

Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day: A Scherzo

This is the fourth article in a series exploring the second octatonic mode:



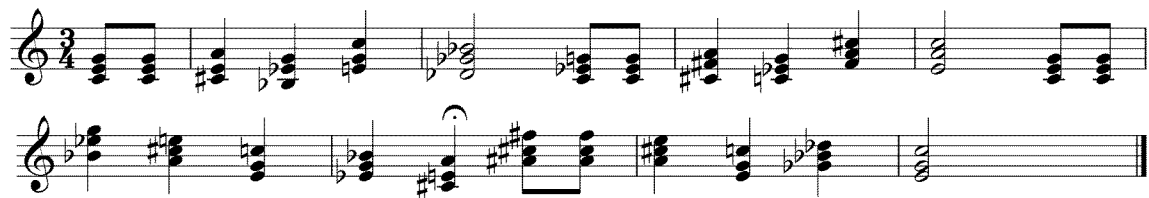
We've practiced this scale in parallel octaves, minor thirds, sixths, tritones, and the very odd alternation of major third – perfect fourth. We've created various patterns and clusters from this scale, and octatonicized hymn tunes. We've also noted that the scale contains traditional triads on C, E-flat, F#, and A, in both major and minor. Next, we'll use triads, arpeggiated clusters, and a hymn tune to create a scherzo.

The term 'scherzo' has assumed different meanings at different times. To Chopin, it could be quite gloomy. But to an Italian the word means 'joke' or 'trick.' Drop off the 'o' and it means the same to a German. We use it here in its playful sense. What makes a joke funny, of course, is expectation thwarted: a surprise outcome, an unthought-of answer, first the setup, then the punchline.

There's an inherent *scherzoso* quality to a familiar tune octatonicized, since we expect a traditional harmony. The next time a friend has a birthday, see how this goes over:



Are some intervals inherently funnier than others? Does the humor depend at all on the shape of the melody? Parallel intervals are one scherzistic tool. Triads are another:



What about combining our 4 traditional major triads, 2 at a time, in an ostinato pattern? Think C major in one hand and E-flat major in the other, for example, and arpeggiate:



This will give you a quirky ostinato pattern (try it on a 4' flute) against which your feet can play a cantus of any octatonicized hymn tune (an oboe at 8' pitch would work nicely). This is not so different from the toccata techniques of last month.

We needn't be limited to traditional triads for our ostinato patterns, though. Try any of these with the left hand:



Or these with the right:



Notice in both instances I assign the single note to my weaker fingers, the pairs to fingers 1-2-3. One good way to come up with a starting cluster (or to start your piece, for that matter) is to begin a tune at different starting points in the scale and hold onto the last note. *Allein Gott*, for example, starts with an ascending scale:



All this activity, and we haven't even involved the feet yet! They could certainly interpolate a wry comment between phrases, or even invert what the right hand has just done.

Fragmenting the opening motif as we've done also lends itself to diminution. Rather than play a whole phrase, just play half, at twice the speed. Then play it again, starting somewhere else in the scale in parallel sixths or thirds. Augmentation would suit the pedal just fine, too. Inversion, diminution, augmentation, fragmentation, various ostinato patterns, silly registrations: all are toys at your disposal. Pick one or two techniques and practice them until you can do them without thinking.

Again, since the octatonic world lacks that old reliable IV-V-I cadence, we need a way to end, to create a sense of tonicity. We can make C major sound like 'home' if the f# leads up to g:



All of these suggestions are merely options, of course. The main goal to keep in mind: have fun!

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