

How Jazz Pianists Practice

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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.

The image displays five examples of scales and arpeggios, each consisting of a treble and bass clef staff. Example 1 is for Gm9, showing a scale in the treble clef and a chord in the bass clef. Example 2 is for C7, showing a scale in the treble clef and a chord in the bass clef. Example 3 is for C13(b9), showing a scale in the treble clef and a chord in the bass clef. Example 4 is for C7(#5), showing a scale in the treble clef and a chord in the bass clef. Example 5 is for Cm9, showing a scale in the treble clef and a chord in the bass clef.

Arpeggios in 7th chords of all types (major, minor, dominant, diminished, etc.) are also useful. These scales and