MODAL IMPROVISATION: THEORY AND PRACTICE JEFF GARDNER



FOR ALL INSTRUMENTS

Jeff Gardner Music School



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MODAL IMPROVISATION - THEORY AND PRACTICE

The concept of modes, the basis for modal improvisation and composition, is an ancient one, present in many musical idioms. The Greek modes - Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, etc., made their grand entrance into the language of modern jazz on Miles Davis' "Kind Of Blue" session, cut in 1959. Bill Evans, the pianist on this recording, brought an extremely clear and varied approach to modal chord voicings. The two modal pieces on the record use very different approaches. "So What", the most famous tune from this record, reduced the 32 bar A-A-B-A structure of much of North American popular music to four 8 bar sections of dorian modes - D dorian - D dorian - Eb dorian - D dorian. The extreme simplicity of this harmonic structure invited an open melodic conception that had been lacking in the Bebop era. "Flamenco Sketches", on the other hand, is an open-ended structure with 5 sections on C ionian - Ab mixolydian - Bb ionian - D spanish phrygian - G dorian. Aside from the mixture of modes, what sets this piece apart is the fact that the sections are of indeterminate length, each succeeding mode being cued by the soloist.

This course will deal with the structure and use of modes as well as exercises to add to your daily routine to master the modes. We will start with some (seemingly!) simple exercises. What is less simple is to really learn them in all 12 keys! The easiest of these patterns include moving intervals such as thirds and fourths through the modes. Then we will move different types of chords, including triads and chords in fourths. Different techniques including rhythmic superposition and permutation (for all melodic instruments) and displacement (for pianists) will be applied to these patterns.

Next we will consider a technique based on triadic pairs, sometimes called as "double mambos" or "bitonal pendulums" (in the musical language of Charlie Banacos).

I have also included some basic improvising structures based on blocks of modes moving in different orders to start using these techniques in a more organic way. Use these forms as jumping off points to write your own modal pieces and/or etudes for your instrument. At the end of the day, this music is about creativity and individual expression - feel free to change, take apart and recombine these exercises in any way that feels good.

MOVING INTERVALS THROUGH A MODE

Using D dorian as our sample mode, let's run up and down the mode in thirds. This exercise, shown here in 8th notes over 2 octaves, should also be practiced in triplets over 3 octaves and 16th notes over 4 octaves.



The following three exercises divide the same 8th notes into accented groups of 3, 4, and 6 notes. Try practicing these subdivisions keeping the metronome at a constant quarter-note tempo. This will work wonders on your time-feel.



We can also run fourths through the same mode.



Now let's play fourths followed by their inversions.



Here are two different ways to move fifths through the dorian mode.



In this pattern, each pair of fifths outlines a seventh chord. These are the diatonic seventh chords contained in D dorian, which should be studied using the techniques shown in the following section on diatonic triads - inversion, permutation, displacement, etc.



DISPLACEMENT

Pianists can play these exercises at the tenth, producing a rich sound. This technique is widely used in Afro-Cuban and Caribbean styles. Fingering for the right hand in all keys: 1-3-2-4-3-5, left hand 5-3-4-2-3-1.





Try the same exercise inverting every other third.





TRIADIC HARMONY IN THE DORIAN MODE

Now we will consider the harmonic materials contained in the dorian mode. First, let's look at the diatonic triads, as simultaneous chords and then as arpeggios. Here are the diatonic triads in root position, moving up through the D dorian mode. Notice that in the dorian mode we have a major chord on the subdominant and a minor triad on V of the mode, while the diminished triad has moved to the sixth degree.



PERMUTATION

Now we will introduce permutation, the manipulation of the possible orders within a given group, or series, of notes. With three notes there are 6 possible permutations. Notice that in the above example, I maintain the same direction within each 3-note group while the groups descend. That is - we are playing each triad in the 1-2-3 permutation. Here follow two more permutations:



We can add a lot of interest to these patterns by using a technique known as mirror permutations. This simply means using a pair of permutations where the second one inverts the intervals of the first, as in the following 2 examples. The first pattern mixes 2-1-3 and 2-3-1.



Here we pair 1-2-3 and 3-2-1



You may have noticed that the triads in the above example do not line up with the beats in 4/4 time. If we want to have the triads correspond to the beats of the measure, in this case, 1 and 3, we can double one of the notes, creating a 4-note melodic group out of a 3-note chord.



There are actually two different ways of thinking about and notating permutation. The first, which we have already considered, is the vertical position in the group. The second is to notate the function of each note in the chord, where the melodic groups are built on chordal structures. In the next example, the numbers above the notes indicate their function in the chord. The numbers below the notes indicate the position in the chord.



THREE NOTE DORIAN CHORDS IN FOURTHS

Now let's move on to 3-note chords in fourths. Be very aware of which chords are built of two perfect fourths, and which include an augmented fourth. The chords marked with an asterisk are those that define the dorian modal harmony, characterized by a minor third and a major sixth.



These chords should also be played as arpeggios. The first exercise can be practiced in rhythmic groups of 3 and 4.



The same pattern can be executed in triplets, so that each 3-note chord corresponds to a beat in the measure.



Now let's use mirror permutations - 1-2-3 and 3-2-1



MODAL TRIADIC PAIRS

We can use triadic pairs to define any modal color, in this case F and G major triads, built on 3 and 4 of D dorian. The first exercise moves up through root position, first, and second inversion. The second example doubles the middle note of each triad, successively third, fifth, and root.



In the following example, I have reinforced the pair of triads with a pairs of chords in perfect fourths in the left hand. The third measure inverts the left hand chords of the second measure, which introduces a major second into the voicing. Notice that the sum of each triad with its corresponding fourth chord is a major pentatonic scale - F pentatonic on beats 1 and 2, and G pentatonic on beats 3 and 4. We will talk about the intersection of pentatonic and 7-note modes farther on in this book.



STRUCTURES FOR MODAL IMPROVISATION

Now let's put all of the previous technical studies into action! The cycle of fifths is a great way to learn a mode in all keys. Also try playing dorian modes up and down by half-steps and whole steps (the latter order must be transposed up a half-step to produce all 12 keys).





This example follows a basic 12-bar blues form without substitutions, turnaround, or secondary dominants.

DORIAN BLUES





Here I stretched the blues form to 16 bars, using four Dorian modes moving upwards by minor thirds. It may be thought of as a cycle of minor thirds. Compare Ron McClure's tune, "Nimbus".

DORIAN BLUES 2



This form introduces the concept of mixed modes. Here we use dorian, lydian b7, and super locrian, or altered scale. The Ab Lydian b7 corresponds to Ab7, tritone substitution for Dm7b5.

DORIAN BLUES 3



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JEFF GARDNER Pianist-composereducator-author-lyricist born in New York, con alma Latino Americana.