

22 $F\text{sus}4$

23 $Bm9$ $E7\text{sus}4$ $E7$

24 $E\flat 7(11)$ $G\flat 7(13)$

Rhythm

Rhythmic study for piano is often overlooked but is essential for jazz pianists. If rhythmic skills are not honed, a pianist who is used to playing solo may be unpleasantly surprised the first time they play with a group. Good "time" is essential in order to interact smoothly within a jazz rhythm section (with a drummer and a bass player). Conversely, jazz pianists should also practice creating different rhythmic styles at the piano without depending on the rhythm section. A solo jazz pianist should be able to create a variety of rhythmic feels (slow blues tempo, fast swing, samba, jazz waltz, etc.).

It is important to be aware of different tempos and how they sound and feel. By practicing at ♩=60, ♩=160, and ♩=260 the mind organizes what kinds of rhythms can be created and executed. An awareness of the beat is also integral to rhythmic phrasing. By starting and ending phrases on different beats, we can get a variety of rhythmic implications out of a similar phrase (ex.25-26).



Also, more and more jazz players are venturing into odd meters (5/4, 7/4, 7/8 etc.), and today's jazz pianist needs to prepare for those experiences. A jazz phrase played with good rhythm (even with a less than perfect melodic line) will almost always sound better than the right pitches played with an awkward feel.

Melody and Improvisation

To play a melody convincingly -- with feeling, musicality and swing -- is often deceptively hard. Jazz pianists rarely play the melody in groups with horn players. However, the pianist's role in a trio is almost exclusively to play the melody. For this reason it is important to practice playing and interpreting melodies. Jazz pianists practice melodic playing in a variety of ways: melody alone, with L.H. accompaniment, in 3rds, 6ths and other intervals, thickened with one or two handed chords, etc. Melodic playing is also a key part of improvising.

Improvisation is the basis for all jazz playing. Although virtually everything a jazz pianist plays is improvised, melodic soloing over chord changes is one of the things jazz pianists practice most. Practice often starts with the basic building blocks: building melodies, playing chord scales and studying chord-scale relationships, improvising over basic chord progressions, and rhythmic phrasing. This practice can vary in difficulty depending on the complexity of the chord progressions and variations in tempo.

There are also more advanced tools and concepts to practice improvisation. Setting parameters in improvisation can lead to new discoveries. Creating melodies in one duration (all half notes, all triplets, etc.), or in a specific mode (dorian, lydian, etc.), or in a specific register (limit yourself to one octave) are ways we challenge our creativity and test our resourcefulness. Motivic improvisation -- developing a motive instead of just "running through the chord changes" -- is another valuable practice tool and an important improvisational approach.

Putting It Together

Working on tunes brings together all of the concepts discussed so far. Furthermore, all of the devices discussed above can be practiced within almost any tune. Jazz pianists may stagger their time between working on specific devices as an exercise and working on the devices within a song. Practicing within the framework of a song also helps to build a repertoire. Jazz pianists must know a large variety of songs. Standards (by Gershwin, Porter, Kern, Rodgers, etc.), Jazz originals (by Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, Wayne Shorter, Thelonious Monk, etc.), Blues structures, and "I Got Rhythm" changes, are basics for the jazz pianists' repertoire. In addition, these songs need to be practiced in many different keys. This is especially important preparation for playing with singers.

Pianists are often expected to come up with instant introductions and/or endings, often when there has been no rehearsal. These and other arranging devices (modulations, tempo changes, etc.) are also areas for practice. Being able to convincingly play a large variety of songs in many keys without rehearsal can mean keeping or losing the gig! Therefore, most jazz pianists practice to keep their repertoire in their fingers and in their ears.

Jazz is essentially an aural tradition as echoed in the phrase "the records are the textbooks." The extensive texts, methods, transcriptions, and resources on all aspects of how to play jazz are a relatively recent phenomenon. The original masters of jazz learned (and created) largely by ear. For this reason, a very important aspect of practice is listening and being able to hear the notes, (pitches and rhythms) the phrasing, and the expressive devices of the music. This kind of aural apprenticeship is an important step in learning the jazz language and important players styles.

Playing and singing along with solos is common and valuable. Transcribing solos is also very worthwhile, while playing from transcription books can be useful if studied as carefully as if one did the transcription themselves. When I find a phrase I like in a recorded solo, I will often write it down, play it, and transpose it through all the keys. In this way I am adding the phrase to my vocabulary. It will often come out in my improvisation when I least expect it. Jazz pianists do not limit themselves to learning the solos and styles of other pianists, but also familiarize themselves with important jazz players of all instruments.

Group jazz playing is akin to chamber performance. Interacting within a group, knowing when to lead or when to follow, anticipating a band-mates path rhythmically, harmonically, dynamically or otherwise cannot be practiced alone. For this reason jazz musicians of all kinds are often eager to play in sessions. These can range from a relatively unstructured jam session to a more controlled rehearsal-like atmosphere. These sessions can be very beneficial. It is a chance to see if what you practiced can be executed in a group situation. It is a way to learn new tunes or to be exposed to new styles and ideas. It is also a chance to test your creative and improvisational skills and see how the group will respond. Most importantly, it is a chance to *listen*. Playing solo piano is a different skill than playing within a group of musicians that are improvising. Jazz musicians must listen to each other in order to interact in a meaningful way.

I have had the opportunity and the pleasure to play a variety of sessions with saxophonist Lee Konitz, in both a group and a duet setting. Lee commented in planning a session that "practicing together was perhaps better than practicing alone." Both are certainly needed, but being able to explore and improvise with others in an unpressured rehearsal environment is an important and rewarding way to practice.

As can be inferred by the topics touched on in this article, jazz pianists need practice in many musical areas. Whether one reaches the level of a working "sideperson," or a top performing artist, the technical and musical demands are numerous. Obviously, only people with time to practice 24 hours a day could cover all of the above items in one practice session! Realistically, only a small portion of these areas could be covered daily. A student's practice would typically focus more on the basics: technique, chord scales, voicings, learning to improvise over chord changes, etc. The professionals practice might cover exploration of advanced harmony, complex rhythms, and a good deal of creative improvisation and experimentation within the songs they will perform.

On tour it is common to travel all day, do a quick sound check, eat dinner, and perform. A practice session may only consist of a few warm up exercises. At these times, the skills one has practiced and developed over a lifetime will help to create music that is spontaneous, improvised, rhythmically spirited, and shaped in the moment, characteristics that are the lifeblood of jazz music.