

Jazz Piano Practice Routine

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H. M. S. Tri-Tone

The acronym “H.M.S. Tri-Tone” can be used to maintain a balanced practice routine. Work on only one small element at a time in each of these 5 categories. Practice for mastery; make sure each element you are practicing is smooth and easy to play before adding more complication or moving on to another one. Always practice in time (use a metronome), with the necessary repetition, so that your awareness can be comfortably shifted from just correct notes to precise and relaxed time and rhythmic feel. Always strive for a full, round piano sound so that every note is fully heard and played evenly. The 5 categories:

1. **Harmonic.** Practice voicings, both within harmonic progressions and individually in all keys. Definitely cover II-V-I (major and minor), turnarounds, and other common harmonic progressions. My book “Jazz Keyboard Harmony” is a good resource for this material.
2. **Melodic.** Work on a melodic phrase that has some strong harmonic implication to it. Do it in all keys but work on only one key at time. Pay close attention to the fingering in each key, and introduce rhythmic variations. It is often helpful to loop the phrase on itself to help solidify fingering and force you to finger it in a context.
3. **Scales.** Practice the standard jazz scales in all keys, but work on one at a time. Use a left hand voicing to give the scale harmonic context. First block fingerings and practice ascending and descending in perpetual motion to solidify fingerings. Add rhythmic syncopations and intervallic “shapes” to move through the scale. When the scales are mastered, practice juxtaposing two scales in a harmonic context, i.e. locrian #2 and altered.
4. **Tunes.** Piano players need to know repertoire; always be learning a new tune. When memorizing a standard or jazz composition, be able to play the melody without accompaniment. Then add just the root motion, before filling in the inner voices. Isolate problem areas and focus on them. Transpose standards to one or two other keys.. A tune you are working on can be the basis for your selection of the above elements.
5. **Transcription.** Copy things off of recordings: tunes, solos, comping patterns, whatever. Just get inside of the music. Learn linear solos note for note and aspire to play along with the original recording; be sure to know the changes, and eventually add a left hand part. When written down, transcribed solos become excellent etudes and a source for specific melodic vocabulary, which you can isolate and practice.

(Optional 6th category-mainly for professional musicians) **Reading.** Practice sight reading of notated piano music (Bach chorales and piano accompaniment literature are good), rhythm etudes (I recommend Louis Bellson’s “Modern Time in 4/4”), lead sheets, and jazz big band parts. Always keep time and look ahead. Isolate and solve difficult rhythmic or notation problems.