

Learn to Improvise in 15 Minutes a Day: The Octatonic Scale

This article introduces an octatonic scale. It's a simple principle that can open whole new harmonic doors. Start on middle c and progress upwards: half step, whole step, half step, whole step, etc. You'll get the result below. Note the suggested fingerings for right hand (above) and left hand (below):



Notice some qualities of this scale. The first tetrachord, C-C#-D#-E, has two black keys in the middle, surrounded by a white key on either side. Doodle back and forth between these, and make patterns out of these first 4 notes, first with one hand, then the other. How do they sound as a cluster of 4 notes, or as various clusters of 3? Really solidify the image, sound and feel of that first tetrachord in your mind and fingers.



Then consider the second tetrachord, F#-G-A-A#. Notice now we have two white keys in the middle, and a black key on either end. Anchor that pattern in your mind, and let each hand invent different combinations out of it.



Practice the whole scale with both hands, first in octaves, then in thirds and sixths. Look at the keyboard as you do this.



There are eight pitches in an octatonic scale, obviously. There are 12 pitches in the chromatic scale. So what's missing? There is no D, F, G#, or B. So it's as if we'd taken a chromatic scale and removed one diminished seventh chord. Sometimes it's easier to reckon with what's absent than to remember all that's present.

Thinking in terms of diminished seventh chords, since the two remaining diminished seventh chords are present, then every note in the scale belongs to one. This means, for every note in the scale, its tritone is also present: C-F#, C#-G, D#-A, etc. For every pitch, there is also its minor third up and its minor third down: E-G is doable, and so is E-C#. That's why we can practice

the scale in parallel minor thirds so easily. We could practice our scales in parallel tritones, as well.

Try parallel major thirds, though, and you will see the difficulty very soon. There is no E# to go with your C#, there is no G# to go with your E. Some notes have an ascending major third, and some have a descending one, and they alternate from one to the other. No note has both. Playing an octatonic scale starting on a major third results in alternating thirds and fourths, itself a pretty cool effect:



Another good way to practice this is to arpeggiate interval pairs, and make little ostinato patterns. Once you've got that down, try octatonicizing a hymn tune. Just alter whatever tones you encounter to fit within the scale. Here's the beginning of *Picardy*:



Notice you don't have to start on C, or on whatever note the hymn starts on. In fact, your next phrase could start somewhere else entirely. We're in the land of the tonal ambiguity here, so take full advantage!

You now have all the elements you need to create a simple octatonic piece. Start with a pedal point, let the left hand make a little ostinato pattern, then bring in a melody in the right hand. When your ostinato pattern gets annoying, change one note, or start a new pattern. Between phrases, punctuate with some pedal movement. Your piece might start something like this:

