

Chromatic Practice Approach

By
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In order to reach a higher level of playing it's essential to be familiar and comfortable with all the chords, scales and progressions in all the keys. Perhaps the most common exercise in jazz is to practice ii-V-I progressions, blues and rhythm changes in all twelve keys. These are exercises that should be practiced frequently, even as part of your daily warm-up routine.

In theory, it's not harder to play in the key of G \flat than in C or F. For example, a blues in G \flat has the same harmonic structure and flow as a blues in F. The reason it feels less comfortable in G \flat is that we spend less time writing, practicing and playing in the "harder" keys. In jazz it becomes very apparent when there is a lack of technique in certain keys, since most jazz tunes are made up of constant key changes, using ii-V-I progressions. The goal when playing jazz is to be able to improvise over these constant key changes. In order to achieve this we have to practice and become comfortable in all keys. Don't forget, we can only reach our highest level of creativity when we don't have to worry about the technical and physical aspect of playing our instrument.

A good habit to get into is to transpose everything you are playing and practicing a **half step up and a half step down**. For example: You spend a whole day learning a jazz tune in the key of F. Why not spend a little more time learning it in F# and E. By using this approach you will quickly notice an improvement in your ability to playing in all keys. You will also become more comfortable transposing on the spot.

Also, when you are comfortable transposing a piece of music in two keys, it will automatically become easier to transpose to all the other keys. With this mastered, you will enjoy a much stronger and deeper understanding of standard harmonic progressions and structure in jazz.

Daily Practice Items

1. Scales and arpeggios in all keys.
2. Improvise over major and minor ii-V-I progressions in all keys.
3. Blues progressions in all keys.
4. Your favorite song in all keys.
5. Practice jazz licks in all keys.

Mel Bay's *Essential Jazz Lines* series is an excellent aid in learning to play in all keys. It presents jazz lines from several of the jazz masters such as, John Coltrane, Wes Montgomery, Bill Evans, Charlie Parker to mention a few. The books also include a play along CD, which make your practicing more fun.

Below are eight bars of several common chord progressions. Indicated above the music is an example of how you can analyze the music. Jazz pianists especially, should be able to analyze standard tunes this way in order to be able to transpose on the spot.

Chord analysis labels for C major progression:

- I chord: CMaj7
- 2-5 to the 4 chord: Gm7, C7, FMaj7
- Dominant 4 of the 4 chord: Bb13
- 3-6-2-5: Em7(b5), A7(b9), Dm7, G7
- Dom 3-6-2-5: E7(#9), A7b13, Dm7, G7

1. Try to use the same kind of thinking when you practice the tune in D \flat and B. It will help you to get a better understanding of the chord progressions.
2. Practice chord changes first.
3. Learn the melody. What scale degree does the phrase start and end on? Does the melody outline a chord?
4. Improvise over the tune.
5. Remember the trouble spots and practice them separately.
6. When you are done with point 1-5, try the tune in A \flat and G. Most likely it will be much easier.
7. **Result:** From these eight bars in three keys, you will have practiced six Major chords, six 2-5-1 progressions, 3 dominant chords, three 3-6-2-5 progressions. Hopefully you will also be more comfortable transposing. Initially it might be slightly harder to play in D \flat and B than in C, but this can be overcome with practice.

Chord analysis labels for D \flat major progression:

- D \flat Maj7
- A \flat m7, D \flat 7
- G \flat Maj7
- B13
- Fm7(b5), B \flat 7(b9), E \flat m7, A \flat 7
- F7(#9), B \flat 7b13, E \flat m7, A \flat 7

Chord analysis labels for B major progression:

- BMaj7
- F#m7, B7
- EMaj7
- A13
- D#m7(b5), G#7(b9), C#m7, F#7
- D#7(#9), G#7b13, C#m7, F#7

The chromatic approach is also very useful when learning voicings.

1. Move the voicing up and down chromatically. Start slow and analyze the chord tones as you go along. Gradually speed up the tempo to get the voicings under your fingers.

Cm7 C#m7 Dm7 Ebm7 Em7 Fm7 F#m7 Gm7 G#m7 Am7 Bbm7 Bm7 Cm7

Eb13 E13 F13 Gb13 G13 G#13 A13 Bb13 B13 C13 Db13 D13 Eb13

2. In this step we are moving away from the chromatic approach. Move the voicing up and down in whole steps.

Gm7 Am7 Bm7 C#m7 Ebm7 Fm7 Gm7 G#m7 F#m7 Em7 Dm7 Cm7 Bbm7 Abm7

3. Practice the voicings by moving up and down minor thirds.

G13 Bb13 Db13 E13 G13 E13 Db13 Bb13 G13

I have used this approach with a couple of my students and they have made great progress in their playing. It has also taken away the mystery from the “harder” keys.

Good Luck

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