

Anatomy of a Melody

Part one: Using balance to create a successful melodic line


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You are given a chord and a matching scale and told, “Now go improvise!” You begin to play and just cannot seem to express anything remotely satisfying. You figure maybe your ear is no good, or maybe you just don’t have what it takes to be a good improviser. Sound familiar? Don’t lose hope just yet! Improvising using chords and scales gets easier if you take some time to examine what really makes a solid melody. The key to crafting a successful melody lies in understanding one simple concept—balance.

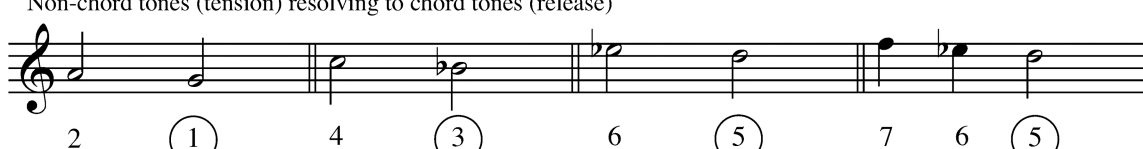
Tension and release

When dealing with a scale, not all notes are created equal. Finding the right balance between tension and release within a scale will get you significantly closer to your goal of rich melody-making. For any major or natural minor scale, scale notes 1, 3, and 5 function as points of release, or resolution, as they outline the scale’s tonic harmony (Example 1) (Assume a tonic harmony of G minor for all examples.). All the other notes in the scale—2, 4, 6, and 7—are passing tones, and they tend to evoke points of tension (Ex. 1). Just as every inhale we take is balanced with an exhale, tension is always balanced with resolution in any effective melody. Each passing tone possesses a tendency to resolve downward or upward to the nearest chord tone (Ex. 2). Becoming familiar with the sound and physical feel of passing tone tensions and chord tone resolutions will help you gain control of your musical line. The rubs produced between dissonances can be felt as vibrations, and each has a distinct feel. Get to know how 6 feels as it rubs against the 5 in a tonic harmony (Ex. 3, m. 1). Feel what a monumental release there is when a prolonged 2 finally resolves to 1 on a tonic harmony (Ex. 3, mm. 3-4).


Ex. 1 G natural minor scale



Ex. 2 Non-chord tones (tension) resolving to chord tones (release)



Ex. 3 Melodic example: non-chord tone tension and chord tone release



Balancing oppositions

Nearly every great melody balances musical oppositions that together give musical lines a natural coherence and logic. Perhaps the most common of these oppositions is tension-release. Listed below are other oppositions that can be balanced in an effort to create an effective melody:

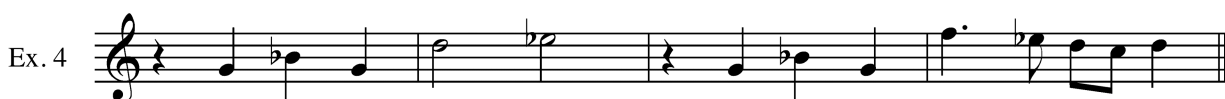
fast-slow
short-long
down-up

question-answer
repetition-variation
loud-soft

play-rest
leap-step
high-low

Below is an example of a G minor melody that successfully explores leap-step and fast-slow oppositions (Ex. 4). Other famous examples of leap-step/fast-slow oppositions include Beethoven's "Symphony No. 5," "Autumn Leaves," and "All the Things You Are."

Melodic example: Fast-slow/leap-step oppositions (G minor)



The improviser need not provide a completely even balance of opposites to make a great melody. Some melodies consist predominantly of fast notes with only the occasional slow note to balance this. "Autumn Leaves" is composed nearly exclusively of legato phrases, and there is no need to balance this out with the occasional staccato passage. As long as the improviser retains an awareness of oppositions, the melody will remain deeply purposeful.

