

eVirtuoso-Online Lessons

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Scales Lesson 4

Applying Scales

Thorough practice of all scales will help when applying them to writing songs and improvising. Make sure to continuously practice scales not just starting from the C root note (Key of C), but beginning with all 12 notes, so that any scale can be played in any key signature (key signatures will be discussed in its own section). Keep in mind that a skilled soloist will create solos with a variety of scale types. Understand the interval functions and differences between all scales in order to develop new creative harmonic and melodic ideas.

Scales can be used in solos and riffs in a variety of ways. Here are just a few methods to help start the creative process for exploring the many vast possibilities.

Practice playing the chord tones as opposed to the whole scale. Instead of simply playing a scale straight up and down, emphasize the notes from the chord progression inside the solo to build a stronger unity between the scale and chord progression. For example, if the chord progression is playing a C major chord, primarily use the C major chord's notes (C, E, G) inside the solo. This same technique can be used with a song's melody. Simply find the melody's strongest notes and highlight them in the solo. Also, use the other scale tones that are not chord tones as links to get a smooth transition from one note to the next. If a chord progression changes chords from C major to G major, use the C chord's third step note (E), and the C major scale's fourth step note (F) as a link to the G chord. If a chord progression changes from C7 back to G7, try shifting from Bb to B, then playing the G7 chord tones (G, B, D, F). The chord change will be smooth and the chord tones accentuated. Study the figure 1 example below and note how the notes in the solo change with the chord progression. Again, this helps strengthen the relationship between the scale and chord inside a solo.

The image shows a musical example for a chord tones solo. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef with a melodic line. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard with fingerings. The progression is Cmaj, Gmaj, C7, and G7.

Chord	Melody (Treble Clef)	Fingering (Guitar)
Cmaj	C4, E4, G4, A4, B4, C5	3-3, 2-3
Gmaj	B3, G4, B4, C5, D5, E5	5-5, 3-2
C7	C4, E4, G4, Bb4, C5	3-2, 0-3
G7	B3, D4, F4, G4, A4, B4	0-3, 1-3

Figure 1 - Chord tones solo example

Scales are often played against chord progressions, and the chords can help decide which scales to play. Beginner students often become confused determining which scale to play with a particular chord because there are so many possibilities when deciding which scale to play with which chord. The following are a few possible scale and chord combinations to try (refer to the chord's section for unfamiliar chords).

The major (ionian) scale works great with the major chord family like Cmaj6, Cmaj7, Cmaj9, and Cmaj13. The fourth step note in a major scale will often sound dissonant when played against a major chord because it will clash with the major chord's third step note.

The dorian mode is used with the minor chord family and also try dorian modes with dominant seventh, sharp nine chords (C7#9).

The phrygian mode works great in minor keys with a v7-VImaj7 chord progression in it (Em7-Fmaj7). In major keys, that would be a iii7-IVmaj7 chord progression. Try playing this scale against minor chords (Cm), minor sevenths (Cm7), minor seven-flat ninths (Cm7b9), minor eleventh-flat ninths (Cm11b9), and minor eleventh-flat ninth-flat thirteenth (Cm11b9b13) chords.

The lydian mode is used with major family chords such as major chords (Cmaj), major sevenths (Cmaj7), major seventh-sharp eleventh (Cmaj7#11), major ninths (Cmaj9), and major thirteenth-sharp elevenths (Cmaj13#11). With the major seven chords, the first step note will tend to resolve down to the seventh step note.

The mixolydian mode is used with the dominant family chords like dominant seventh (C7), dominant ninth (C9), dominant eleventh (C11), and dominant thirteenth (C13) chords. Try using the suspended second and suspended fourth alterations with this scale as well (C7Sus4, C7Sus2, C9Sus4, and C13Sus4).

The minor (aeolian) scale is used with the minor family chords. This scale works with minors (Cm), minor sevenths (Cm7), minor ninths (Cm9), minor elevenths (Cm11), and minor eleventh-flat thirteenth (Cm11b13). It is also used in minor keys with a minor seven-flat five chord (Cm7b5) in the chord progression.

The locrian mode can also be played with the minor seven-flat five chord. In addition to the diminished chord (Cdim), the locrian mode is used with minor seven-flat five-flat ninth (Cm7b5b9), minor eleventh-flat five-flat ninth (Cm11b5b9), and minor eleventh-flat five-flat ninth-flat thirteenth (Cm11b5b9b13) chords.

