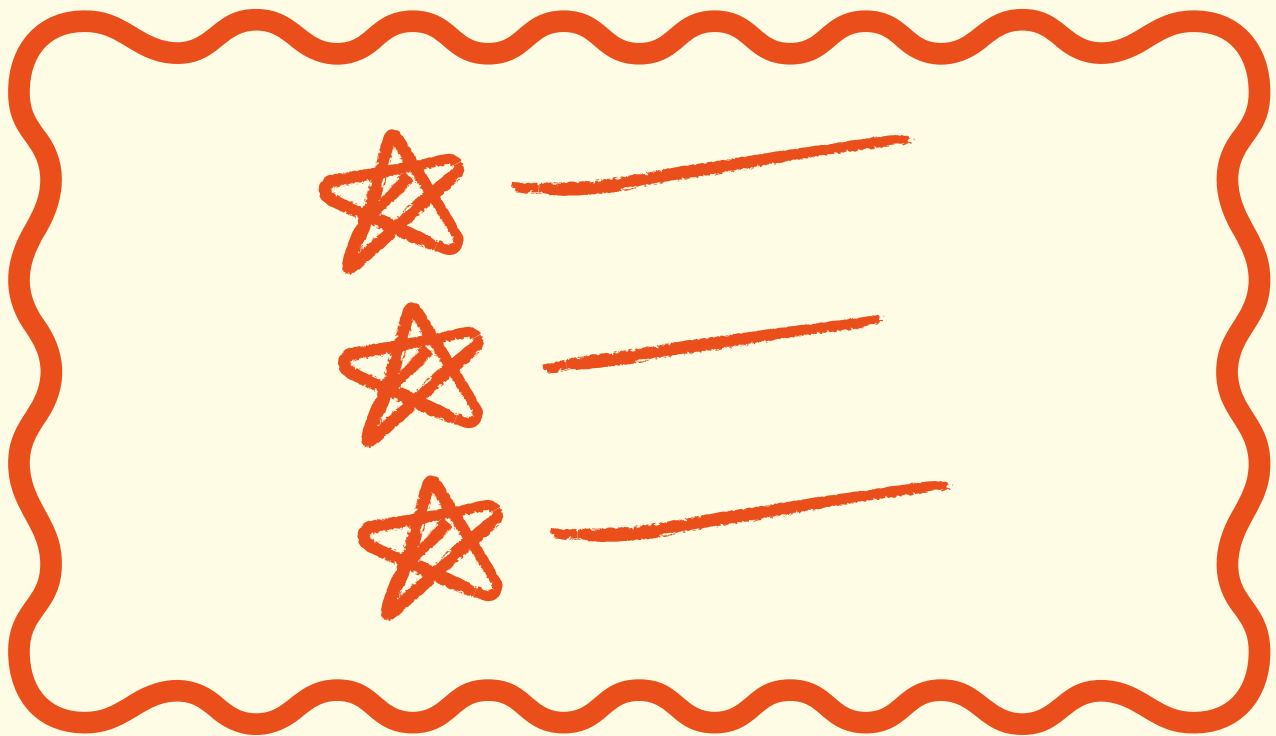# Intermediate Improvisation

CREATED BY ANDREW CHEN

Learning Objectives

In this worksheet we will build on our existing improvisational language through the lens of **rhythm** – or, to put it differently, we will introduce and become familiar with some **rhythmic concepts** that can **enhance our existing melodic language.**

