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Getting started with Gypsy Jazz

By Jason Anick

Welcome to the second installment of my column dedicated to playing in the swing violin style known as “Gypsy jazz.” Last time I discussed how to improvise over minor chords by making use of a specific set of color tones that give you that authentic Gypsy jazz sound. We focused on the A minor chord, the first chord of minor blues tunes like the ever-popular “Minor Swing.” Blues tunes in Am use three chords: A minor, D minor, and E7. The color tones for D minor follow the same principles as for A minor (described last time), but the E7 requires special treatment. That brings us to the subject of the current column — how to approach 7th chords when playing in a minor key.

Lesson 2: Improvising over 7th chords in Minor Keys

A good place to start is learning the E7 arpeggio (example #1).

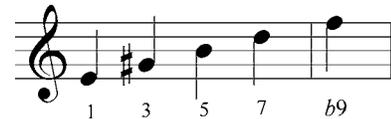
Example 1 - E7 arpeggio



The first, third, fifth, and (flatted) seventh notes of the E scale are the “safe” notes to play over an E7 since they are all within the chord itself. However, in order to get a more “jazzy” sound we will need to consider which color tones to include as well. Recall that the color tones are the notes outside of the chord that can be used to connect notes of the arpeggio into interesting lines and phrases.

The most useful extension to the arpeggio in this case is the flat nine. To find it, count up nine notes in the E scale. This gets you one note past the octave to F#, which, when flatted, becomes F. So you can think of it simply as a half step above the root of the chord. Let’s look at an E7 arpeggio with the added flat nine (example #2).

Example 2 - E7b9 arpeggio



Now let’s see what happens when we take the E note out of the equation and lower the F down an octave, making it the root of the arpeggio, as in example #3.

Example 3 - F diminished arpeggio



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All of a sudden we've got an F diminished arpeggio! A diminished arpeggio is a series of four notes each separated by a minor third (a full step plus a half step) and it plays a key role in achieving that "Gypsy jazz" sound.

To see how the diminished arpeggio can be employed to make interesting phrases, let's take a look at some licks that work over four bars of E7 or E7(b9). For now play the notes straight, but eventually you will want to play them with a swing feel.

Example 4 - Lick 1



The first part of this lick 1 (above) comes straight out of an E7 arpeggio. We add a slide into the D note which helps to "jazz" up the phrase, as well as an A note used as a passing tone. The second bar of the phrase introduces the flat nine (F note), which

acts as a passing tone back to the E. Notice also how the first half of the phrase and the second half of the phrase have both rhythmic and melodic similarities. The creative use of such motifs to link phrases together tends to make for more interesting solos.

Example 5 - Lick 2



Lick 2 illustrates the importance of rhythm in the construction of an interesting phrase since harmonically every note in this lick simply lies within the F diminished arpeggio. The use of

syncopation, as seen in the second half of the lick, is one rhythmic device that is commonly used within jazz solos.

Example 6 - Lick 3



The first part of lick 3 has a series of chromatic passing tones that lead up to the F note. In the next phrase there is a series of chromatic passing tones that lead up to the D note. Both the F and D notes are part of the F diminished arpeggio so as long as you

land on those notes on the down beat, you can approach them chromatically either from below or above. You may want to play the G# in measure three with your fourth finger so you can grab the following D note more easily with your third finger.

Example 7 - Lick 4



One of the strengths of the violin is the ability to sustain long notes, so don't be afraid to play long notes as seen in the first part of lick 4. The second half of the lick provides another example of playing with syncopated rhythm.

[Boston based jazz fiddler Jason Anick plays Gypsy jazz and new acoustic music with the John Jorgenson Quintet (www.johnjorgenson.com). Jason has led jazz violin workshops at Django in June and Djangofest Northwest and teaches private lessons while on and off tour.]

With these ideas in mind, you should now be able to experiment with the E7 arpeggio and the F diminished arpeggio to create your own phrases. If you don't read music well or would like to hear these and other licks that work over E7, I have posted a short video of this lesson online at www.jasonanick.com.

👉 **Reminder:** Check out Jason's accompanying online lesson! (Go to www.jasonanick.com and click on videos.)