

Jazz Ear Training Utilizing Pivot Tones

by Rob Boone (ITA Journal Spring 1998)

Trombone players typically use arpeggio practice as part of their daily warm-ups and drills. Take additional advantage of this practice time by including ear training in conjunction with working out on your horn. These exercises can be performed at any tempo, dynamic range, and with variety of articulation and phrasing.

There is a wonderful out of print book called *Practice With The Experts*, which was compiled and edited by Paul Tanner. The book was published in 1960 by Leeds Music Corp. Great west coast players of the time contributed their favorite exercise “gems” to this terrific book. The writers included Robert Marsteller, Frank Rosolino, Dick Nash, George Roberts, Lloyd Ulyate, Milt Bernhart, Tommy Pederson and Hoyt Bohannon.

The arpeggiated exercise offered by Hoyt Bohannon provided an excellent opportunity to work on two-octave drills while exploring some of the different chords and tonalities which can be built on a lower common or pivot tone (**example 1**). It is a challenge to play the 61-note exercise flawlessly on one breath and then transpose it through all 12 keys. At one point, Tom Ervin required his students to be able to play this exercise by memory, in all keys, before advancing to a higher level of study.

Hoyt Bohannon’s exercise provides a useful ear training drill when transposed through all 12 keys. Major, minor, diminished and augmented triads are built on the common lower pitch. The exercise should be played in several different styles, utilizing different phrasing, articulation and dynamic level. Inverting the exercise places the pivot tone on top (**example 2**).

The harmony can be altered in many ways. The pivot tone can be used as the root, third and fifth of major triads (**example 3**) or minor triads (**example 4**). Additional intonation concerns come into play as the pivot tone becomes different parts of the chord. Once a pattern is created, modulate it through other keys. I find the best way to change pivot tone is to either go up or down in half steps or use the circle of fifths.

Once the concept of these pivot exercises is understood, new exercises can be constructed. For example, changing the meter and shape of exercise three produces a good pattern using a smaller range to explore the same harmonic concept (**example 5**). Moving the pivot tone from the bottom notes to the top notes will help you create additional drills (**example 6**).

Model this type of exercise to be useful as part of your warm-up, range extension, articulation drill or other aspect of your playing. Jazz player will use pivot tones with many other types of chords and harmony. The common tone can be the seventh, ninth or other part of the chord. Quartal harmony can be explored along with triads (**example 7**). Common pivot tones allow smooth transition from sharp keys to flat keys (**example 8**). This harmonic concept is invaluable for a player and can help build confidence with command of the horn, harmony and improvisation.

Example 1: Hoyt Bohannon exercise from *Practice With The Experts*

The musical notation for Example 1 is presented in two staves of bass clef, 6/8 time. The first staff contains four measures of music, each with a chord label above it: F minor (i-), Bb minor (iv-), F diminished (i⁰), and F augmented (I⁺). The second staff contains two measures of music, each with a chord label above it: F augmented (I⁺) and F major (I). The exercise is a 61-note arpeggiated exercise.

Example 2: Hoyt Bohannon exercise inverted

F minor (i-) B \flat minor (iv-) F diminished (i 0)

F augmented (I+) F major (I)

Exercise 3: major triads with upper pivot tone

F major D \flat major B \flat major

Exercise 4: minor triads with upper pivot tone

F minor D minor B \flat minor

Exercise 5: major triads with lower pivot tone

B \flat major G \flat major E \flat major G \flat major

A major F major D major F major continue downward

Exercise 6: major triads with upper pivot tone

A major C major E major

B \flat major D \flat major F major continue upward

Exercise 7: major triads alternating with quartal harmony

F major B quartal (pattern continues downward)

Exercise 8: shifting major triads using pivot tones