Below are two activities for you to both complete now, and add to your practice routine in future:
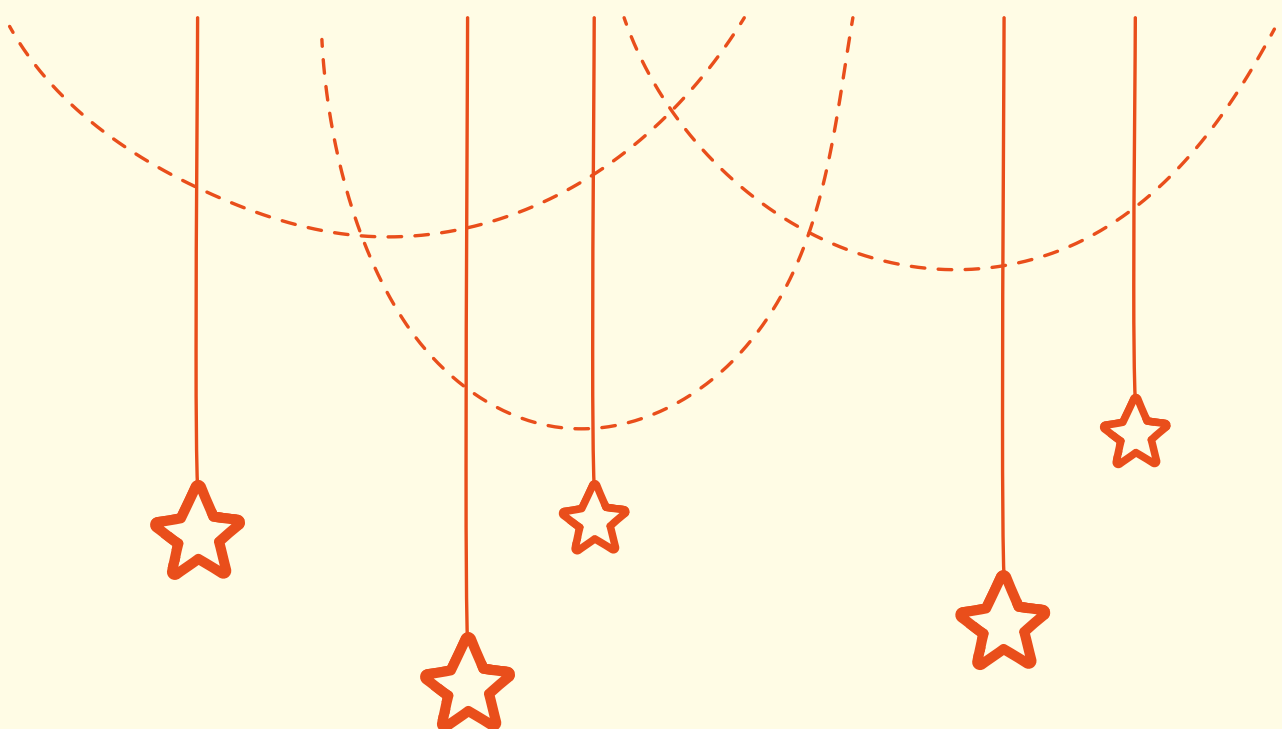**"1. Adding and Subtracting From a Known Line"**, and **"2. Rhythmic Pushes"**. Both are designed to get us thinking in new and creative ways about the melodic language that we already have in place, and expand the **improvisational possibilities** of our playing as a result.

By completing these activities and revisiting them regularly later during practice, we will **improve our musicality**, particularly our internal sense of **groove** and **pulse**. Intentional, controlled repetition of practical exercises like the ones below – just like any technical aspect of your playing, like scales or breathing – allows us to more seamlessly and effortlessly call upon them when we're being spontaneous in our improvisations.

Finally: by design, these exercises aim to show how we can **add** to what we can already do musically through **exploration, experimentation, and small incremental tweaks**, rather than have us reinvent our improv wholesale. This is an essential, lifelong part of developing our confidence and abilities as jazz musicians, and hopefully you'll be inspired to take away different aspects of these exercises, and further embark on your own exploration in your own playing by varying up the approach.

You will need to have your instrument for both activities below. By now you should understand the **swing** groove, its importance in **jazz** music, and its relation to the **pulse**. You should be familiar with **chord tones**, or the relationships between certain melodic notes and the chord that they are being played over. Perhaps you have learnt or developed **language** in your improvisation around this, either as melodic fragments or complete lines.

Adding & Subtracting from a Known Line

Let's take a short melodic line that we might play when improvising – something we know already works. I've written one out below (see step 2.) as an example for you to follow: it's a 9 note **swung** melodic phrase that we would play over a C^7 chord (the type of chord we'd find in a C major blues).

Over the course of this exercise, we're going to play through this phrase and variations of it several times. It's important we learn and play it in some kind of **musical context** in order to internalise what it sounds like, and develop our improvisation.

First, let's get our **backing** set up. Set a metronome to 90bpm to help us keep the pulse. If possible, have a friend or teacher or instructor play the C^7 chord, either as is every 2 bars, or as part of a groove, so we can hear the **harmony** over which we are playing.

Note: If you play a transposing instrument, such as a saxophone or trumpet, you will either have to transpose the phrase below, or have them play the chord of your instrument's transposition instead.

