

A Guide to Improvising on the piano (especially for jazz) and singing

Written by Jevan Pipitone
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Contact Details

Website: <http://www.jevan.com.au>

LinkedIn: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/jevanpipitone>

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/jevanpipitone>

Table of Contents

1. Major Scales Fingering	3
2. Harmonic Minor Scales Fingering	3
3. Melodic Minor Scales (MM) Fingering.....	4
4. Jazz Chords RH	4
5. Improvising using notes from a scale.....	5
6. Chordal Shapes	6
6.1 A Shape	6
6.2 Another chord shape	6
6.3 Another shape	7
6.4 Others	7
7. Single Note Shapes or Single Any Notes Left Hand (played slowly or medium speed)	8
8. Chords LH.....	9
9. Other techniques	9
9.1 RH can alternate between single note & chord.....	9
9.2 Two Scales.....	9
9.3 Changing Keys	9
9.4 RH scale improvising over major scale, with LH root+7th of mode 2, 3, 6	9
9.5 LH bass note improvisations	10
10. Rhythms	10
11. Jazz Singing Improvisation	11
12. Piano and Singing Together	13
13. Other things	14

1. Major Scales Fingering

RH=right hand

LH=left hand

	Scale	RH	LH
0b	C Major	12312341	54321321(4..)
5b	Db Major	23123412	32143213
2#	D Major	12312341	54321321(4..)
3b	Eb Major	21234123(1234..)	32143213(214..)
4#	E Major	12312341	54321321
1b	F Major	12341231	54321321(43..)
5b	Gb Major	23412312	43213214(321..)
1#	G Major	12312341	54321321(43..)
4b	Ab Major	34123123	32143213
3#	A Major	12312341	54321321
2b	Bb Major	21231234	32143213
5#	B Major	12312341	13214321

Example: Ab maj, 4b: Bb Eb Ab Db (up by 4 each time with G wraps to A), second last flat is the key eg Ab

Example: A major, 3#, F# C# G# (up by 5 each time with G wraps to A), last sharp add 1 semitone to give key eg G# -> A

To work out which flats or sharps: BEADG (flats) (up by 4 each time, with G wrapping to A) take as many flats as needed for key signature as per guideline above (eg F maj has 1 flat Bb; Bb maj has 2 flats Bb Eb, Eb maj has 3 flats Bb Eb Ab, etc). FCGDAE (sharps) (up by 5 each time, with G wrapping to A) take as many as needed for key signature eg Gmaj has F#, Dmaj has F# C#, Amaj has F# C# G#, Emaj has F# C# G# D# etc (note major key in sequence also goes up by 5 ie Cmaj Gmaj Dmaj Amaj Emaj etc). ie two patterns one going up by 5 for the # key signatures and one going up by 4 for the flat key signatures. This is called "Circle of fifths".

2. Harmonic Minor Scales Fingering

Scale	RH	LH
C Harmonic Minor (HM)	12312341	54321321
Db HM	34123123(41..)	32143213
D HM	12312341	54321321
Eb HM	21234123	21432132
E HM	12312341	54321321
F HM	12341231	54321321
Gb HM	34123123	43213214
G HM	12312341 (or 5 if done)	54321321
Ab HM	34123123(4..)	32143213
A HM	12312341	54321321
Bb HM	21231234	31321432
B HM	12312341	13214321

HM is b3 b6 from major scale. For example CDEbFGAbBC

3. Melodic Minor Scales (MM) Fingering

Scale	RH going up	RH going down	LH going up	LH going down
C MM	12342345	54321321	54321321	12312341 (or 5 if done)
Db MM	23123412	32132143	32143213	31234123
D MM	12312341 (or 5 if going down after)	54321321	54321321	12312341 (or 5 if done)
Eb MM	21234123	32143213	21432132	23123412
E MM	12312341 (or 5 if going down after)	54321321	54321321	12312341 (or 5 if done)
F MM	12341231	13214321	54321321	12312341 (or 5 if done)
Gb MM	23123412 (or 3 if going down after)	32132143	43213214	41231234
G MM	12312341 (or 5 if going down after)	54321321	54321321	12312341 (or 5 if done)
Ab MM	34123123	32132143	32143213	34123123
A MM	12312341 (or 5 if going down after)	54321321 (4..)	54321321	12312341 (or 5 if done)
Bb MM	21231234 (or can start with 4)	43213214	21321432	23412312
B MM	12312341 (or 5 if going down after)	54321321	13214321	12341231

Melodic Minor is b3 going up, b3 b6 b7 going down, from major scale.
For example CDEbFGABCBbAbGFEBDC

4. Jazz Chords RH

Min7:

RH: b3 5 b7 9 or b7 9 b3 5 (for both fingering is 1235)
LH: 1

Maj7:

RH 3579 or 7935
LH: 1

Dom7:

RH 35b79 or b7935
LH 1

For example in C Major, b3 is Eb (since 1 is C) etc as follows.

