

Creating Colorful Textures with Anchor Tones & Diatonic Shapes

An MTNA TEMPO Presentation Session by Eric Jones (ericjonespiano@gmail.com)

INTRO:

In this session, I present a framework for improvisation that is easy for anyone to learn, and which doesn't require knowledge of chord voicings or even chord progressions. Instead, the focus is on creating a variety of sound qualities and textures by exploring different diatonic combinations of notes. This approach...

- Makes extensive use of just 7 tones, which can be freely combined in numerous ways
- Derives harmony from “anchor tones” rather than traditional chord voicings and focuses on the quality of each harmonic change (making it great for ear training).
- Makes use of intervallic shapes for harmonic texture, often resulting in sophisticated and beautiful improvisational harmonies.

PART 1 - The Diatonic palette

Diatonic tones

What do we mean by diatonic tones? In short, diatonic tones are the set of 7 tones that make up any given major scale (technically, a diatonic scale is any scale with 5 whole steps and 2 half steps). We can combine these tones in numerous ways to create all sorts of interesting and sometimes complex harmonic textures beyond the obvious chords we are used to playing (i.e. not just triads, 7th chords, etc.).

Anchor tones

An “anchor tone” is not a standard term used in music theory, but is a phrase I use to refer to a sustained or repeated note (usually in the bass) which colors the perception of all the other notes. So in this sense, the other pitches are “anchored” to this one tone.

- Anchor tones are most effective when played low in the bass register (and can be reinforced by playing two notes an octave apart). But they can also be a higher tone if repeated continuously as a kind of ostinato.
- Diatonic anchor tones can be referred to by their major scale degree number (1-7).
- Each anchor tone casts a different harmonic “color” over all the other notes (any set of notes above the anchor tone can be played exactly the same but their qualities will change by simply changing the anchor tone).

Exercise: *Diatonic droplets*

This is an improvisation exercise which doesn't involve playing a melody, but rather evokes a scene of droplets of water falling slowly off the branches of a tree or overhang. For this exercise (and all the exercises in this presentation) we will stick with the white keys, but this can be done in any key by simply using the notes of a different major scale.

- Press down the sustain pedal
- Play any 2 white key notes in the RH and any 2 white key notes in the LH.
- They can be played simultaneously or staggered. There is no correct rhythm or tempo; use the image of droplets of water gently falling from the leaves of a tree.
- Now play a low anchor tone note (keeping the sustain pedal down). Start with a low C (scale degree 1), and continue to play various "droplet" notes above.
- Change your anchor tone (to any other bass note white key) and continue playing "droplets" above. Notice the change in harmonic color that the different anchor tone gives to the notes above.
- Try to describe the quality of each anchor tone (1-7) in your own words.

General tonal qualities or categories of the various anchor tones (keep in mind that within each general category there are distinct differences between the specific anchor tones):

Major qualities: 1, 4, 5

Minor qualities: 2, 3, 6

Diminished quality: 7

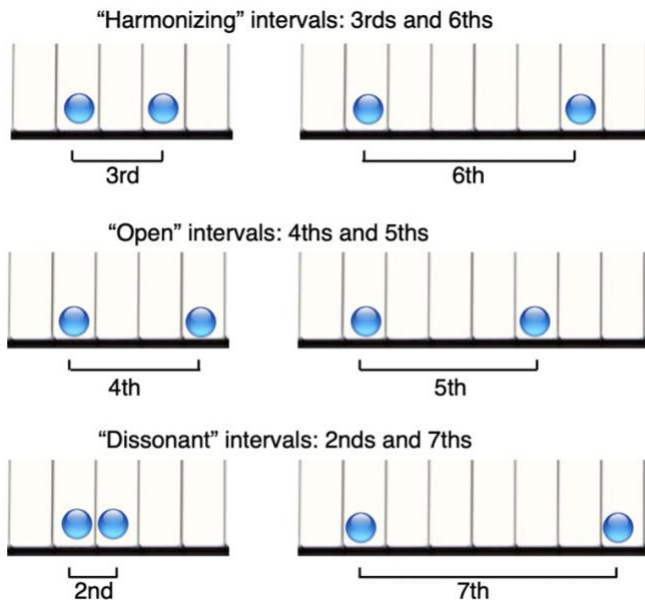
Teaching tip: Have students find their own adjectives or descriptions for the qualities of each anchor tone; this is great ear training for both modes and chord positions within a key!

PART 2 - Creating textures through diatonic shapes

Dyads

A dyad is sometimes referred to as a 2-note chord or simply as a harmonic interval. The dyad is a basic textural building block, and when combined with a second dyad can create a complex and often beautiful harmonic texture. The simplicity of dyads proves that "less is more" when it comes to creating interesting sonic textures.

All dyads can be defined by their interval*. They can be divided into three basic categories, which I've defined as "harmonizing" (3rds and 6ths), "open" (4ths and 5ths) or "dissonant" (2nds and 7ths). Note that the intervals in each pair are *inversions* of each other.



