



FIDDLE

Improvising from the Beginning Jazz String Curriculum for 4th, 5th and 6th Grade String Orchestra

Part 10: Guide Tone Lines

by Cristina Seaborn

Learn how to improvise from the ground up, and build a strong foundation of rhythm, melody, harmony and form. In a series of articles on basic instruction you can give to your 4th, 5th and 6th grade beginning orchestra students, we will be learning how to play accompaniment parts while half the group practices improvisation all at once. This will be a safe place for you and your students to experiment for the first time with spontaneous composition. You will be able to model this for your students, one step at a time. This table of contents lists the series of lesson plans that will come out, one topic in each String Notes magazine article:

- Sound and Silence
- Melody and Chord Progression
- Long and Short Melodies
- Rhythm
- Groove
- Ornamentation of Melody and Rhythm
- Melody Notes Outside of the Chord
- Preparing for Harmonic Change
- Chord Tones
- Guide Tone Lines
- Ornamentation of Guide Tone Lines
- Harmonic Progression

A guide tone line is created from the notes of the chords, and strengthens the essential harmony in music. Guide tone lines are one of my favorite topics in improvisation. When I am accompanying a vocalist, I create a guide tone line using whole notes and half notes. You can also use a guide tone line as an anchor for your improvisation.

The third and the seventh of the chord are most often used to create the guide tone line because these are the most colorful and unstable chord tones. Here is an example of a beautiful guide tone line to a bluegrass standard, *Blackberry Blossoms*. The descending G scale is easy to play over the chord progression that bounces around the I, IV and V chords. This guide tone line is a beautiful counter-melody to the tune. Then the second section of the tune goes to E minor.

In the second half of the *Blackberry Blossoms* guide tone line, I used the root and fifth to create a grounded quality, with the sound of a bagpipe drone.

The root and fifth of the chord are more stable than the third and seventh. Because the third of the chord tells you the major or minor quality of the chord, use the third as much as possible in creating a guide tone line. If the chord has an altered fifth (flatted fifth or sharp fifth), use this colorful note.

For a music writing exercise on a 5-line staff, write the third and seventh of every chord to a tune. Notice how closely they are related to the third and fifth in the next

chord, only in the inverse.

There are three different levels of guide tone lines:

- 1) Guide tones only (thirds, altered fifths, sevenths)—thirds give the major or minor quality of the chord, while the altered fifth or seventh give the chord color
- 2) Guide tones, roots, and perfect fifths (chord tones)
- 3) Guide tones, roots, perfect fifths, and tensions (maintaining the chord sound with extensions such as 11 or 13, but not being strict about using only the chord tones)

The rhythm of a guide tone line is mostly made up of half notes and whole notes, with a few anticipations and syncopations. Leaving a rest is also important, such as not playing for a whole section of 4, 8, or 16 measures. Think of the guide tone line as an integral counter-melody using 4-bar phrases within the 32-bar form. It is important that this melody makes a solid harmonic connection between the chords. When improvising, the guide tone line can be thought of as background to the solo you are creating. For example, the descending scale guide tone line in *Blackberry Blossoms* is the backbone to your improvised solo. You can think the scale in your mind to help you root the chord progression internally, while creating other notes to embellish the

descending line. The guide tone line is a better foundation for your solo than thinking about the root of the chord, as the guide tone line is melodic.

Guide Tone Line Exercise #1: Composition

Write out an original guide tone line using notes from the chords with half notes and whole notes:

- 1) Use the root of the chord only
- 2) Use only thirds, sevenths, and altered fifths
- 3) Include root, thirds, fifths, and 7ths

As a rule, use a melodic leap only at the point of a chord change. Otherwise, keep the guide tone line as stepwise as possible. Try a melodic sequence, where you repeat an idea three times, slightly varying the third time through.

Guide Tone Line Exercise #2: Record Your Guide Tone Line

Play your guide tone line composition on your instrument. Record yourself and listen. Improve your ideas each time with your own self-evaluation.

Guide Tone Line Exercise #3: Background Tracks

Use the Jamey Abersold series of background tracks for jazz and bluegrass standards <http://www.jazzbooks.com/> or create your

own background track for a tune of your choice. Improvise using your guide tone line as a foundation for your ideas. Record yourself and listen. Improve your ideas each time with your own self-evaluation.

Expert at fiddling and jazz improvisation, Cristina Seaborn holds a Bachelor of Music Degree in jazz violin performance from Berklee College of Music in Boston, and a Masters in Conducting for Orchestra from St. Cloud State University. She has produced an instructional video for fiddling through Mel Bay entitled Anyone Can Play Country Fiddle, CDs entitled Inside the Heart of a Musician, Seaborn Breeze, and Spirit Wind, and many arrangements for string orchestra of fiddle music, jazz, Celtic, Scandinavian, Cajun and original. Cristina is a violinist and fiddler with over thirty years of experience. In symphonies, quartets, jazz ensembles, and folk/rock bands, her musical background includes influences in classical, jazz, Celtic, bluegrass and Texas swing fiddle. ♪

Blackberry Blossoms

Melody

Guide Tone Line

Third and seventh of every chord

5

9

13

13