

Some **suggestions for practicing** inspired by analysis of free jazz and avant-garde styles:

(1) Melodic improvisation with pivot-tone modulation

Improvise melodically (horizontally) and motivically in a major key using the major scale, blue notes, and perhaps the occasional chromatic inflection or approach note. Modulate to a distant key (try keys a major or minor third up or down, especially) using a pivot tone. Modulate back to the original key. Try to hear the new key before you play in it. (Try singing these modulations slowly before playing.) Do this in a rhythmic groove, but with flexible meter. Record yourself and listen back.

Variations:

Try all key relationships (in addition to thirds, try m2, M2, P4 up and down, and tritone).

Do the same with two minor keys, or a minor and a major key.

Develop simple motives while moving through several keys this way.

Use the occasional less tonal phrase for contrast, interruption, or variety. (See Paul Bley's description of Ornette Coleman's "erasure phrases" in the book Time Will Tell.)

(2) Melodic pitch-class set improvisation in free time

Improvise melodically for a while using a single three-note pitch-class set. Using your ear and melodic imagination along with your analytical ability, apply all the possible transformations to the pitch-class set: repetition, transposition, retrograde, reordering the notes, intervallic inversion, octave displacement, linking of overlapping set forms, and combinations of these. (Later, once you've really explored the possibilities of these transformations using several sets, try expanding or contracting the intervals into related sets, extending the sets, improvising on two contrasting sets, etc.) Record yourself and listen back.

Try to always use your ear, and play with rhythmic energy and character, and with the same expressive variety and intensity you would use in any other kind of music.

See any book on set theory for definitions, examples, and more ideas. (Allen Forte's The Structure of Atonal Music or Joseph N. Straus's Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory are good places to start, but you don't need to know all of this to transpose, invert, and reorder three- or four-note sets.)

(3) Textural and timbral improvisation

Make a list of all the sounds you can produce on your instrument, including extended techniques. Also, make a chart of the parameters you can vary (loudness, pitch, timbre, envelope [including attack, decay, vibrato, changing dynamics, etc.]). Write a bunch of single whole notes and a bunch of single eighth notes with every possible marking and see if you can play them all so the differences can be heard distinctly. Explore your level of control of dynamics, timbre, and

envelope. Play the extremes (without damaging your instrument) and the tiniest gradations in the middle. Improvise simple forms using contrast in these areas: short ABA pieces, for example. Use silence. Record yourself and listen back.

(4) Drone and modal exercises

Sing and play accompanied by a drone of a single low pitch or a perfect fifth (which can be produced by another player, or by a piano or keyboard with the sustain pedal down, an electric keyboard with keys taped or held down, an electronic looping device, or a *tanpura* or *sruti* box – real, recorded, or app).

- a. Diatonic scales: Sing a simple melodic idea in any key or mode rooted on the bass note of the drone accompaniment, then play the same idea. Continue this for a long time until you've fully explored all the major and minor scales, church modes, pentatonic scales, synthetic and non-Western scales and their intervals on every tonic. (You can omit Locrian if you're using a perfect fifth drone.) After doing the sing-and-play exercise for a while, improvise melodically on your instrument without singing first, but always hearing what you're playing.
- b. Pairs of scales: Do the same, but shift from one scale to another (on the same tonic) and back. Make sure you can sing the new scale before you play it. Try every combination of scales on every tonic. (F# Dorian and F# Aeolian, F# Dorian and F# Lydian b7, etc.)
- c. Scales with chromatic notes added: Sing and play in a single scale (4a. above), but add one chromatic note to it. Listen to and explore the tendencies of that note. For example, sing and play in C Major, with Ab or G# (scale degrees b6 and #5) added. Listen to Ab as part of melodies resolving to G and in melodic arpeggios of F-, D-7(b5), B°7, Ab+, etc. Use G# to approach A and in a variety of melodic arpeggios, including CMaj7(+5), E7, etc. Always sing first, then play, to make sure you can hear all the intervallic possibilities.

Do the same with two or three chromatic notes added to a scale.

- d. Alternate between a scale built on the tonic of the accompanying drone and a scale built on another tonic (a scale “outside” the key). Make sure you can sing the outside scale before playing in it. Try every key relationship and scale type.
- e. Do the same as 4d., but with triads or instead of scales. Do the same with chords built in perfect fourths.
- f. Improvising over a drone or pedal tone, experiment with groups of three major triads (or major scales, or minor triads) equally spaced in major thirds, or with groups of four equally spaced in minor thirds. One may be the tonic triad (or scale), or not.

Note: This is a compilation that I've derived from others' teaching – some very common or very old, like the whole tradition of Indian music study, and others specific: David Liebman on playing “outside,” my composition and theory teachers on transforming pitch class sets, or mixing modes, and saxophonist and teacher Ken Radnofsky on making a list of possibilities for varying dynamics and envelope on a single note. Some are more my own ideas or variations, based on listening to the original innovators in this field and some of their ways of using pitch and sound.