



## It's Got That Swing: Jazz & Pop

Bradley Sowash, Editor

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### Scalin' the chords

When I was about twelve years of age, my parents took me to a restaurant that featured a live jazz trio. I was amazed to see the pianist playing without written music. Unaware of the awkwardness I might cause by interrupting a performing musician, I approached the stage and asked him how he did it. His succinct reply changed my life. Without missing a beat, he simply said, "learn your chords, kid."

He was right. Understanding harmony has been an essential element to creatively interpreting keyboard music at least as far back as the origins of Baroque music. Harmony and chord nomenclature have evolved from the figured bass of the seventeenth century to today's popular chord symbols and extended harmonies. My students sometimes ask, "How many chords are there?" I tell them there are hundreds, maybe thousands, of chords if you include inversions and voicings, but that they only need to learn a few at a time to make their own great music. Here are some of the techniques I use in my studio to develop chord fluency.

#### Scales—a round peg in a square hole?

Since chords derive from and work together with scales, let's begin by thinking through how to make scale practice more relevant to real music.

Many of the structural elements of music we commonly play are even or "square." Whether it's classical, jazz, or pop, western music is often organized in multiples of four. For example, there are:

- \* four notes to a beamed group of notes (8ths, 16ths, 32nds),
- \* four beats to a measure of *common* time, and
- \* four-measure phrase lengths between cadences.

Given this predominantly square musical architecture, isn't it odd (pun intended) that we expect our students to practice *seven* note scales with *five* fingers? For example, running up and down a major scale over one octave in common time comes up an eighth note short—either that, or we are in 15/8 time!



Add to this the tendency of intermediate students to zoom up and down scales ("listen how fast I can play") without an identifiable pulse, and scale practice becomes more of a "monkey trick" than a useful musical skill.

#### Squared scales

A better way to square up a seven-note scale is to repeat and, in some cases, lengthen the top note so that it fits ordinary even musical phrase lengths.

#### How to teach practicing squared scales

Set a metronome or drum machine to 100 bpm:

1. Play half notes over one octave (two clicks per note)
2. Play quarter notes over two octaves (one click per note)
3. Play slow triplets over three octaves (three notes for every two clicks)
4. Play eighth notes over four octaves or two octaves twice (two notes per click)
5. Play fast triplets over three octaves (three notes per click)

Half notes over one octave (two clicks per note)  
(M.M. ♩ = c. 100) Repeat tap note

Quarter notes over two octaves (one click per note)

Slow triplets over three octaves (three notes for every two clicks)

Eighth notes over two octaves (two notes per click)

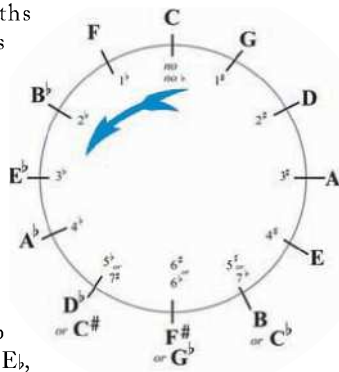
Fast triplets over three octaves (three notes per click)

Practicing scales this way reinforces how the various subdivisions interrelate. It also helps the student feel the evenness of standard phrase lengths more intuitively.

### What's the best order for teaching scales?

Here are two strategies:

1. Counter-Clockwise—Start with C on the circle of fifths and progress by adding flats as each scale is mastered moving in the direction of F, B $\flat$ , E $\flat$ , and so on all the way around through the sharps until you come back to C. This strategy emphasizes understanding functional harmony, since chords often move in this same way (C7 resolves to F, F7 resolves to B $\flat$ , B $\flat$ 7 to E $\flat$ , etc.).



2. Pendulum—Another method is to swing back and forth between sharps and flats. If you think of the circle of fifths as a clock, the order after the key of C at 12:00 would be F at 11:00 (1 flat), G at 1:00 (1 sharp), B $\flat$  at 10:00 (2 flats), D at 2:00 (2 sharps), etc.

### Scale practice variations

As students advance, it's easy for them to lose interest in the foundational benefits of scale practice. Here are some tips to keep them challenged in this area.

- Add articulations—staccato, legato, accenting every other note, swing eighths, etc.
- Vary note values—left hand plays quarters while the right hand plays eighths and vice versa.
- Play in harmony—start on different notes in each hand to play in 6ths or 10ths.

### More scales

Advancing students can also begin to explore more exotic scales such as whole tone, diminished, ethnic, jazz scales, or the modes.

