

Practice Transposition to Develop Your Ear and Technique

Transposition is one of the most useful and musically valuable skills a pianist can practice. The practice develops one's ear and contributes to the understanding and managing of fingering problems that occur with unfamiliar patterns. Beside furthering the ability of pianists who apply the skill directly in their work (e.g., accompanists), the practice of transposition benefits pianists who improvise jazz. It is the essential technique for connecting the ear, mind, and hand, and the best kept secret for teaching instrumental jazz improvisation. Transposition combines using your knowledge of theory, technique, fingering, and keyboard pitch relationships in a way that no other practice approach can offer.

The Benefits of Transposition:

1. It develops your awareness of melodic and intervallic sequences. The awareness of sequences will contribute to your ability to transpose. The practice involves the application of music theory to melodic and harmonic intervals, chord and melody relationships, and melodic sequences.
2. Transposition is ear-training applied to the keyboard. It demands that you concentrate on listening and connecting what you're hearing to what you're playing. Accordingly, it's playing by ear, but in a way that presents a challenge rather than playing anything. You must accede to the constraints that the music places on you.
3. Transposition will contribute to your ability to reliably memorize and retain melodies and chord progressions. If you are committed to learning a standard or a more complex written composition, transposing will solidify your knowledge of the music.
4. Transposition forces you to come up with fingerings "on the fly." Rather than having the time to work out the best fingerings for written compositions, transposing melodies and pieces develops your skill to improvise music as improvisation is always spontaneous and immediate. While the practice of sight-reading develops the same skill, transposing involves your ear to a much greater degree than sight-reading does.
5. The practice will develop your awareness of keyboard pattern recognition and the topography of the keyboard. In other words, you begin to notice the black key/white key relationships and how intervals and sequences manifest on the keyboard.
6. Transposition will expand your improvisational vocabulary. As you practice the skill, you will acquire patterns, licks, scale fragments, motifs, and other short phrases that will become a permanent part of your melodic vocabulary.
7. You will develop your awareness of what something will sound like before you play it. It will also demonstrate your ability to play what you hear and get your fingers to the keys that give the tones that you want.

How to Practice Transposition:

Exercise #1

1. Play a chord, scale, or short phrase.
2. Play it a half-step higher or a half-step lower, or:
3. Sing it a half-step higher or a half-step lower, then play it.
4. Play the figure in other keys.

Exercise #2

1. Choose a tune or a simple piece that you know well.
2. Learn the left hand and right hand in all keys. You may do hands separately at first, but eventually play them together. You can use different voicings in the left hand (in other words, transpose the left hand harmonically, but don't worry about transposing the chord voicings in the original key exactly as you played them). Try to play the melody, however, exactly as it is played in the original key.

Consider the following:

1. Although recognizing intervals in the melody is important, try to *hear* the piece as you play it in the new key. This is your primary guide for the melody. Make sure you know the melody and chords well before attempting to transpose it.
2. Notice the interval relationships between one note and another or between one group of notes and another group of notes within the melody. You may not use all of the interval relationships that you notice, but there may be one or two crucial intervals that enable you to play the melody fluently in the new key.
3. Notice interval relationships between the melody and the chord that sounds. Again, you may not use all of these interval relationships, but there may be one or two crucial relationships that enable you to play the melody fluently in the new key.
4. Notice the relationship between successive chords. This would normally be the interval that the root moves. For example a C major seventh moving to an E minor seventh would produce a root movement up a major third.
5. Notice the relationship between each chord and the key of the piece. For example, you should be able to quickly grasp that an Eb major seventh is a chord on the bIII of C major, or III of C minor. Also notice temporary (tonicized) key centers within the piece. For example, if the bridge is in a different key, you should be aware of the new key and its relationship with the principal key of the piece.
6. Always keep your attention (even if it is only an background awareness) on the key that you are playing the piece in. For example, if the original key is G major, and you are transposing it to Bb major, you want to remind yourself, as you play, that you are in Bb. Additionally, if there are other important key areas that exist in the piece (such as a "B" section in Eb minor), you should also keep these in mind. Accordingly, be aware of the key relationships in the piece.

7. When you transpose, you will use a combination of your ear and your knowledge of music theory to guide you. Aspects of theory that guide you for the melody are basics like scales, intervals, and melody/chord relationships. For the harmony, you will rely on your awareness of the relationship between a chord and the key (e.g., V7/II – II – VI – V7, etc.), the relationship of a chord to the adjacent chords, and the relationship between the chord and the melody note or notes it supports. You are simultaneously using your ear as a guide. When you are transposing a melody and chords together, however, rely mostly on your ear to guide you with melody and mostly on your knowledge of theory to guide you for the chords.

8. Notice ubiquitous progressions such as II – V – I, II – V, III – VI – II – V – I, circle of fifths, and so on.

9. If there is a piece that you want to play in multiple keys, one of the most important things to do is learn it very well, and analyze its harmonic and melodic relationships. This will make transposing it much easier.