

Anatomy of A Melody

Part three: Gaining melodic independence over a II-V-I progression

by Javier Arau

One of the challenges in improvising over a basic II-V-I chord progression is keeping a solo sounding unpredictable and engaging. Maintaining a focus only on chord tones can often lead to a very satisfying melody, but such an approach can begin to sound uninspired, predictable, and a bit tedious. Chord tone consonances within a melodic line can always be balanced with a focus on non-chord tone dissonances. Breaking free of chord tone dependency can be achieved by attaining a deeper understanding of tension and release within the II-V-I progression. The end result is a “melodic independence” and freedom to create a line as dissonant or consonant as you desire.

Differing tension-release patterns: Big picture vs. small picture

A “big picture” tension-release pattern occurs over the course of the entire chord progression. The big picture pattern of a four-measure II-V-I chord progression begins with 2 measures of release (tonic I) and alternates with 2 measures of tension (II and V) (Example 1a). Chordally dependent melodies reinforce this big picture pattern by focussing only on chord tones in the chord progression. A “small picture” tension-release pattern can occur within each individual chord in the II-V-I progression (Ex. 1b), but since the notes of a chordally dependent melody remain consonant within each chord and are not balanced by any focus on tension notes, small picture tension-release patterns do not occur in chordally dependent melodies. The only way to create melodic tension within an individual chord is to gain melodic independence from the chord progression.

Ex. 1a Big picture tension-release pattern over a basic II-V-I chord progression:

Diagram illustrating the big picture tension-release pattern over a four-measure II-V-I chord progression. The progression consists of four measures: G m, G m, A m7(b5), and D7(b9). The first two measures (G m) are labeled as 'release (consonant)', and the last two measures (A m7(b5) and D7(b9)) are labeled as 'tension (dissonant)'. The notation shows the chords in a single staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (Bb).

Ex. 1b Small picture tension-release pattern over a basic II-V-I chord progression:

Diagram illustrating the small picture tension-release pattern over a four-measure II-V-I chord progression. The progression consists of four measures, each labeled as 'tension/release'.

Gaining melodic independence

An occasional focus on a non-chord tone can add tension to any melody, thus providing balance to the small picture. In addition, such a focus helps the melody gain independence from its underlying chord progression. Examples 2 and 3 both offer melodies that are melodically independent. Example 2 centers mostly around non-chord tones—scale step 6 over the I chord, 5 over the II chord, and 3 over the V chord—all of which provide points of tension. The final measure offers a quick and direct resolution to scale step 1. Both melodies provide brief moments of release throughout, but the moments of tension are more heavily stressed. In example 3, measures 1 and 3 both stress non-chord tones on beat 3. Measures 2 and 4 both stress non-chord tones within the first beat.

Melodic independence (General focus on dissonant non-chord tones until release on last chord)

Ex. 2

Melodic independence (General focus on dissonant non-chord tones until release on last chord)

Ex. 3

Using chord tone suspensions

In a II-V-I progression, a pitch that is a point of resolution over one chord very often becomes a point of tension over the next chord. To become a point of resolution again, it usually must move up or down a step. In example 4, scale steps 4 and 2 are consonant with a V chord and must resolve down a step, to 3 and 1, to become consonant with the I chord in measure 2. If scale steps 4 and 2 are not resolved immediately to the I chord and instead rub against it, they are considered suspensions, momentarily hanging "suspended," as if in mid-air, over the new chord (Ex. 5). A suspension usually eventually resolves to the new chord, but it arrives at this resolution a little late. Examples 6 and 7 illustrate the use of suspensions. Using suspensions can help make an otherwise chordally dependent melody sound melodically independent.

No suspension: 2, 4 resolve immediately to 1, 3

Ex. 4

Suspension: 2, 4 delay resolution to 1, 3

Ex. 5

Suspensions on every measure

Ex. 6

Suspensions at every new chord change

Ex. 7

Superimposing chords

A melody can imply more chords than just the ones in the underlying chord progression. Melodic independence can also be achieved by superimposing extra chords in a melody. Examples 8 and 9 illustrate melodic independence using superimposed harmonies. The melody in example 8 implies a V chord in the second half of measure 1 and the first half of measure 2. A tonic I chord is implied at the start of measure 4. The superimposed harmonies in example 9 all use notes from the tonic I scale, with an occasional raised-7th added.

Melodic independence (Superimposed harmonies)

Ex. 8

Melodic independence (Superimposed harmonies)

Ex. 9

Conclusion

On the road to melodic independence, you should take significant time and energy to become fluent with handling chord tones and non-chord tones within each chord of a II-V-I chord progression. Also, get to know your own tension and release preferences. A well-crafted melody can evoke a complete spectrum of complex emotions. Like life, melody need not fit into simple compartments of complete consonance or dissonance. Emotional nuance is valuable for artistic expression, and it may be attained only through mastery of both big picture and small picture tension-release patterns. When attained, your own voice is likely to emerge, stronger than ever.

Next time: Using sequences and thematic development over a II-V-I progression

Sequences and thematic development also help to achieve melodic independence. They give purpose and direction to any line and contribute to an engaging melody. Next time, we will explore how to develop successful sequences and melodic themes over a II-V-I progression.