All of these and more can be found in a scale thesaurus or through an online search. Of course, blues scales are a perennial favorite. Their unique quality of having “no bad notes” forever facilitates fearless improvising. Here's an exercise to develop two types of blues scales that can be transposed to any key.

### “Bright” blues scale

A bluesy, but happy sounding scale, it's a major pentatonic with an added flat third “blue note.”

Musical notation for the “Bright” blues scale in C major, showing the major pentatonic scale with an added flat third (blue note).

### “Dark” blues scale

The classic blues scale, it's a minor pentatonic with an added sharp four.

Musical notation for the “Dark” blues scale in C minor, showing the minor pentatonic scale with an added sharp fourth.

### Major key chords—skip to success

It's important that students understand how chords are derived from scales. In the early stages, skipping up a scale is a better way to help students construct chords than measuring intervals. Write a scale either as notes on a staff or simple note names. Ask your students to play a broken triad on each note of the key/scale of the week by “skipping” up the scale.”

Musical notation showing a scale with broken triads (chords) written above each note.

For visual learners, horizontal images such as “play the pickets on a fence leaving the spaces between” or “play just the ties of a railroad track” are helpful.

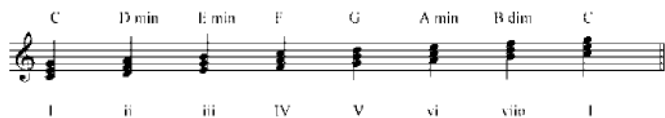
Now guide them through “stacking thirds” on the previously written scale to help them conceptualize the vertical aspect of chords.

Diagram illustrating stacking thirds on a scale. It shows a horizontal line with vertical bars representing notes C, D, E, F, G. To the right, a vertical line with horizontal bars represents the same notes stacked vertically.

G	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C

Reinforce the concept of stacking with vertical images such as a ladder or staircase.

Listening, rather than counting half steps, helps students learn chord qualities. Play and listen to the chords one by one, asking your students to decide whether each is “cheery” (major), “sad” (minor), or “creepy” (diminished). As decisions are made, label the constructed chords with pop/jazz chord symbols above the staff and traditional Roman numerals below (see top of page 30).



### Keep it practical

Do this for each key/scale studied until your students catch on to the consistency of chord qualities in all keys (all I, IV, and V chords are major, ii, iii, and vi chords are minor, vii<sup>o</sup> is diminished). If a question comes up about note spelling, just say, “stick to the key.” A great way to demonstrate the real-life utility of chords is to help your student learn to play a well-known nursery rhyme, folk song, holiday, or patriotic tune by ear. When the melody is secure, focus on harmonizing the left hand by looking for primary chord tones in the melody. First, ask them to play root-position whole note chords under the melody:



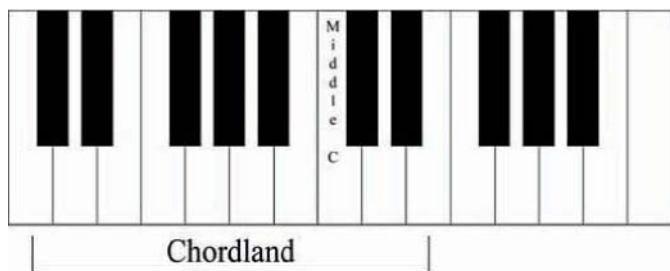
Next, help them position the chords into logical, common-tone inversions that ease the left-hand movement:



For each of the following lessons, ask your students to transpose their tunes to new keys. You might also show them how to vary the accompaniment style.

### Chordland

Closed block chords sound best on the piano in a range from C below middle C to E above middle C, an area I call “chordland.” Go much lower and the chords sound muddy. Higher chords collide with the melody.



### The chord/scale relationship

Ask your students to “put the scale to work” by improvising a right-hand line in place of the melody, using the chords from their previously learned play-by-ear tune. If they are shy about making a spontaneous melody, take them through these steps to jump-start their creativity. Note that the following examples are only possibilities not intended to be read verbatim. Each student’s improvisation will necessarily be unique.



Voilà - they’re improvising!

### So many minor scales, so little time

1. Introduce minor scales only after all the major scales and key signatures are mastered.
2. Teach natural minor scales first to underscore the relationship of major to relative minor keys.
3. Explain why and how composers use harmonic and melodic minor scales, so your students see their value.

