

Anatomy of A Melody

Part two: Learning chordal dependence over a II-V-I chord progression

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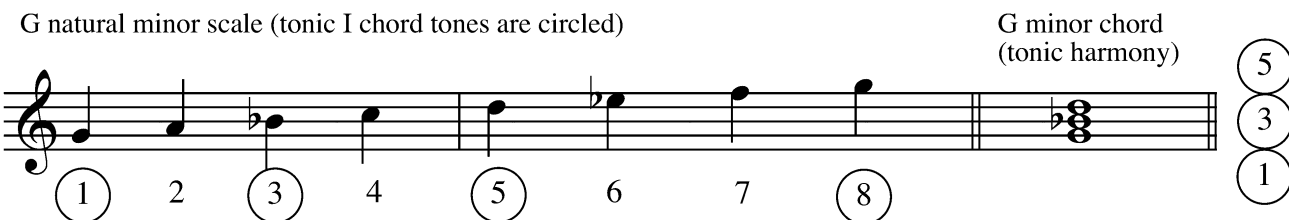
One of the fundamental challenges of improvising over a basic II-V-I chord progression is knowing how to move smoothly from one chord to another, matching each new chord in the cycle. This may be achieved by maintaining a steady focus on chord tones, which tend to change with each new chord. This focus on chord tones is called “chordal dependence,” and the resulting melody can be quite consonant and strikingly beautiful.

Understanding basic II-V-I chord triads

Before you get to improvising over a II-V-I progression, you should first understand a bit about the origins of II-V-I chord triads. The I, II, and V chords are all based on the tonic I scale (Examples 1a-b). This scale can be played over all three chords of the II-V-I progression. The tonic I chord triad uses scale steps 1, 3, 5; the II chord triad uses scale steps 2, 4, 6; the V chord triad uses scale steps 5, #7, 2 (Ex. 2). The II-V-I progression is very often a 4-measure pattern, with 2 measures of tonic I, 1 measure of II, and 1 measure of V (Ex. 2).

Ex. 1a

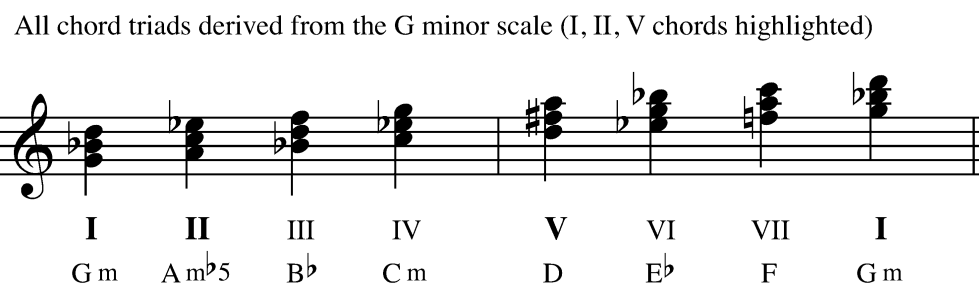
G natural minor scale (tonic I chord tones are circled)



G minor chord (tonic harmony)

Ex. 1b

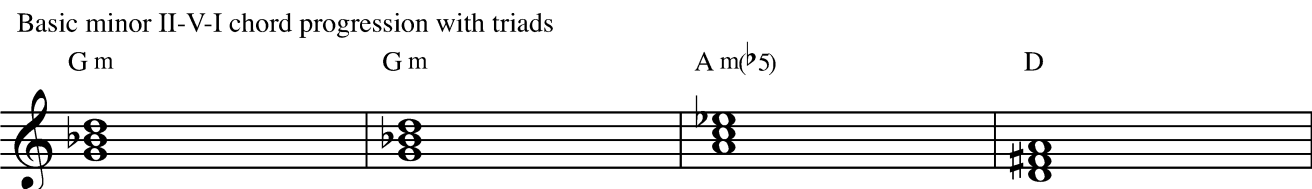
All chord triads derived from the G minor scale (I, II, V chords highlighted)



Chord	Notes
I	G m
II	A m ^{b5}
III	B ^b
IV	C m
V	D
VI	E ^b
VII	F
I	G m

Ex. 2

Basic minor II-V-I chord progression with triads



Chord	Notes
G m	G, B ^b , D
G m	G, B ^b , D
A m(^{b5})	A, C, E ^b
D	D, F [#] , A

Understanding basic II-V chord extensions

To play an effective, chordally dependent solo, knowing simple triads is often not enough. You must also get to know the upper extensions of the II chord and the V chord. Example 3 illustrates every chord tone within the II and V chords, including common chord tone extensions. The chord tones presented here greatly increase the melodic possibilities, but the sheer number of tones can be a bit overwhelming at first.