Let's now learn the phrase. Sing the melody (above) in full, four times, back to back.

Let's switch to our instrument. Again, play the melody in full, four times – back to back if possible but if you need to take a break while still learning the phrase, that is ok too.

Now, we're going to begin **subtracting**. We will continue repeating the phrase back to back, but with each repeat, we'll get rid of one of the notes from the start of the phrase (from left to right). Make sure that the rest of the phrase still lines up and **swings** as it did before with the pulse!

Once we get down to just our last note, we'll begin **adding** the notes of the phrase back in (from right to left). Continue doing this until we play the original phrase in full, again, and then stop. All together it should look something like:

(Start and play through as normal, and then play each two-bar cell in reverse order until you get back to the top).

Now that we've got the phrase under our fingers, we want to focus on really feeling how it relates to the **swing** groove underneath it. Cutting up the phrase and starting it at different points in the bar already sounds pretty good, but we can both emphasise the feel of the music, and enhance the musicality of our playing, through the use of **accents**.

Let's repeat the sequence above, but this time make a real point of **accenting** the first note of our entry each bar. We can also try and quieten the notes that come after it. Note how each different beat and offbeat of our entry musically sounds and feels different. Do this until you get the hang of it.
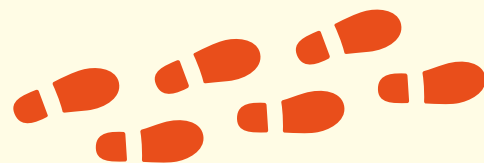
Next steps: Now it's your turn. Try and incorporate this exercise into your regular practice, and notice how it feels more and more effortless each time, day to day.

When you feel comfortable with all the steps as written, try different ways to vary the exercise up. Maybe you can try increasing the tempo, or subtract notes from the middle of the phrase instead. Remember, we're still looking to incorporate a sense of rhythm and placement in our playing.

Or, take it a step further, **and invent a two bar phrase of your own** (or one you already know) over a C7 chord, like above, and **take it through steps 2 to 5**. You might notice some variations sound better than others – make a mental note of which ones, and try to incorporate them into your own playing!

Rhythmic Pushes

A '**push**' is, in most general terms, a word in jazz that refers to an **accented strong note or chord** that happens on an **upbeat** (in most cases, the **'and of'** beats 2 or 4) – as if we've taken it and 'pushed' it backwards by half a beat. Swung offbeats are an essential part of the **swing** feel generally, which itself is a core part of jazz improv – if we tastefully and unexpectedly use **pushes** to start or end a phrase, we can make an otherwise 'weak' beat feel **strong**, and greatly reinforce the feeling of the groove and musicality of our playing.

In relation to **chord tones** (or playing notes related to the current chord), it's probably most straightforward to **think of a push as "starting a chord early"**.

Let's look at this simple chord sequence below to show what I mean – as written, the chord symbols change on the 1st and 3rd beats, and the notated chords change accordingly. If possible, have a teacher or instructor play these examples so you can hear them.

If we were to 'push' the chords on the 3rd beats (the G7 and A7(b9)), we would play them half a beat early, like this:


★ ★ ★

We don't necessarily have to hold our pushed chords either – note how, **even when we make them short and accented, they still sound as if they fill the rest of the space in the bar:**
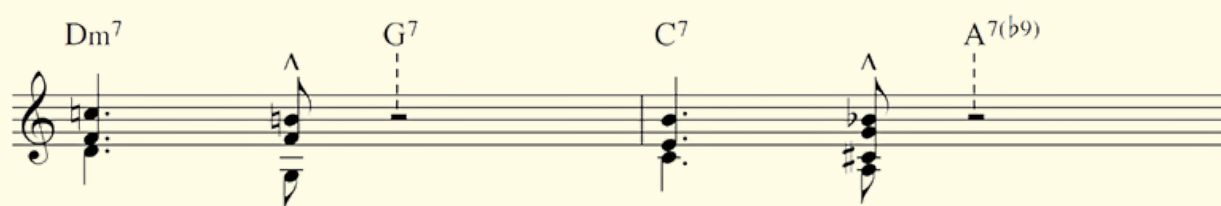
We can take this a step further and push every single chord – even though we're now not playing any of the chords "in the right place", it still sounds musically full, and in fact **swings more than the first way we tried.**

