Chord Tone Soloing

By Ed Saindon

sing only chord tones as a basis for creating lines is a fundamental approach to improvisation. The challenge lies in the fact that chord tones are stable notes. Hence, there is no tension and color in the line from the use of passing tones, approach notes, or tensions. With that in mind, there are certain aspects to focus on when soloing with only chord tones.

CONNECTING THE CHORDS

Connecting the lines from chord to chord via stepwise motion can help the lines flow through the changes. The use of guide tone motion on II–7 to V7s is an effective way to connect the changes. The 7th degree of the II–7 chord resolves down a half step to the 3rd of the V7 chord. Notice how the chords are connected by half steps in Example 1.

Example 1



EDITING

Editing involves the use of space via the omission of unnecessary and repetitive notes in a melodic line. The use of editing can make a melodic phrase more concise and coherent as well as allow for more space and the ability to play with more syncopated rhythms. Example 2 shows the use of chord tones played in consecutive eighth notes.

Example 2



Example 3 illustrates the use of editing as applied to Example 2. With editing, we get more interesting lines as a result of the space, rhythmic syncopation, and clear sense of phrasing.

Example 3



PHRASING

Here are some suggestions with regard to phrasing: try to avoid creating phrases that sound like separate and unrelated ideas from chord to chord. Try to play a phrase that continues over several measures. Begin and end phrases in unpredictable places in the measure as well as in the overall form of the composition. Try to phrase over the barline.

Experiment with various phrase lengths. Maybe play a short phrase, leave space, and play a longer phrase. Try to avoid consistently playing in two-bar and four-bar phrases. For example, play a melodic phrase over three bars instead of two bars. Play two measures and rest for one, and repeat that format throughout the composition. This three-bar routine will force you to play and rest where you're not use to playing and resting.

Example 4 illustrates the use of phrases that occur over more than one measure and flow from one measure to the next. The progression is the first eight bars of a well-known standard.

Example 4



ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

The improviser should be able to play chord tones in any inversion. Most importantly, avoid consistently starting every phrase with the root of the chord. Any chord tone can be used to begin a phrase. Avoid playing up and down arpeggios since this will make the solo sound like an exercise. Remember, it's not necessary to play every chord tone of each chord. Try to include unexpected leaps and changes in direction of the line as well as a variety of intervals in the improvised line.

In terms of rhythm, avoid the consistent sounding of beat 1 from measure to measure. This consistent emphasis of beat 1 tends to stop the rhythmic flow of the line. Rather, try to anticipate beat 1 with the sounding of the "and" of 4, which then carries over the barline. Simple, syncopated rhythmic figures like that create a sense of "forward momentum" in the line. Strive for a balance of non-syncopated and syncopated figures as well as using a variety of rhythms, which may include eighth notes, triplets, and sixteenth notes. Also, try to balance the line with use of long notes and short notes.

The use of motives is an important element in improvisation. A motive can be as simple as a two- or three-note melodic idea that can be transposed, rhythmically displaced, slightly altered, and/or developed. Lines that contain motives have a greater sense of logic and direction.

With the incorporation of the aforementioned musical elements and techniques, chord tone soloing can be a very effective technique in improvisation. The goal should be to make the improvisation sound musical as opposed to an academic exercise.

SUGGESTED EXERCISES

Here are some exercises to help the improviser with the technique of chord tone soloing:

Chord Tone Connection

This technique involves starting with the lowest note on your instrument and going up and down the instrument using only chord tones. When proceeding from one measure to the next, play the closest note in the new chord. You can begin by using quarter notes and then proceed with eighth notes, triplets, and sixteenth notes. Example 5 uses a three-octave range beginning from F below middle C. The progression is the first eight bars of a well-known standard.

Example 5



Playing Within an Octave

This technique involves staying within an octave while only using chord tones. This method forces the improviser to see the chords in various inversions. Example 6 illustrates the use of playing chord tones within an octave from middle C and up an octave. Notice the use of motives, space, syncopation, and how the chords are connected via stepwise motion.



Chord Tone Solo

The solo in Example 7 is based on a John Coltrane standard and illustrates the musical elements and concepts that have been discussed. Notice the use of motives within the solo while only using chord tones. Also, the use of space and syncopation helps prevent making the solo sound stiff and academic.

SECOND'S NOTICE





Improvising with chord tones is a fundamental technique of improvisation and is an important approach in establishing a good foundation in the ability to improvise. Once improvisers have a handle on chord tone improvisation, they can begin to introduce the techniques of tension resolution via passing tones, approach notes, and tensions along with chord tones. We will address this topic in a future issue of PN.

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