CMin7: Eb G Bb D or Bb D Eb G

Maj7: E G B D or B D E G

Dom7: E G Bb D or Bb D E G

5. Improvising using notes from a scale

Eb major

RH:

(position i)
CDEbFG
12345 (fingering)

Or

(position ii)
FGAbBbC
12345 (fingering)

B major

RH:

(position i)
GABCD
12345 (fingering)

Or

(position ii)
CDEF#G
12345 (fingering)

Pick any of those fingers to play, then try to change between positions I and ii. For example

RH:

BDCG
3515 (fingering)

Or

CAD
125

Left Hand Improvising:

Eb Major

GAbBbCD
54321 (fingering)

Or

CDEbFG
54321 (fingering)

Another possibility is to imagine/ remember/ see on the keyboard what the scale notes are, and then play them with any finger that is convenient from the state of the finger down then up of the last note played, thus allowing additional possibilities to be possible for improvising. Another example is Db major which is all black notes except for F and C, so when I am improvising in Db major I can just remember the white notes to use (F, C) and/or pick any black note.

6. Chordal Shapes

Play these notes at the same time:

RH

6.1 A Shape

FGC
125 (fingering)

Continue this pattern within C Major Scale Notes

le

GAD
125

CDF
125

Etc

6.2 Another chord shape

RH

DEFA
1235

EFGB
1235

Etc

6.3 Another shape

RH

CEFA
1235

EGAC
1235

6.4 Others

Try other 2,3 or 4 note chord shapes & shift up or down within a key (ie use only notes of that scale), with RH or LH.

Can also do 2 3 or 4 simultaneous note shapes in the RH and LH at the same time (different shapes and notes each hand), as long as all of the notes are from the same scale then it should be fine.

Can play a major scale in the RH either ascending or descending, and then jump to a non-consecutive note in the scale possibly with a change of direction as well, beginning with the finger that the fingering has for that scale at the new note. Keep doing this in order to vary the continuous notes. For example (starting ascending) CDEF (jumping down a bit and continuing the scale) DEFGAB (jumping up a bit and continuing the scale) DEFG (jumping down a bit and changing direction to descending) DCBAG. RH improvising using the Eb major scale has the advantage that it is easier to jump to the new fingering since it falls naturally onto flats or naturals, whereas improvising with C major is harder to keep the fingering correct since any fingering might do. In fact, fingering can sometimes be not worried about, but usually to start with I do worry about it.

Sometimes there could be a pause of any length between it, in order to add some "space" i.e. times of silence. Start adding some gaps in the continuous scale by missing out the occasional note. Play 3 notes one after the other, pause, 3 notes, pause; 2 notes, pause, 2 notes, pause; 4 notes, pause, 4 notes, pause (with all the notes of the same duration). Instead of playing a 3 note chord with all notes simultaneous, it is possible to play each of the notes one after the other and then hold them down once they are played, also the order in which the 3 notes are started to be sounding can vary for example 123, 321, 231, etc.

The LH could do 1st and 5th note of the scale at the same time (eg Eb Bb, for the scale Eb major), this can be shifted around so it can be 2nd and 6th note of the scale at the same time (for example F C, for the scale Eb major) (the distance between the notes is 5 scale notes but it can start on any note in the scale), and then hold it after playing the two notes together. This just provides a nice LH keyboard/piano bass sound that can be used with the RH improvising and works particularly well with keyboard midi generated sounds since they might be more likely to continue to sound for longer than for a piano. Another possibility is for the LH to do 1st and 7th notes of the scale at the same time (eg C with 5th finger of LH at same time as B with thumb of LH).

Single note RH improvisation can do single note shapes such as using RH fingers 251 251 251 shifting down or up one scale note each time (eg 251 251 251 would be D up to G down to C, E up to A down to D, F up to B down to E), or can use fingers 125 or fingers 521 etc. i.e. the order in which the shapes are played can be varied.

