

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF EVERY PRACTICE SESSION!



Scales: What's The Point Anyway?

By Gunnar Mossblad

If scales and chords are the most enjoyable aspect of your practice routine, then this article is not for you. But, if it's not one of the more fun things in your practice routine or you conveniently run out of practice time before you get to the scales and chords, read on. Many musicians do not realize the true importance of studying and practicing scales, and as a result do not know how to practice scales to make them interesting and fun. That's right, scales can be fun. They serve an important function in your technical, musical, and most importantly, communicative skills as a musician.

COMMUNICATING IN THE JAZZ LANGUAGE

Scales and chords are one of the main building blocks of music. If you think of music as a language, practicing scales and chords are like studying vocabulary, conjugating verbs, and constructing simple sentences. In essence, practicing scales and chords are like learning the grammar and construction of the language of music. It still does not sound like fun does it, but read on. The purpose of practicing is to learn to communicate your thoughts and feelings aurally (improvising) or in written form (composing). The problem is that

very few of us had the early musical training that we had when we first learned our native tongue. Long before any of us could write or say our name, we learned to communicate by hearing our parents speak, imitating them, and eventually gaining the ability to communicate our thoughts and desires. We did not even consider what language it was, we just learned how to communicate. Imagine if you were taught music the same way. Unless you were a second or third generation musician, you probably did not have the opportunity to learn the language of music like you did your native

tongue. However, with the right approach you can use the practice of scales and chords to not only gain technical prowess on your instrument, but to register the quality of those sounds to your memory.

Unfortunately too many students only realize the technical value of the scales and either avoid them or are bored rather quickly. This is similar to the way too many of us studied a foreign language in high school. Remember those Spanish classes you crammed for in high school. How much can you speak now? In fact, remember how awful you did when you finally got to try out your Spanish on your trip to Mexico. It was difficult at best to say anything that the locals understood, and even more difficult to understand them. You did not have that aural foundation of the language. Until you have absorbed a language into your subconscious, and can think in that language, you will always sound like you are speaking a foreign language. Yet, if you move to a foreign country, in less than six months you will probably be thinking and conversing fluidly in that language. It's a matter of understanding and imitating.

Do not get me wrong, scales and chords are important to your technical and theoretical development. However, without practicing to fully hear and understand the musical grammar of music, you will not be

able to construct and reproduce meaningful communications when you improvise. That's right, music is supposed to communicate and that's when it gets FUN. To do that, like any language, you need to HEAR, UNDERSTAND, and COMMENT musically, without stumbling technically or playing "wrong" notes.

Can you imagine playing a tune with a group and not playing the right changes, key, or even just stumbling technically (stuttering) over the form of the tune. It's because you do not understand what the other musicians are saying. That would be like having a conversation with someone, and not really understanding them. Imagine a conversation between two people who meet on the street, but do not fully understand each other. This often occurs between two people who do not really speak the same language, Imagine:

Person 1 — Hi, my name is Frank, what's yours?

Person 2 — The bank is over there.

Person 1 — Nice to meet you 'Bank', what do you do for a living?

Person 2 — My name is Rick Layer, what's yours?

Person 1 — You're a Brick Layer. Well, that certainly is interesting.

Example 1a



Example 1b



Example 1c



Example 1d



Example 1e



Well, you get the idea. First, they do not realize they are not communicating, BUT WE DO (the audience). I hope you can see the potential problems. At best, it is funny, but at the worst, it could be tragic. The same thing happens when you do not fully understand the musical language. To communicate with your fellow musicians you use the building blocks (scales and chords) to construct meaningful dialog with the other musicians which in turn communicates a cohesive musical statement to the audience. First you establish a song and key (subject), then using the structures of that tune (topic), you improvise (comment) using the tune's structures. By reacting to the musical statements (dialog) from the other members of the group you make a valid musical statement. If the essence and construction or sound of the scales and chords are in your subconscious, you should be able to make a viable musical statement. If not, it's going to sound like you do not understand the subject of the conversation that is taking place. You will not make musical sense, like the imaginary conversation above. So what is the point of scales? To gain a musical vocabulary (teach you the meaning of words and phrases) that can be utilized to improvise in a communicative way to the audience and other members of the group.

KEEPING SCALES INTERESTING

HOW DO I keep it interesting (especially after 20+ years of playing them) Vary your practice. After all, shouldn't you be able to say the same thing a variety of different ways. Remain focused on the main objective, which is to absorb it into your subconscious, but vary the WAY you practice them to gain flexibility and keep your interest.

After you have the basic scale and articulation (see EXAMPLE 1A), change the rhythm (EXAMPLE 1B), then the articulation (EXAMPLE 1C), the rhythm and articulation (EXAMPLE 1C). This can obviously go on, limited only by your creativity. Vary the tempo. Try going extremely slow one day. This is very difficult. Use poly-rhythmic development (example 1d), or vary the rhythm throughout (EXAMPLE 1E). I am sure you get the idea. Do NOT limit yourself. But, remember the main objective is to UNDERSTAND and HEAR the SCALE or CHORD as a sound that can be reproduced in a communicative way.

Imagine what the conversation between those two people on the street could have been, if only they UNDERSTOOD each other more accurately:

Person 1 — Hi, my name is Frank, what's yours?

Person 2 — Rick, Rick Layer, Glad to meet ya'.

Person 1 — Nice to meet you Rick. So what do you do for a living?

Person 2 — I'm a jazz bone player.

Person 1 — Oh yea? I'm a saxophonist. Who ya' playing with?

Person 2 — Nobody, I said I was a jazz trombone player. How about you?

Person 1 — People here and there. You know, Last to be hired, first to be fired.

Person 2 — So lets play sometime.

Person 1 — Cool, etc.

Have fun with those scales. §



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Once you have a work that you are happy with, Acid House allows you to save it in both Acid format for later work with the program, and in standard wav format for import into other music software. This second option is the way you would import the final product into an integrated digital audio and MIDI program for further use.

CD ARCHITECT

Now you have a tune ready to go. How do you let others hear it? It used to be that for private use you made cassette tapes and for bigger applications you made a DAT tape to be mastered and pressed into CD's at a CD replication plant. Sonic Foundry now gives you another solution to this problem. If you have one of the new CD-R drives on your PC that is capable of burning gold colored CD-R discs, then CD Architect is for you. All the CD-R drives come with basic software that enables you to write audio CD's, but for the most part this software is missing much of the functionality that a real mastering package like CD Architect gives you.

The user interface is very slick. CD Architect is set up as a Direct-X plugin to Sound Forge from Sonic Foundry. If you don't have Sound Forge, don't worry since CD Architect ships with Sound Forge XP (a lite version of the full blown package). CD Architect supports most of the popular IDE CD-R drives available as well as the dedicated outboard SCSI models.

In terms of advanced features, the program allows you to adjust the spacing between tunes individually to any value, perform fades in and out, handle 1 song CD's with several jump points (as on live in concert CD's), adjust overall volume levels of tunes, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. It basically handles all the messy