

Scalesa philosophy

Quite recently I visited a notable conservatoire of music in London to examine some twenty or so students in their end of year scale exams. I was struck, as I often am in grade examinations, at the variance of technique, musical execution, sound quality, musical awareness and levels of understanding in this area. Very often students will express annoyance, frustration, apathy, horror, confusion and anger at the concept of scale learning and playing - leaving any amount of work on them till the last minute for an exam and ignoring their existence in daily practice.

By the word 'scales' I am of course referring to all of the scale, mode and arpeggio shapes encountered in music and therefore worthy of our interest and study.

I intend to argue the case for a fresh approach to this subject with a **Why - What - How** framework.

Why do we play scales?

"For finger technique and coordination" I so often hear and indeed this is a vital beneficial symptom of good practice.

To develop a consistent tone across the range - To enhance aural skills in terms of interval shapes and relative intonation - the latter has obvious instrumental control issues e.g. embouchure security and breathing support - to become familiar with the physical as well as perceptible shapes that will be encountered in 'real' musical situations to have fun! in the assimilation of the intellectual and the physical (i.e. working things out and then playing them!)- To develop theoretical and physical resources of the kind helpful in improvisation, composition and performance.

What scales do we play?

"All of them" is a common response although I would argue for an understanding of how even some of our more familiar scales are formed and/or derived. All of the major scales across the range as well as **all** of the modes derived from the majors i.e. Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian and Locrian.

All of the minor scales in pure, harmonic and melodic forms. Jazz musicians in particular would benefit from the study of the modes of harmonic and melodic minors, in all keys of course !

The relevant arpeggio should be played in conjunction with 'it's scale'! For example a Mixolydian on C should be followed by the arpeggio C7 (i.e. the dominant 7th in F) in order to put the scale in an harmonic context

Other scale shapes should be investigated too e.g. Whole tone, chromatic, augmented and diminished, blues and pentatonic even the colourful Hungarian scale and note cells like the pelog.

How do we play scales?

"Every way" would be a flippant answer, yet I would urge for the spirit of investigation and creativity in finding new ways of executing familiar and not so familiar scale shapes. With the **Why** and **What** of scales as previously discussed firmly in our minds - Variably in terms of articulation, dynamic, character, patterns, speeds and intention - Diagnostically...that is, with an ear for the positive and the negative and the stamina and humility to correct. - In context...either with a pianist playing a 'vamp' or relevant harmony or in duo or ensemble exercises (see M.Miles/J. Wilson book on scales published by Camden). Analytically...i.e. in response to analysis of repertoire and 'real' musical situations, for example, the Clarinet player might work on the scale of F and it's dominant 7th as well as the diminished 7th on F sharp and the supertonic minor arpeggio of G minor because you find these shapes in the Concertino by Weber! With a sense of fun! Perhaps inventing melodic shapes or imposing Isorhythms and moving towards a non specific style of improvisation.

Conclusion

Having considered the **Why - What - How** of scale playing the musician is well placed to respond to many technical and musical challenges with confidence and security, , thus allowing more space and time for considerations like expression and interaction.