Let's apply this to our melodic improvisation – we can achieve a similar effect by playing pushed **chord tones** when starting or ending phrases. In this exercise we will use the **blues** chord progression in C – for now, use the top chords above the staff.
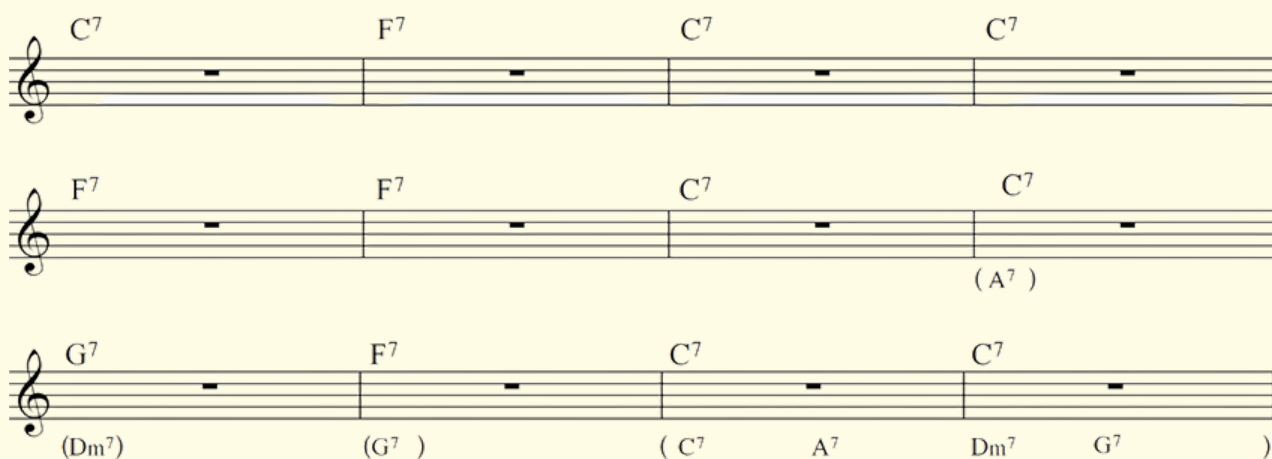
First, let's get used to where the 'pushes' fall in the bar. Set up a metronome at 90bpm. After a two bar count-in, read through the chord progression, strongly saying the word **'dat!'** on the 'and of' 4 before each chord. Make sure you include the upbeat to the very first bar too!

Drop the metronome to 70bpm, and pick up your instrument. We're now going to go through the whole sequence again, this time playing a short accented note – the same note of the **root** of the pushed chord – on the 'ands of' 4:

Now, let's do the same, but instead of playing the **root** as a push, let's play one of the **chord tones** (3rds and 7ths) of the next chord, like this (but for the whole sequence):

Tip: This is a more difficult/involved exercise than Activity 1, so don't worry if you need to practice this at a slower tempo, or work out what notes you want to play without the metronome as well – in fact, often it is extra-slow practice that best enables us to play fast later on!

Finally, let's develop our single note 'dats' into more of a phrase – play the sequence through with the same pushes as before, but this time let's also play them again, unaccented on beat 4 before the next push, so that they link up to make a two note phrase.

See below as an example – note how we end up playing each chord tone twice – once as a push before the chord, and the next as an unaccented note on the 4th beat during the chord. And – even though we've made these melodic fragments up using our system, they actually sound pretty musical and swinging in context.

Next steps: Now it's your turn. Try and incorporate this exercise into your regular practice, and notice how it feels more and more effortless each time, day to day.

When you're comfortable with all of the steps above, try increasing the tempo – a little bit at a time, again going through all the steps until it feels comfortable again. Or, try using the alternative chords (in brackets below the stave) for our pushes – you'll end up playing a push on the and of beat 2 in the last two bars as well, which is good practice.