A RH 3-note chordal shape with 4 scale notes between each notes, then the chord is wholly shifted up or down one scale note then another scale note etc, makes a nice sound. For example RH: chord DGC, then up to chord EAD, then up to chord FBE. Release the previous chord before playing the next one. Can use fingers 125 of RH, or 521 of LH, for such chords, and when shifting it up or down, the same fingers are used for the new three note chord.

7. Single Note Shapes or Single Any Notes Left Hand (played slowly or medium speed)

Always notes from a scale.

LH:

FCG
521 (fingering)

Or

GDA
521 (fingering)

Play 5th 2nd 1st finger separately or 1,2,5 or 2,1,5 ie can change order of playing the single notes

Or pick any 2,3, or 4 notes from scale & play in LH as a chord, while RH improvises single notes or chords (from the same scale).

Can play a semitone below, or semitone above, a scale note at the same time as the scale note and then release the semitone out note to remove the dissonance. For example C# with 3rd finger RH at same time as C with 2nd finger RH, and then off the 3rd finger. Or play C# with 3rd finger, and then C with 2nd finger (at the same time as up C#), so it slides from one dissonant chromatic note to a scale note. Can quickly play C (thumb RH) then C# (2nd finger RH) then D (3rd finger RH) so it quickly runs through those notes consecutively as a quick moment of sound, with each off when the next occurs.

Improvise LH single notes, at the same time as improvising chords RH. Or improvise single notes LH and single notes RH. Can make it sound (imagine in my mind) like a classical 2-part theme, or make it more jazzy by adding chords. Can even make it sound like a classical 4-part theme with 2 single note improvisations in LH and 2 single note improvisations in RH but it is hard to keep track of which note was last for the 2 notes in LH and RH so they go smoothly from note to note, easier is to have 2-part RH improvisation (2 single notes in RH not necessarily played at the same time but they can be) at the same time as a single note improvisation in LH, making it a 3 part classical theme.

8. Chords LH

AbEbF
521 (fingering)

BbFG
521 (fingering)

FBbCF
5321 (fingering)

GCDG
5321 (fingering)

These are some examples of shapes for chords in the LH.

9. Other techniques

9.1 RH can alternate between single note & chord

For example

A 5 (fingering)
D 2 (fingering)
(A,D are played at same time)

Then

G 1 (fingering)
(G is played on its own)

Then back to A,D then G then A,D then G etc

9.2 Two Scales

For example RH G major improvisation single notes, while LH Bb major improvisation

9.3 Changing Keys

Play notes in LH and RH (chordal or single notes) from one key. Then change keys and have a smooth transition to the fingering of that new key (or just use general fingering such as 521 in LH if that's what is the easiest fingering to play those notes).

9.4 RH scale improvising over major scale, with LH root+7th of mode 2, 3, 6

RH improvise over C major scale, using swung 8th notes (ie 1st note of two is slightly longer than second note which is slightly shorter), while LH plays 1st and 7th of dorian

mode eg Dmin7 ie DC (ie chord "2"), or LH plays 1st and 7th of phrygian mode ie ED (ie chord "3"), or LH plays 1st and 7th of aolian mode eg Amin7 ie AG (ie chord "6"). So LH alternates between chord 2, 3, and 6 in any order playing root+7th note together, while RH improvises over major scale.

Switch between different keys e.g. cmajor, Fmajor, Bbmajor, etc. LH and RH change simultaneously and smoothly (eg continue with RH improvisation over scale notes) to the new key.

The reason why this can help is because in jazz it is necessary to improvise over various key changes during the piece, so it is useful to be able to seamlessly change between keys.

9.5 LH bass note improvisations

LH can do bass note improvisations, anything within the scale, usually a single note if it is low in pitch, or can do chordal improvisations if higher in pitch.

LH and RH can both improvise single notes with different notes (both within the scale) but the same rhythms. Or can miss out some notes with LH or RH.

LH and RH can improvise single notes at the same time, using only notes from a scale.

Pick 3 notes from the scale for the LH, and 3 notes from the scale for the RH, total 6 notes, one possibility is to play these 6 notes at the same time as a chord, another possibility is to play each of the 6 notes in a random order, one note at a time and hold them down once played. Then let them all off and repeat for another 6 notes.

Crushed scale note: Instead of crushed semitone note that might not be from the scale (such as when in C major playing D# and C and then releasing the D#), use scale notes for the crushed note e.g. Play C and D at the same time, then release the D and have the C held for a few moments before continuing.

Fast scale downs (or ups): Play G and hold for a moment, then quickly as possible play one after the other some of the descending of C major scale, FEDC, and sit on the C.