Pentatonic scales are very popular and work in many situations. The major pentatonic scale can be played over major chords, and the minor pentatonic scale can be played

over minor chords. The minor pentatonic scale is also commonly used with the relative major chords, like the A minor pentatonic scale over the C major chord. Try playing major pentatonic scales built on the major scale's first, second, and fifth steps over major seventh chords. One example, using the C major scale (C, D, E, F, G, A, B), is playing the C, D, and G major pentatonic scales over a C major seventh chord. For dominant seventh chords, play pentatonic scales based on the major scales first, flat third, and flat seventh steps. Another example is playing C, Eb, and Bb pentatonic scales over a C7 chord. Over altered dominant chords, play a minor pentatonic scale with the root note based on the chord's flat third, fourth, and flat seventh step note. A third example is playing Eb, F, and Bb minor pentatonic scales over the altered dominant C7#5#9 chord.

The blues scale is often played with the dominant (C7, C7b9, C7#9, C9, C13) and minor (Cm, Cm7, Cm7b5) family chords, and is commonly played throughout the entire blues progression matching the scale's root note with the song's key signature. For example, play a C blues scale over a C7-F7-G7 chord progression. Also, practice using relative minor blues scales, such as playing the C# minor blues scale in the key of E. By comparing blues scales with pentatonic scales, their many similarities allow them to be great substitutes. Try substituting the minor blues scale with the minor pentatonic scale.

The harmonic minor scale is played with minor chords that add a sharped seventh step like minor-major seventh (Cm/maj7) chords, minor ninth-major seventh (Cm9/maj7) chords, minor eleventh-major seventh (Cm11/maj7) chords, and minor-major seventh-flat thirteenth (Cm/maj7b13) chords. Also, try the harmonic minor scale with the fourth step dominant seventh-sharp ninth (F7#9) chord, or the fifth step dominant seventh (G7), dominant seventh-flat ninth (G7b9), and dominant seventh-flat thirteenth (G7b13) chords.

The jazz/melodic minor scale, just like the harmonic minor, can also use minor-major seventh (Cm/maj7), minor ninth-major seventh (Cm9/maj7), and minor eleventh-major seventh (Cm11/maj7) chords. The minor thirteenth-major seventh (Cm13/maj7) chord can also be used. For dominant chords, try playing the jazz/melodic minor's second step as a dominant seventh-suspended fourth (D7Sus4) or a dominant seventh-suspended fourth-flat ninth (D7Sus4b9) chord. On the fourth step note, play a dominant seventh chord (F7) or a dominant seventh-sharp eleventh (F7#11) chord. On the fifth step, play a dominant seventh (G7), dominant seventh-suspended fourth (G7Sus4), or dominant seventh-flat thirteenth (G7b13) chord.

The lydian-augmented scale is used with major chords that have a raised fifth step, like the major seven-sharp five (Cmaj7#5), the major seven-sharp eleven-sharp five (Cmaj7#11#5), and the major thirteen-sharp five (Cmaj13#5) chord.

The Lydian b7 scale is used with major and dominant chords that have flat fifth, flat ninth, and flat thirteenth chord alterations. A few examples are major-flat five (Cmajb5),

dominant seventh-flat five (C7b5), dominant seventh-flat five-flat ninth (C7b5b9), and dominant seventh-flat five-flat thirteenth (C7b5b13) chords.

The locrian #2 scale is played with minor seventh-flat five (half-diminished) chords like Cm7b5. It can also be used with minor ninth-flat five (Cmin9b5) and minor eleventh-flat five (Cmin11b5). This scale works better than the locrian scale when the ninth step is unaltered.

The super locrian scale is used with altered fifth and ninth dominant chords. A few examples are dominant seventh-sharp five-sharp nine (C7#5#9) and dominant seventh-sharp five-flat nine (C7#5b9) chords. Because this scale flats every step but the root (1, b2, b3, b4, b5, b6, b7), flattening the root note creates a major scale.

The whole tone scale works with dominant chords that have a raised and lowered fifth step such as C7#5, C7b5, C9, C9#5, C9b5, and C7#5#11.

The whole step-half step and half step-whole step scales are used with the dominant seventh chord and can add flat ninth (b9), sharp ninth (#9), sharp eleventh (#11), or thirteenth (13) chord extensions such as C7, C7b9, C7#9, C7#11, or C13. Diminished seventh chords like Cdim7 can be used as well. Remember, these two scales are the same, just starting on a different note.

The augmented scale can be used with augmented chords (major chords that have a sharped fifth step). This scale can also be used when the augmented chord is extended with a major seventh interval to create the major seventh-sharp five chord like Cmaj7#5.

Continue to practice and experiment with the many vast possible combinations of scales with chords. If a teacher or a friend is not available to practice with, try to record a few chord progressions and then practice solo ideas on top of them. Listen to each scale against the chord progression to find which scale fits best for that song. Also, look at some favorite songs and begin to analyze the scales used in those songs, and how those scales sound against the chord progressions. This process will become easier with time, and also help define a unique composing style that helps separate one musician from another.