



Jazz Articles by Bob Taylor
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**Article 2:
Improvisation
Warm-ups**

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Improvisation Warm-ups – Increasing Your Payoff

by Bob Taylor – ©2005 Visual Jazz Publications

There are a lot of cool-sounding warm-ups out there.

As I conduct jazz clinics in schools, from junior high to college level, I am impressed by the many elaborate warm-up routines used in jazz ensembles. Most are created by the ensemble director or the students; some are purchased from the many pre-designed routines published in the jazz education market. They are usually built on unison or harmonized arpeggios that go around the circle of fourths, covering all the keys.

▶ Does cool sound equal cool learning?

But as I listened to one school after another zip their way through these cool warm-ups, the thought struck me: “Are we missing the point?”

For all the time and effort that these directors and students were spending on warm-ups, this fact remained: *they were not making much progress in their solos.*

Let’s take a look at the roots of the problem here.

Benefits and Drawbacks

Written warm-ups do have some advantages:

- They get students working together as an ensemble.
- They help students get familiar with scales and chords.
- To a certain extent, they can be helpful with ear training.

▶ What are the drawbacks of written warm-ups?

But they also have their share of drawbacks:

- Students get used to playing scales and arpeggios exactly the way they appear on the page, which leads to rote thinking.

- Opportunities to vary scales and arpeggios are usually lost.

When it comes to improvisation, these are some *serious drawbacks*. Traditional warm-ups, as it turns out, are in that grey area – they help a little with improvising and a little with reading, but they don't do a great job at either.

As I thought more on the matter, it was clear to me that warm-up time could be put to better use. (This, of course, may not sit well with publishers of jazz band warm-up material ...)

The key here is deciding what you want to accomplish:

- Do I want to improvise better?
- Do I want to read better?

Then, use an approach that really addresses your needs. First, let's talk about a warm-up approach for improvisation.

The Flexible Scale Advantage

Instead of writing out a rote set of scales and arpeggios to practice, use the power of *flexible scales and arpeggios*. They're free, they're customizable, and you get a lot better payoff on your practice investment.

Basically, a Flexible Scale or Flexible Arpeggio is one that goes up or down in pitch whenever you want, not when it's written on a sheet of paper.

Note: For the whole scoop on using flexible scales to improve your improv, see the author's Art of Improvisation at <http://www.visual-jazz.com/catalog/index.php?cPath=1> (for students) or <http://www.visual-jazz.com/catalog/index.php?cPath=3> (for teachers).

Flexible Scales are a better approach to improvisation warm-ups, because:

- You can set your own difficulty level, from very easy to very challenging.
- You can spend more time on the keys you really need to work on.
- You can use your own rhythm approaches for variety,
- No more rote rehearsal – each flexible scale experience is new and interesting.

But the biggest advantage of Flexible Scale Warmups is this:

* What you practice is **directly transferable** to creative improvisation.

This means that your warm-up time is now a direct investment in seeing melodic shapes, hearing intervals, and pushing your skills – *as much as you want*.

▶ What do I really need?

▶ Why are Flexible Scales a better solution?

▶ How do I use a Flexible Scale warm-up?

The Approach

Here's a quick step-by-step approach you can use for flexible scale warm-ups:

1. Choose a key. If students are at different skill levels, let them choose their own tempo.
2. Have students decide on the Flexible Scale Level they want to tackle (see The Art of Improvisation for details).
3. Turn them loose for Flexible Scale Practice – anywhere from 20 seconds to a minute or more – and then go on to the next key.

Make sure students don't go faster or more difficult than what they can handle. (For coaching suggestions, see the Teacher's Guide for the Classroom Art of Improvisation). Also, remember that Flexible Scale warm-ups can be done with or without instruments.

▶ What is that strange sound?

Controlled Chaos – A New Mindset

The first thing you may notice with the Flexible Scale warm-up is that nobody is playing in unison any more. They are all in the same key, but that's about it – each person is doing his own thing. So is that a bad or a good thing?

Two votes for bad: 1) Some faculty member walks into the room to hear how the band is sounding these days – and is surprised to hear “controlled chaos” ... 2) The director has “lost control” – students aren't moving in lock step together.

Two votes for good: 1) Students can finally concentrate on exactly where there skills are at and how they want to improve; 2) The director can provide individual coaching to selected students, right in the middle of the exercise.

As you can see, the “votes for good” clearly win the contest. Controlled Chaos is like an intense lab experiment, with each student pushing the envelope in ear training and creativity. It means thinking outside the box – and that is actually a key component of improvisation. Remember – what students learn in this laboratory will bear fruit early and often in their improvisation, whether in practice or in concert. The choice is yours – a “cool-sounding” warm-up routine, or cooler solos in your concerts ...

Sightreading Jazz as a Warmup Method

If you picked the second goal – “I want to read better” – then Sightreading Jazz provides a great warm-up method that's easy to use and highly customizable. Packets are available for Concert, Bass Clef, Bb and Eb instruments, including both pitch and rhythm exercises.

For more details, see the Visual Jazz sight-reading materials page at: <http://www.visual-jazz.com/catalog/index.php?cPath=1>