Finger patterns: For example 5th finger RH (G) then 2nd finger RH (D) then thumb RH (C), play one after another the notes on those fingers within the C major scale, then shift the hand down one scale note and do it again (ie A, E, D), and so on (ie 5th finger RH on B, then 2nd finger RH plays F, then 1st finger RH plays E; etc), so that the pattern moves down (or up) each time.

10. Rhythms

- Run series of 8ths in head and pick from those. Eg 12345678

Can pick 1478 1478 etc. What this means is count 1234567812345678.. and play a note on the piano of any pitch within a scale, whenever the count of 1,4,7 or 8 is encountered.

- Or run series of 8ths and pick every 5th note to play.
- Switch from beat of 8ths to beat of 4ths ie 12341.2.
(. Indicates where an 8th beat would have been)
- Or switch from 4ths to 8ths. ie half time or double time of beat.
- Play a note on every second crotchet beat (i.e. minims, but not held). Or play semibreves (4 crotchets in length, but not held so it is basically a crotchet then 3 crotchets of rest, but I can think of it as a semibreve but not held). Play a note every crotchet beat. Play a note every quaver beat. Play a note every semiquaver beat. So we can switch between exact doubling of the speed each time, doubling again, or halving each time. Generally one can continue to play notes from that given speed for a while before switching to a half time or double time or double double time or half-half time (i.e. halved from the half time) etc.
- 2 against 3 (LH 2 beats to RH 3 beats), 3 against 4
- 123456 123456 .. or 12345 12345 .. ie count 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, or 9 etc whatever per bar (of eighth notes for example).
- While perceiving 8th notes continuously in head, alternate between playing LH and RH notes or chords, with some given number of spaces between each. For example LRLR, L-R- (- meaning nothing played), L+R/L/L-/L+R/R (L+R means play left and right hand simultaneously, L or R means just play left or right hand, - means play nothing for that beat,/ is a divider separating the beats). L/-/L+R/-/R/R/L+R which is an 8 beat pattern; can try these out by clapping left and/or right hand during those beats or by playing notes on the piano using left and/or right hand.
- 123456 and feel/emphasize 1, 4 mostly, or sometimes for a while 1,3,5
- Swung eighths: not swung means 12 (of 12345678 in 4/4 time where we're counting the eighths here), the 12 are equal (50% 50%), swung means 1 is approx 66% and 2 is approx 33%. Too much swing would be 1 as 75% and 2 as 25%. Just try to make it a little more than 50% and it should be fine. Also can emphasize the second note by playing it a little louder.

Out of a continuous all-eighth notes swung or straight eighth notes virtualization in my head, play 2 of them, or 3 of them, or 4 of them, or 5 of them, or 6 of them, followed by a pause, starting at any time of the all-eighth notes at random, and playing all the ones that follow for that many notes. Can insert random gap lengths between them (staying within the rhythm of all-eighths).

Can create rhythms to bounce between left hand and right hand improvisations (and even can include sung notes to bounce off) for example LR <pause> or L<pause>R, R<pause>L, etc where <pause> might be one eighth note in duration.

11. Jazz Singing Improvisation

Vowels:

O as in on

Oo as in soon

Oh as in Boat
Ah as in car
Aw as in saw
Ay as in Say
Eh as in set
Ee as in seen
Ih as in bit

Diphthongs (two vowels next to each other that glide smoothly from the first into the second): ou[t], [b]i[te], [t]oi[l]

Can start on one vowel and then glide it into another vowel.

Consonants: D, L, B, V, Z, S, etc

Sit on the vowels. But not necessarily, it's just something to try. Make the consonants clear, sometimes can emphasize the consonants to make sure we hear them eg "t"op.

Sing (scat):

o e o e o e.. ah

bah bih bah bih bah bo

Phrases, can vary volume during them for variety. Sometimes get louder then softer or softer then louder, and sing some notes louder and others softer, while singing a note, will encourage you to use the correct breathing. Try a crescendo or diminuendo over a phrase (gradually get louder or gradually softer). Can emphasize 2,4 of 1234 if notes fall there. Or could emphasize 3,7 of 12345678 since that is like emphasizing 2,4 of its halftime. Sing phrases in one breath if possible. Try to sound lyrical, melodic, harmonious, telling a musical story with the improvisation.

Build up slowly to a climax then drop back towards the end. Building up can involve more notes, more rhythms, louder sometimes.

