

SOLOING SECRETS: The Hirajoshi Scale

By Peter Hodgson

Scales are funny things. They're incredibly important to understanding how music works, and they function as great finger exercises too. But at a certain point they can become little cages, if you let them. Sometimes you'll find the perfect note lurking outside of the scale you're using for the rest of the song or solo. This is the kind of thinking that most likely led to the flatted fifth being added to the Minor Pentatonic scale and leading to the creation of the Minor Blues scale, for instance. Of course, you can only add so many notes to a scale before it simply becomes the chromatic scale, which tends to be where my personal approach to soloing sits right now. At some point I started to see the guitar as just one long string, and the intervals I'd memorised from years of studying scales meant I was suddenly able to go straight for melodies I was hearing in my head in realtime rather than basically hitting different scale degrees like I was previously. It's common to hear musicians say "Learn everything - and then forget it" and then for some smartass to hit back with a Spinal Tap-esque "Well I don't know it so isn't that the same as forgetting?" But that's not it: the point is "learn as much as you can, so that it becomes intuitive and you can form a musical sentence as instantly as you can form a linguistic one."

Okay, so having said that, here's my favourite scale of all time: the Hirajoshi scale. It began life as a tuning devised by Yatsushashi Kengyō (1614-1685) for the koto. I'm drawn to its tranquil peacefulness, but if you lean on certain notes within the scale it can also give you a more melancholy, sombre texture. You'll hear it popping up a lot in the work of Jason Becker and Marty Friedman in their classic shred metal duo Cacophony, where Jason seemed especially fond of digging into its slightly surreal nature. It's a five-note scale, but nothing like the Minor Pentatonic we all learn. Unlike the Minor Pentatonic, which seems purpose-built to encourage an intuitive, free-form approach, Hirajoshi is a little more thinky, and it's harder to play fast with it because it can involve some odd intervallic leaps.

Here's how to play Hirajoshi: start with the Phrygian mode (the third degree of the major scale) and remove a few notes! The easiest way to approach this scale is to imagine it as a pair of patterns repeating across each new pair of strings. Figure 1A is the Hirajoshi scale in the key of A, starting on the 5th fret of the low E string. It goes Root, 2nd, minor 3rd on the bottom string, then 5th, minor 6th on the next one. Now all you have to do is leap to the next octave of the root (in this case, the A note at the 7th fret of the D string) and start that pattern again (Figure 1B). Finally, hit that A at the 10th fret of the B string and you're in place to repeat the pattern again an even higher octave (Figure 1C). And there you go: an exotic-sounding scale, but easy to play and remember (Figure 2). One easy way to find your way around this scale is to pick a pattern on two adjacent strings then move it up an octave on the next string pair and then the next one. This is a good way to build tension to then release it with a big sustained root note or chord.

Figure 4 is another way of looking at the same scale, but this time it's laid out in a two-note-per-string manner that breaks us out of the temptation to fall into repetitive box patterns. You'll go from playing two frets apart to four frets apart to one fret apart, with no particularly identifiable pattern to latch onto, so you really have to think about it, especially when you first start learning it. It also leads you towards some of

the more unusual, drastic intervallic leaps that are somewhat masked when you play the scale in the way outlined in Figure 2.

A great way to practice this scale is to set up some kind of droning root note loop. Then you can compare each note of the scale against the root and see which ones build tension, which ones release it and which ones are neutral. I use it at the beginning of the solo in my song “Hyperreality” where it plays against some long sustaining minor chords before switching to some bluesier licks and then finally an utterly gross and indulgent shredfest.

Figure 1A

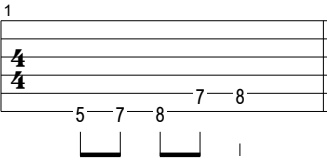


Figure 1B

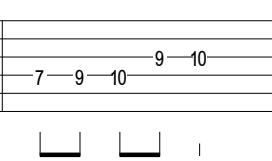


Figure 1C

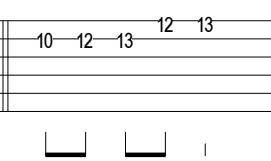


Figure 2

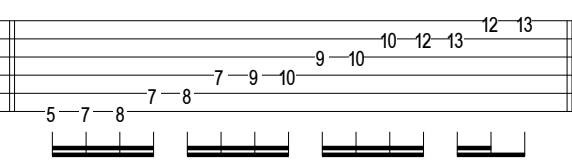


Figure 3

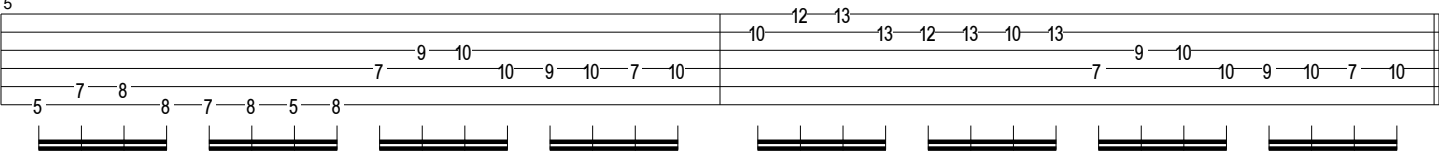


Figure 4

