

The Chicken or the Egg?

Which comes first, virtual practice or flexible scales?

The Chicken

I discovered virtual practice in college, as a way to save practice time. Instead of endlessly practicing scales on my horn in a practice room (not my idea of a good time), I could learn them in the car, in the shower, standing in lines, wherever. Or on a bus, such as a 3-week summer tour around the U.S. with a college performing group – where I learned my whole-tone, diminished, and harmonic minor scales. I thought I was “chickening out” of long practice hours, but ironically I spent even more hours on scales with virtual practice because it was so easy and convenient to do.

I came back from the tour armed with many new scales for improvisation, but also a dilemma – I still had to figure out how and where to use the scales in solos. Plus, the idea of running scales up and down the octave in a solo had limited appeal to me.

The Egg

Enter flexible scales. I had watched many students struggle with the same dilemma of turning scales and arpeggios into something interesting. The idea of flexible scales made perfect sense – not only do they sound better than regular octave scales, but they are ideal for building your musical vision as you practice them. And therein lies the egg metaphor: flexible scales are the genesis for many musical ideas, especially *in the musical moment*, which is precisely where improvisation occurs.

I later discovered a layered approach to flexible scales that takes you from scale to full-fledged improvisation. You can read more about that in Chapter 1E of *The Art of Improvisation*.

The Answer

So which should come first: virtual practice or flexible scales? For me, the chicken (virtual practice) came first, but ...

The real answer is the chicken *and* the egg. They fit together logically, powerfully, and beautifully to fuel the ideas and skills for your improvisation.