### Minor key chords

Repeat the process of building diatonic triads together by writing a scale and stacking thirds. Then pick a well-known *minor* key tune to learn by ear, harmonize, and improvise on. Here are some possibilities:

- Go Down, Moses
- God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen
- Greensleeves
- Joshua Fit the Battle Of Jericho
- Wade in the Water
- Wayfaring Stranger
- We Three Kings
- When Johnny Comes Marching Home
- Zum Gali Gali

### Chord fluency

Here are some exercises designed to develop instant recall for common chords:

#### 1. Chord Crawls

Pick a chord quality and run it up or down chromatically. Repeat this drill in all inversions. You can choose whether to include augmented chord crawls as well.



## 2. Step down progressions

Q: What chord results from lowering the root of a C diminished triad by a half step?

A: B major triad.

You can use this nifty trick to create an exercise to practice all four triad qualities in all keys.

## 3. Basic cycles

Run chords around the circle of fourths with triads in the right hand and roots in the left. Use inversions for good voice leading.

Repeat, starting on all inversions and/or substituting minor chords.

## Seventh chords

When students have a thorough understanding of triads in several keys, they are ready to expand their knowledge of harmony by constructing and playing seventh chords.

First a refresher course on pop/jazz chord nomenclature (see chart below).

### Stack on another third

Whether learning triads or four-note chords, the process is the same. Ask your student to build, name, and number the diatonic seventh chords by stacking thirds on each note of the key/scale of the week. For example in C major, the student would construct and label the following.

A good way to sort out chord qualities is to think of the bottom three notes independently (major, minor, or diminished) and then work out the seventh degree (major or minor). By the way, it's easier for students to think backwards from the root down to the seventh rather than count all the way up seven notes. Convoluted, but practical! Students can readily understand that the seventh of a major seventh chord is one half step below the root and in a dominant seventh it is a whole step below the root.

## A logical progression

Next, ask students to arrange and play the chords they have built and named, using the following progression. Play these in root position before working out the voice leading.

CMa7 FMaj7 Em7 Am7 Dm7 G7 CMaj7 G7  
IMaj7 IVMaj7 iii7 vi7 ii7 V7 IMaj7 V7

I've found this to be an ideal progression for learning chords because it uses six of the seven chords within a major key. Additionally, it familiarizes the ear to the diatonic root movement around the circle of fourths that is so common in best-loved standards. "Farmer's Market" is one of my tunes that uses this progression (see Excerpt 1).

Notice that the arrangement below uses only root position and second inversion chords. These are the two most common closed chord seventh chord positions and all that is required to play almost any seventh chord progression in any key.

Excerpt 1: "Farmer's Market," from *That's Jazz, Book 1, Digging Deeper* by Bradley Sowash, mm. 1 - 12.

"Farmer's Market," from *That's Jazz, Book 1, Digging Deeper* by Bradley Sowash Copyright © 2007, Neil A. Kjos Music Company, JP25, www.kjos.com. Used with permission, 2011.

Chord Name	Pronounced	Explanation
C	C major	A single letter chord name is major by default
C-, Cm, Cmi, Cmin	C minor	"Minor" only modifies the triad (never the 7 <sup>th</sup> )
CM7, CMa7, CMaj7, CΔ	C major seven	"Major" only modifies the 7 <sup>th</sup> (never the triad)
C7	C seven	Triad is major by default and 7 <sup>th</sup> is minor
C-7, Cm7, Cmi7, Cmin7	C minor 7	Triad is minor and 7 <sup>th</sup> is minor
Cm7(b5), C <sup>o</sup> 7	C half diminished	Triad is minor, 7 <sup>th</sup> is minor, 5 <sup>th</sup> is lowered
Cdim7, C <sup>o</sup>	C diminished 7	Triad is diminished and so is 7 <sup>th</sup>

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### Transposing power

Have your student transpose the above progression to the scale/key of the week while improvising a right hand line. Remember to keep the left hand chords in “chordland,” where closed block chords sound best.

### Building chord fluency with seventh chords.

A great way to build instant recall of chords is to play sequential chord progressions that move logically from key to key. Here are some possibilities.

### Seventh chord crawls

Pick a chord quality and run it up or down chromatically using four-note chords.

### Seventh chord step down progressions

### Seventh chord cycle progressions

This one moves the roots by fourths, alternating root position and second inversions along the way for better voice leading.

### Mini progression chains

The ii-V-I sequence of chords is surely the most often found mini-progression or “chord cell” found in standards. This exercise isolates the progression and moves through six keys. To practice the other six keys, start on E♭m7.

Mastering harmony is a steep, but rewarding road. Use these exercises to enrich your students’ harmonic vocabulary, train their ears, and open the doors to more musical freedom so they can enjoy a lifetime of versatile and satisfying music making. ▲