Masterclass: Jazz Piano Mastery - July 29, 2026

Exploring "Oh! Susanna" in C Major - Basic Chord Structures & Free Improvisation with Pentatonics, Bebop, Blues Scales, Arpeggios & Enclosures

Focus: Taking a step back from complicated chord structures to focus on a more basic chord structure while developing the ability to freely improvise using essential concepts such as pentatonic scales, bebop scales, blues scales, arpeggiating chords, and enclosures.

We'll work out the melody and harmony of "Oh! Susanna" by ear, lock in a swinging two-handed head arrangement from the provided sheet music, then systematically apply targeted improvisation tools over the form before combining them into confident, flowing lines. Emphasis will be placed on swing feel, melodic flow, clear voice leading, and building spontaneous musical solos at a medium swing tempo.

Overview

This masterclass uses "Oh! Susanna" as the vehicle, a seemingly simple folk classic whose straightforward, blues-tinged chord changes create the perfect laboratory for developing flowing improvisational lines. The main goals are to internalize the tune by ear, swing the written head with both hands, and then freely improvise over the changes using pentatonic scales, chord arpeggios, bebop scales, blues scales, and enclosures.

Lesson Plan Breakdown

Warm-Up and Review:

Play the II-V-I bebop scales in C major (Dm7 - G7 - Cmaj7) in swinging eighth notes, then the major bebop scale for F major.

Suggested daily practice: 10 minutes

1. Ear Training Exercise: Melody & Chord Structure by Ear

- Simply using your ears, work out the melody and chord structure for "Oh! Susanna" on your own before analyzing the provided sheet music.

- This type of exercise develops critical aural skills that are foundational to authentic jazz improvisation. By forcing the ear to lead the process, you strengthen relative pitch, harmonic recognition, form internalization, and the ability to "hear" the changes in real time, skills that free you from visual dependence on sheet music and allow more spontaneous, conversational playing in both solo and ensemble settings.

Suggested daily practice: 15-20 minutes

2. The Written-Out Arrangement: Hands-Together Swing Feel

- Using the provided sheet music, focus on putting the left-hand and right-hand parts together while making them swing.

- Play the head at a medium swing pace and practice the two hands together until you can really feel the groove lock in.

- Concentrate on rhythmic precision, relaxed swing eighth notes, clear voice leading, and a driving yet relaxed hard-bop-inspired feel.

Suggested daily practice: 20-25 minutes

3. Soloing Application: Building Free Improvisation Step by Step

- Once the swinging head is solid, move on to soloing over the changes.

- Using the provided sheet music as a guide, first improvise using the suggested pentatonic scales.

- Then shift to arpeggiating the chords.

- Next incorporate bebop scales.

- Follow with blues scales.

- Add enclosures (chromatic approaches from above and below).

- Finally, try to freely improvise, combining all of the elements into continuous, musical lines while maintaining a solid swing feel.

Suggested daily practice: 25-30 minutes

4. Recording goal:

Submit a musical recording of the complete written arrangement of the head along with one full chorus of free improvisation, recorded with the backing track (or metronome if preferred). Aim for note-for-note accuracy and strong swing on the head, followed by confident, flowing improvisation that clearly demonstrates use of the techniques practiced.

Suggested recording time: 20-30 minutes

Performance Objective: You should be able to perform the full written arrangement of "Oh! Susanna" at a medium swing tempo with accuracy and a driving swing feel, then seamlessly transition into a musical one-chorus solo that freely combines pentatonic scales, arpeggios, bebop scales, blues scales, and enclosures. This builds essential skills for creating flowing, authentic improvisation over basic yet highly usable chord changes.

Why “Oh! Susanna”?

While it might seem like an oversimplification, "Oh! Susanna" contains key chord changes that make it ideal for focusing on flowing lines. Its clear, mostly diatonic harmony (centered on I-IV-V motion with natural places for II-7 - V7 activity) removes the distraction of dense reharmonization, allowing deep concentration on the core improvisation tools; pentatonics, arpeggios, bebop language, blues inflection, and enclosures, while still providing enough harmonic movement to keep the lines interesting and musical.

Tips for Success

Refer to the provided written arrangement, masterclass recording, and any bass/drums backing track. Focus first on learning the head by ear and then locking it in with a solid swing feel. Once the arrangement is comfortable, systematically layer each improvisation technique before combining them freely.

Jazz rewards both accuracy to the material and personal expression.

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