Randomly sing some words of the song louder and some words softer on purpose. Make some parts of a word louder (such as a vowel like "oo" or a consonant like "t" in cat). Change the timing of the singing of the words, slow it down or speed it up a bit so that words fall on the next of swung quavers (or even out of time and faster for a moment and then back to in-time). Try "saying" a bit of the song instead of singing it. Try different personalities for singing the words. Modify the pitch of the tune a bit from how it's written, in order to customize it. Add embellishments like adding an extra note a semitone above or below the target note. Sing at normal volume, then jump up in pitch a lot and sing that note louder and then jump back down again with back to normal volume.

Accenting a word:

- From <http://timeformusic.org/2012/07/25/creating-singing-exercises-to-emphasize-speech-skills/>
- "LET'S take a trip to the beach.
Let's TAKE a trip to the beach.
Let's take a TRIP to the beach.
Let's take a trip to the BEACH."

Accenting a syllable, changing volume of a phrase or word or syllable or note:

- From <http://timmarriner.com/Vocal%20Techniques.pdf>
- "A singer can sing a song with note to note perfection but if they lack emotional expression the overall performance will suffer"
- "Accent: Giving a particular note, syllable, word, or phrase more stress than the ones before or after. Italics do it in print, accents do it in singing."

Sing intervals within the major scale, for example, C(1) up to G(5) down to D(2) up to A(6) down to E(3) up to B(7) etc, the pattern adding a note to the scale that is up by 5 scale notes, note that some intervals will not be a perfect 5th eg B F but will be 5 scale notes apart. Repeat for 4 scale notes apart, 3 scale notes apart, etc. The purpose of this exercise is to practice singing / moving between the intervals that are within the major scale.

For scatting, can sing a consonant-vowel, or vowel-consonant, or just consonant, or just vowel, eg Z-ah (Zah), Ah-z (Ahz), Z, Ah

Make up words/sentences (like speaking) improvised, and make up the notes that go with it, fully improvised. Have a word sound over one pitch note, or two pitch notes, or multiple pitch notes.

Make up scat sounds only e.g. doo, dah, ah-ay.

Sit singing on the same pitch and change the sound slowly e.g. from aw to ah.

You can also improvise with singing, by making up some words just like talking to a person but make up a melody at the same time as speaking. Think of a scenario and describe what I see, while singing improvising any notes with the words. Sometimes there can be multiple notes for one word syllable. For example if I imagining that I am on a bus I might sing, "The trees are going past. I am on a journey, but I don't know where to." And then I can keep improvising the words and story and see where it leads.

Slide slowly up or down in pitch. Slide up to a note, or down to a note. Slide very slowly so it is obvious. Sing switching between various single pitch notes and then suddenly at the end of the phrase slowly glide/slide downwards in pitch.

12. Piano and Singing Together

Alternate piano chords with singing notes so they bounce off each other, and other times correspond them at the same time. The bounce can occur from singing to piano, or piano to singing, or there can be an implementation of a rhythm that might occur in my mind (anything random), that switches randomly between singing and piano doing it.

Think of a piano chord rhythm to play along with such as 14 (of 12345678), 25 (of 12345678) hold the note played at position 4 or 5 until 7 or 8 of the 12345678; and where the eighth notes are swung.

Piano can play 1,3,5,7 of the chord if maj7. 1 b3 5 7 if min7. 1 3 5 b7 if dom7. 1 b9 3 5 b7 (eg for G7b9). dim7 I think is 1 b3 b5 7.

Can sing and play improvising the same single notes on the keyboard/piano. An advantage to not singing and playing keyboard at the same time is that they can both be heard clearly, however, I can play chords on the keyboard and sing at the same time, or even single notes on the keyboard at the same time as singing (singing and keyboard both improvising).

13. Other things

Play an improvisation snippet on the piano, then play it a semitone up (out of key) for tension, then resolve that tension by playing it in key again (perhaps offset by one scale note higher).

While playing LH in one key and RH in that key as well, then shift the RH to improvising in a different key temporarily for tension and then back to in key again.

Move an improvisation snippet (RH single note phrase) around within the key, i.e. using the notes of the scale, shift the phrase up or down some total amount of shift for the whole thing. For example CFFC (C up to F, F, down to C) is then shifted up two scale positions in the C major scale, becomes EAAE (E up to A, A, down to E).

Guide tones: 3th and 7th of the chord (since they define important characteristics of the chord ie major or minor, dominant7 or major7). Try and hit the 3rd and 7th of every chord during an improvisation (I find this is usually too difficult, but if it's done, it does sound good).