

Appendix: Getting Serious about Practicing Scales

This book, in its examples and etudes, provides dozens of instances of attractive melodic ideas derived from the harmonic minor and melodic minor scales. But it is also important for improvisers to be able to generate and discover their own melodic ideas, ones that are not simply quotes from the work of others. One way to facilitate this process of discovery is to be imaginative and thorough about practicing the scales from which harmonically appropriate melodic ideas can flow. Practicing scales thoughtfully and sensitively can take us far beyond the usual “calisthenic” value—keeping our chops in shape—associated with scale practice. Let’s look at some ways we can practice a scale so that our efforts can nourish our creative process and help lead us to new and compelling melodic ideas. The discussion below focuses in most instances on the harmonic minor scale, but the methodology can be applied to any scale.

Practicing Intervals

Suppose we are trying to become more comfortable with a particular harmonic minor scale, and we decide to practice the scale in thirds. I typically hear musicians practicing thirds (here on the E HM scale) in this way:

Exercise App.1



This exercise does improve one’s ability to hear and execute the E HM scale in thirds. But if we think about it, the exercise could be engineered to be of significantly more value. The exercise is constructed of several building blocks, including:

- 1) Interval direction
- 2) Pattern direction

In the first two bars of Exercise App.1 above, the interval direction is ascending (each interval of a diatonic third is played from bottom to top), and the pattern across the scale is also ascending (we play the interval on each successive note of the scale from bottom to top). Then in the last two bars the interval direction is descending and the pattern is also descending. We can say that this exercise is “thirds on the E HM scale, ascending/ascending, then descending/descending.”

What happens if we change things so that in the second two bars we keep using the ascending interval? That is, when we change the pattern direction, we do *not* change the interval direction. Now the exercise looks (and sounds!) like this (following page):

Exercise App.2



This is a quite different exercise (ascending/ascending, then ascending/descending) partly because of what I like to call the “hidden” interval, which is the interval that we must negotiate to get from the last note of one pair to the first note of the next pair. In Exercise App.1, the hidden interval in every case is a *second*, while in Exercise App.2 the hidden interval in the last two bars is a *fourth*.

Continuing this line of thinking, we also need to run the exercise in the converse fashion—first descending/ascending, then descending/descending, as in the following exercise:

Exercise App.3



Here the hidden interval of a fourth appears in the first two bars.

We’re not done, however—there are other useful ways to practice thirds. Specifically, there’s no reason why we need to segregate the ascending thirds from the descending ones. That is, why not alternate directions? That way we could run the exercise once where we begin with ascending thirds:

Exercise App.4



And, in the interest of thoroughness, we should run it another time beginning with descending thirds:

Exercise App.5



Let’s keep going: why must we limit ourselves to eighth notes? All of the above exercises can—and should—be played in triplets, for example:

Exercise App.6