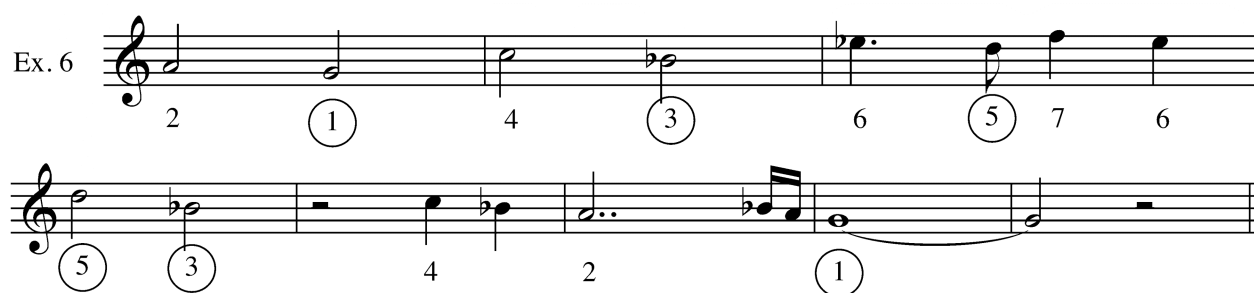
Keeping the big picture

A melody can gain musical purpose and direction by centering around tonic chord tones and gradually moving from one central tone to another. A common movement for a melody includes an initial focus on 5 followed by a gradual descent to 1 (Ex. 5). Also common is an initial movement from 1 up to 5 followed by a gradual descent back to 1 (Ex. 6). A melody centered around 3 before an inevitable descent to 1 is also common (Ex. 7). Inexperienced improvisers often begin their solos on 1, but melodies very often initially withhold 1 as a central note, saving it for later in the melody. This is because 1 provides the ultimate resolution, and beginning with it may give too much resolution, too soon—a bit similar to beginning a joke with the punchline.

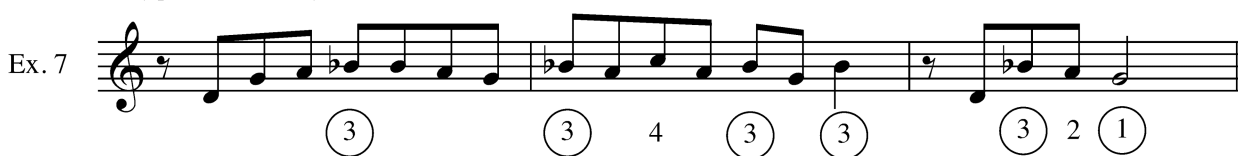
Big picture: Moving from 5 to 1



Big picture: Moving from 1 to 5 to 1



Big picture: Moving from 3 to 1



Centering around 5 does not necessarily mean that 5 needs to be stressed repeatedly. In fact, repetition of 5 may not provide enough dissonance at all. Here are two examples of melodies that center around 5 before descending gradually to 1. The first example is more consonant than the second, as it focuses more directly on 5 (Ex. 8). The second example focuses more on the dissonance between 6 and 5 (Ex. 9). Even though 6 is used more than 5, the central idea is a focus on 5 and the way 6 rubs against it.

Centering around 5 (stressing 5) before moving to 1



Centering around 5 (stressing 6) before moving to 1



Conclusion

A successful melody stems largely from an awareness of balance. Take some time to study and play through the preceding melodic examples, noticing how many oppositions are balanced throughout. While tension-release, leap-step, and fast-slow oppositions were all previously addressed in some detail, these melodies explore many other oppositions, including repetition-variation, play-rest, up-down, and high-low. Careful examination of each line will help develop a greater understanding for the significant role balance plays in melodic improvisation and how it may be explored in your own improvisations.

Next time: Balancing oppositions over a II-V-I chord progression

One fundamental mistake that inexperienced improvisers make when soloing over a II-V-I progression is to focus only on chord tones over each chord. The end result tends to be an academic, wholly consonant, and often uninspiring melody. Adding a II chord and a V chord into the mix presents new challenges for the improviser, but by keeping in mind a few tips about tension and release, your melody can begin to sound fresh and purposeful. Next time, we will take a close look at how to better balance chord tones and passing tones in an effort to free the melody from its underlying chord progression.