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CHAPTER 1 Living in the Language

Infants spend a great deal of time listening before they learn to talk. The brain must grasp the way words sound before it can devise ways to physically produce them. Therefore, an infant must “live in the language” and gradually comprehend the basic rudiments before the act of speaking.

Improvisation works the same way. Before it can become natural, the rudiments of the musical language—melody, harmony, rhythm, tone, and dynamics—must first be re-explored in ways quite different from those employed by the traditional school. The following series of exercises will assist in this process.

At first, the exercises may seem deceptively simplistic, especially to the skilled player. But as they are practiced, different muscles in the brain will be exercised and prepared for future steps. Above all, be patient—crawling comes before walking.

Exercise Series One: Ode to Mr. Morse

Exercise 1-1: One-Note Rhythms

1. Set a metronome to ♩ = 110–112.

With the right hand (RH), use one finger on C to form musical statements. Start simply, and then gradually get more creative. In the example below, note that each rhythmic pattern could be repeated several times before moving on to a new idea.

2. Continue to experiment for several minutes or until all possible rhythmic ideas have been expressed. It may take awhile for spontaneous creativity to occur, so be persistent.

Exercise 1-2: Rhythms in Octaves

The first exercise should have created the feeling of being a Morse code operator (thus, the title of this series of exercises) communicating with rhythmic patterns. For the next exercise, imagine creating a new “language” and trying to convey a message to another person through rhythmic patterns.

CHAPTER 16 When One Scale Won't Work, Part 1: Transitional Thinking

The last few chapters have explored situations in which one or two related scales work well across an entire passage. But there are many circumstances in which the harmonic movement is too rapid or diverse to work with so few scales. This chapter will address these situations.

Chopin's Prelude in C Minor Op. 28, No. 2, is a piece that most everyone has either played or heard. It is simultaneously simple and complex. Take a moment to play through it, and notice that the harmony shifts too often to work with just one or two scales.

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the piano accompaniment of Chopin's Prelude in C Minor Op. 28, No. 2. Each system consists of a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a common time signature (C). The first system is marked 'Largo' and 'ff' (fortissimo). The second system is marked 'p' (piano) and 'ritenuto'. The third system is marked 'pp' (pianissimo) and 'cresc.' (crescendo). The notation includes various chords, arpeggios, and melodic lines, with some notes beamed together and others separated by rests. The overall texture is dense and complex, reflecting the rapid harmonic movement mentioned in the text.

Most of the earlier examples in this text have demonstrated slow harmonic movement with the chords changing gradually. This piece demonstrates faster harmonic movement with the chords changing more rapidly—in fact, with every beat. Also, the harmonic movement is less predictable, making the piece more difficult for improvisation.

Improvising through this prelude without considerable forethought might seem quite treacherous—like trying to steer a kayak through swift rapids with shifting currents. But, in extending that analogy, the skilled kayaker would advise that rough waters can be navigated more easily when one first takes time to study the intricate nuances of the river. Similarly, the best way to navigate a difficult musical passage is to first study its harmonic nuances measure-by-measure.