*When exploring diatonic intervals (intervals formed by combining any two notes within a major scale) it’s not necessary to specify their exact quality (i.e. major, minor, perfect, diminished, etc.) for purposes of improvisation.

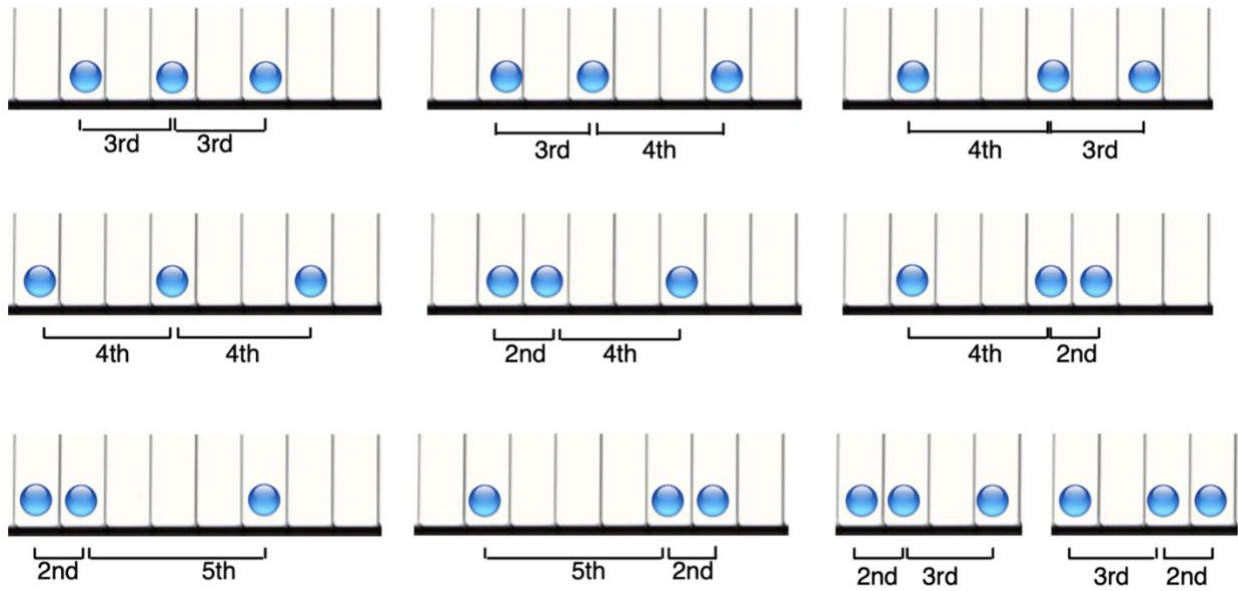
Teaching tip: *Again, have students find their own adjectives for these different kinds of intervals; this is great for intervallic ear training.*

Exercise: **Combining Dyads**

1. Pick one dyad and move it around with the RH while the LH plays a held or repeating anchor tone (any scale note).
2. Play a single kind of dyad in both the RH and LH. Move them closer together or farther apart. Move in parallel or contrary motion. Then add a low anchor tone (held with pedal).
3. Do the same as above, but play two different kinds of dyads (one in each hand).

3-Note Shapes

I am using the term “shape” to refer to the unique pattern formed by the distances between the notes. Each three-note shape can be defined by a unique combination of two intervals. While these are not exhaustive, here are some common 3-note shapes: triad shapes (root, 1st and 2nd inversion chord shapes), shapes with 4ths and 2nds, shapes with 5ths and 2nds, and shapes with 3rds and 2nds. These shapes can be used as block chords or broken chord patterns (ostinatos or motifs).



Exercise: Combining 3-Note Shapes

Choose from the above menu of 3-note shapes. These can be played as block chords or in various broken patterns (feel free to alter the rhythms!). Enjoy exploring the complex textures that can be formed by combining two shapes (one in each hand). Add an anchor tone to create a harmonic color (use pedal to let it sustain) and then continue to move the shapes. Shift the harmonic color simply by changing the anchor tone. Try these combinations:

1. 3-note shape in RH (move it around), an anchor tone in LH (either a held or repeating note)
2. 3-note shape in RH, identical shape in LH (move closer together, farther away, in parallel and in contrary motion)
3. Same as above, but with two different 3-note shapes (one in RH, one in LH)
4. Same as above, but with a dyad in one hand and a 3-note shape in the other hand

Further explorations

- Practice these exercises in different keys (using the notes of other major scales)
- In addition to forming harmonic textures, diatonic shapes can be used to create dynamic ostinato sequences or even to create melodies.
- Experiment with applying different rhythmic motifs to any of the shapes when creating melodies and other patterns to create some thematic coherence.
- Practice chord progressions by simply changing anchor tones in the bass, according to the specific chord sequence (e.g. 1-6-4-5).