

Definitive Piano Improvisation Course

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Contents	Pages
Introduction	
Pentatonic Scale Improvisation	1
Country Western Style Made Easy	4
Left Hand Harmonizing Methods	10
Right Hand Arranging Techniques	13
Left Hand Arrangement Techniques Series 1	21
Left Hand Arrangement Techniques Series 2	30
Be A Master of the Key of C maj and A min	35
How To Fill Up Long Measures	40
Chord Inversion And Improvisation	48
Meter Challenge And Improvisation	55
12 Bar Blues And Improvisation	58
Major 7 th Chord And Improvisation	65
Minor 7 th Chord And Improvisation	69
The Seventh/Dominant 7 th Chord And Color Chord	73
Middle Eastern Music And Improvisation	76
Chord Substitution	78
Great Endings	83
Transposition	87
Rubato Piano Playing And Phrasing	91
Melody Improvisation	95
Oriental Music And Improvisation	96
Ragtime Techniques And Improvisation	98
Modulation	101
Embellishments/Ornaments	106
Improvisation By Switching Keys (Gmaj/Emin)	109
Block Hand Style Arrangement Technique	114

Topic: How To Improvise A Song Using Pentatonic Scale

Goals:

1. Ability to compose piano music by using the pentatonic scale.
2. Ability to improvise any song using the pentatonic scale.

Pentatonic scale is one of the easiest scales to master. As the name indicates, this scale consists of 5 notes. Knowing the pentatonic scale helps you to create many piano music styles; including gospel/evangelical, new age, and a variety of Oriental music, etc

First, let's go through the pentatonic scale. Do you know the notes of the pentatonic scale?

They are the I, II, III, V, VI notes of a regular scale.

In the key of C major, it is C, D, E, G, and A

In the Key of D major, it is D, E, F sharp, A, and B.

In the Key of E major, it is E, F sharp, G sharp, B, and C sharp. ...

If you have trouble with other keys, send me a note, and I will let you know what the pentatonic scales are for other keys.

Now, let's listen to them carefully as I play the C major pentatonic scale.

Listen to audio sample - CD1 track 1

This is your assignment:

For the next two weeks, practice the C major, F major, G major, and D major pentatonic scales everyday (for now, use just your right hand, do not worry about your left hand yet).

The fingering I use is 12355 (it is fine to use another fingering as long as you can move along the scale relatively fast. You may use any fingering combinations. Just make sure you can play up and down the keyboard rather smoothly.

After you become adept at the scale, try playing it in different combinations. That is, instead of always I, II, III, V, VI, try varying the order of the five notes.

For example: TRY III, V, II, III, I or II, III, V, VI, V (Yes, you may use the same note twice).

Listen to audio example –CD1 track 2

Do you get it?

Why do we need to practice the pentatonic scale? You see, as you are practicing different combinations and ordering of notes in the pentatonic scale, you are also practicing improvisation and composition. Improvisation and composition are not rocket science. It can be practiced and trained. Change the rhythm of your scale. Do you notice you are creating a different musical phrase every time you do so. In the old days, composers spent a lot of time "messing around" with different piano notes. This is called "creative time". Let your hands guide you. Do not depend on the sheet music.

You ask: What about my left hand? What notes do I use, what chords do I use? You see, since the pentatonic scale only has five notes, and three of them are I, III, V, which belong to the tonic chord. It is fine to use just the tonic chord in the left hand. Note: tonic chord is the first triad chord of any key. For example: In the Key of C major, C chord is the tonic chord (CEG).

Instead of using a block chord (three notes play at the same time), I recommend using just the bottom and top notes of the C maj chord. C and G played separately can create a very nice open voicing.

Also, try using A and E notes, which are part of the A minor chord (you see, A minor chord consists of ACE, which are also parts of the C pentatonic scale (C,d,E,g,A). You may play in alternate octaves to create variations. Sometimes play at a lower range, sometimes at a higher range.

Listen to my left hand audio sample – CD1 track 3

Now, are you ready for the exciting parts? You are going to combine what you have practiced, both right hand and left hand, and start creating some music.

Let me repeat the steps:

1. With your right hand, play C pentatonic scale in any combination or order and in any octaves.
2. With your left hand, use C and G notes plus A and E notes interchangeably. You can play in lower octave and higher octaves.
3. Make sure to use the sustain pedal often, change the pedal when you change chords on left hand.

Listen to my audio sample – CD 1 track 4

What do you think? Are you making up music as you go on?

It really is not hard to improvise, is it? My advice is: spend more time on the

piano without any sheet music. Let your hands guide and move you, the better you are with the scale, the easier it is to improvise. Very soon, you will be able to sit down at the piano for an hour or two and enjoy making up your own piano music without any sheet music in front of you. The more you do it, the more enjoyable it becomes. It is great to know how to play piano.

C Pentatonic Scale Diagram



Chord Inversions in 2-1 Break Up Pattern

<http://www.playpianotips.com>

The image displays 12 musical staves, each representing a different chord inversion in a 2-1 break up pattern. The chords are arranged in two columns of six. The left column contains: C, D, E, F sharp, B flat, and A flat. The right column contains: G, A, B, F, E flat, and D flat. Each staff shows the chord's notes in a 2-1 break up pattern, with the first two notes beamed together and the remaining notes following in a descending sequence. The key signature for each chord is indicated by sharps or flats at the beginning of the staff.

Londonderry Air/Danny Boy

Public Domain

The musical score is written in G major and 4/4 time. It consists of seven staves of music, each with a measure number and chord symbols above the notes. The notes are primarily quarter and eighth notes, with some half notes and rests. The chord symbols are: G7, C, Am, F, C, Am, G7, C, Am, Dm, G7, C, G7, C, G7, D7, G7, C, F, C, G7, C, Am, Dm, G7, C.

1 G7 C Am F

5 C Am G7

10 C Am Dm G7 C

15 G7 C C G7

20 C C C G7 D7

25 G7 C F C G7

30 C Am Dm G7 C