Every chord tone outlined, including basic extensions on II and V. A bit overwhelming at first.

Ex. 3

(tonic I)	(minor II7(b5))	(V7(b9))	(tonic I)
G m	A m7(b5)	D7(b9)	G m

Limiting the melodic focus (to 1, 3, 5 and 2, 4, 6)

Instead of handling so many chord tones and extensions at once, and to keep things concise, try limiting the chord tones to 1, 3, 5 over the I chord and 2, 4, 6 over the II and V chords (Ex. 4). Most new improvisers tend to approach each new chord with a focus on the tonic of each new chord: centering on G for G minor, A for A minor, and D for D7. A melody can sound really choppy and predictable if you jump so abruptly from one chord center to another, particularly over the V chord, whose basic triad is really far away from both the I and II chords (see Ex. 2). The subtle shift up from 1, 3, 5 to 2, 4, 6 will not only ease your improvising experience, it will also help keep the voice-leading between notes clear, strong, and not at all choppy. Examples 5 and 6 both illustrate melodic, chordal dependence, focusing on 1, 3, 5 (over the I chord) and 2, 4, 6 (over the II and V chords).

Only scale steps 1, 3, 5 and 2, 4, 6 outlined. Clear and concise.

Ex. 4

G m	A m7(b5)	D7(b9)	G m
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Chordal dependence (Melodic focus limited to chord tones 1, 3, 5 and 2, 4, 6)

Ex. 5

G m	A m7(b5)	D7(b9)	G m
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Chordal dependence (Melodic focus limited to chord tones 1, 3, 5 and 2, 4, 6)

Ex. 6

Chord progression: G m, A m7(b5), D7(b9), G m

Melodic focus: 5, 5, 6, 4, 5

Broadening the melodic focus to include all chord tones

Now that you have become familiar with the basic melodic movement from 1, 3, 5, to 2, 4, 6, you can broaden your options by including all available chord tones, as introduced in example 3. Among the remaining chord tones to be explored, scale step 1 functions as a point of resolution over the II7 chord, and scale steps 5 and #7 function as points of resolution over the V7 chord. Example 7 illustrates use of the raised-7 on the V7 chord. Example 8 illustrates a brief use of 1 over the minor II7 chord and the use of the raised-7 and 5 on the V7 chord.

Chordal dependence (Melodic focus on chord tones, including #7 over V7)

Ex. 7

Chord progression: G m, A m7(b5), D7(b9), G m

Melodic focus: 1, 3, 5, 1, 4, 2, 2, #7, 6, 5

Chordal dependence (Melodic focus on chord tones, including scale step 1 over minor II7(b5) and 5 and #7 over V7).

Ex. 8

Chord progression: G m, A m7(b5), D7(b9), G m

Melodic focus: 5, 1, 5, 4, 1, 1, #7, 5, 1

Conclusion

Becoming familiar with the top and bottom parts of the tonic scale is essential to gaining a strong sense of chordal dependence. Focusing on scale steps 1, 3, 5 and 2, 4, 6 develops the bottom and middle of the scale; including all the chord tones helps develop an understanding of the entire tonic scale. To become fully in control of your melodic line, continue to work on shifting to and from a tonic 1, 3, 5, as the chords dictate. The resulting melodies can be inspiring and beautiful, to say the least.

Next time: Gaining melodic independence over a II-V-I progression

While relying on the pattern of tension and release inherent in the chord progression can often lead to a very satisfying melody, if you center only on chord tones, you are not maximizing your melodic potential. By increasing levels of tension and release within each chord, you will gain melodic independence, which will bring you one step closer to artistic freedom.