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## Getting started with Gypsy Jazz

By Jason Anick

Welcome to *Fiddler Magazine's* new occasional column dedicated to playing in the swing violin style known as "Gypsy jazz." Gypsy jazz, also called "Hot Club" music and "Jazz Manouche," was first popularized back in the 1930s by Gypsy guitarist Django Reinhardt, Parisian violinist Stéphane Grappelli and their Quintet of the Hot Club of France. Their unique string jazz sound combined improvised American swing music with the powerful drive of the Gypsy style rhythm guitar and soulful virtuosity of the Gypsy violinist. Thanks to the brilliance of their improvisations, many of their recordings still sound fresh today, though the genre has since grown to incorporate elements of post-swing jazz, Latin, and world music.

The rediscovery of Grappelli in the '70s and '80s introduced him to the folk music audience, so it is not uncommon now to find bluegrass or Irish fiddlers jamming on Hot Club swing tunes. Thanks to the ever-increasing number of "Django festivals" around the world, it is easier than ever to find other musicians who enjoy the style and to observe the top players close up to pick up nuances of

technique. Like other types of folk music, Gypsy jazz is a community-based music, both accessible and challenging and ultimately a very rewarding style to play. The best way to learn, of course, is to listen to as much as you can. In this column, I'll be introducing a number of tips and tricks designed to take some of the mystery out of improvising in this style. Let's get started!

### Lesson 1: Color tones over A minor

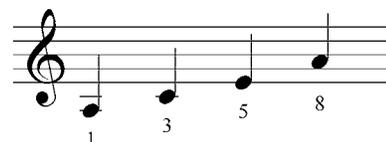
A good place to start is to get familiar with playing over minor chords. The most popular tune to jam on in the Gypsy jazz repertoire is the Reinhardt/Grappelli composition "Minor Swing." Since "Minor Swing" is essentially an A minor blues, the temptation might be to improvise using the A minor pentatonic scale.

#### Example # 1 — A minor pentatonic scale



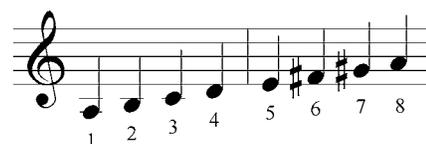
But a better way to think about it — and to give it that real Gypsy jazz sound — is to build your solo based on the A minor arpeggio and a particular set of additional "color tones." An arpeggio is simply the notes of a chord played one at a time. In the case of Am, this means the A, C, and E notes.

#### Example # 2 — A minor arpeggio



These are "safe" notes to play over an Am since they are all in the chord, but that only gives us three tones to work with. The color tones are the notes outside the arpeggio of the chord that can be used to connect notes of the arpeggio into interesting lines and phrases. It is the particular choice of color tones that creates the unique Gypsy jazz sound. The technical name for the scale that includes most of these color tones is the ascending A harmonic minor scale, shown in example #3. The numbers below the notes give a numeric label for each note in the scale. You can see that the arpeggio consists of the 1st, 3rd, and 5th notes in the scale.

#### Example # 3 — Ascending A harmonic minor scale



To see how the arpeggio and color tones can be employed to make interesting phrases, let's take a look at some licks that will work over four bars of A minor.

Example # 4 — Lick 1



Within the first two bars of Lick 1 there are two color tones that serve to approach their respective A notes: a B leading down and a G# leading up. The second part of this line is based on the start of Grappelli's solo on the original 1937 recording of "Minor Swing." Notice the use of the Eb (or D#), sometimes referred to as the "blue" note in A minor. When slid up and down this note gives the phrase a dark bluesy feel. The line ends on an F#, the 6th

note of the harmonic minor scale and a color tone that really adds that authentic Gypsy jazz sound.

It can also be hip sounding to start a phrase with a color tone. Lick 2 leads off with a B note, the 2nd note of the A harmonic minor scale. Creating some tension right from the start can be a desirable effect within jazz solos. You should also note the use of syncopation (a common rhythmic device in jazz) throughout the phrase.

Example # 5 — Lick 2



Lick 3 uses the blue note (Eb) to spice up the arpeggios and ends each phrase on a color tone. Ending each motif on a note outside the arpeggio is an effective way to "jazz up" your sound.

Example # 6 — Lick 3



In Lick 4, we construct a nice motif by adding the G# to the arpeggio as a leading tone to the A. The second half of this line introduces a Bb note which is not part of the A harmonic minor scale. The Bb is used in passing to descend chromatically (in half steps) from the B to the A note. Chromatic passing tones can fur-

ther enrich your tonal palate, but you should become completely familiar with the color tones within the A harmonic minor scale before complicating things by incorporating chromatic notes into your solos.

Example # 7 — Lick 4



With these ideas in mind, you should now be able to experiment with the Am arpeggio and color tones to create your own phrases. If you who don't read music well or would like to hear these and other licks that work over A minor, I have posted a short video of this lesson online at [www.jasonanick.com](http://www.jasonanick.com).

[Boston based jazz fiddler Jason Anick plays Gypsy jazz and new acoustic music with the John Jorgenson Quintet ([www.johnjorgenson.com](http://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.]

Don't forget to listen to recordings of Minor Swing to get other soloing ideas. In addition to the 1937 recording by the Quintet of the Hot Club of France, I also recommend violinist Florin Niculescu's solo on Bireli Lagrene's *Gipsy Project & Friends* (2003).

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