To take it a step further, you can **try this exercise over a different chord sequence** (perhaps that of a tune you know), or add more notes running into each push to create complete lines rather than just 2-note phrases – this allows us to incorporate more of the principles we've learnt in melodic playing as well as in the "subtracting and adding" exercise we did first. Often it is useful to do an exercise like this when learning a new tune too to reinforce our understanding of the harmony, and I would encourage you to try that when the time arises.
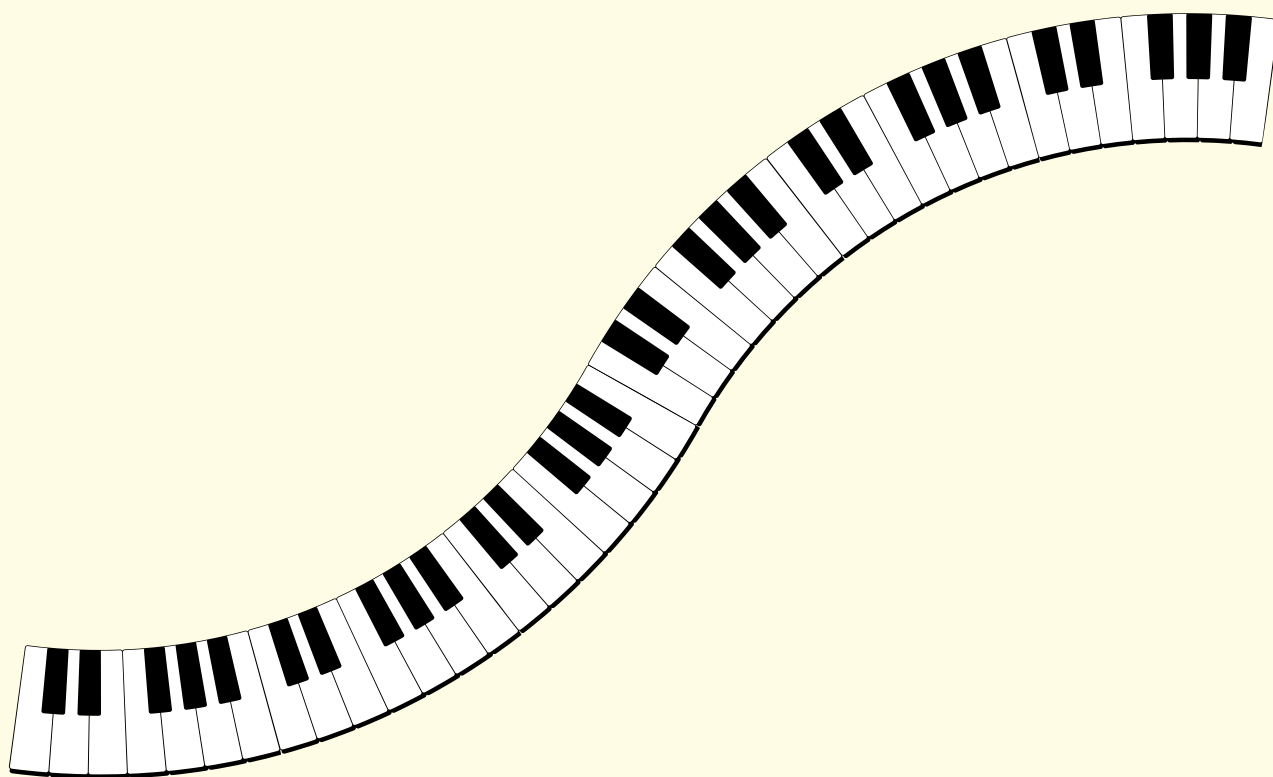
Mini Quiz

IN A SWUNG GROOVE, WE DELAY (OR 'SWING') –

- Every second minim
- Every second crotchet
- Every second quaver

PRACTICING DIFFERENT RHYTHMIC PLACEMENTS OF OUR MELODIC LINES CAN:

- Improve our internal sense of groove and pulse.
- Help us think outside the box and give us new ways to explore our playing.
- Allow us to improvise more freely and spontaneously when we need to.

WHAT IS THE MAIN POINT OF PLAYING TO A METRONOME?

- It helps with intonation.
- It helps us accurately play rhythms.
- It helps with dynamic control.

Answers
Every second quaver, all of these!, it helps us accurately play rhythms

TRUE OR FALSE? – THE SAME MELODIC PHRASE WILL SOUND AND FEEL COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PLAYED WITH DIFFERENTLY PLACED ACCENTS.

- True
- False

A 'PUSH' IS –

- An accented note
- A fast melodic phrase
- A note or chord played half a beat early

TRUE OR FALSE? – A CHORD OR NOTE HAS TO BE HELD THROUGH A BAR IN ORDER TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT THAT CHORD OR NOTE IS FILLING THE WHOLE BAR UP.
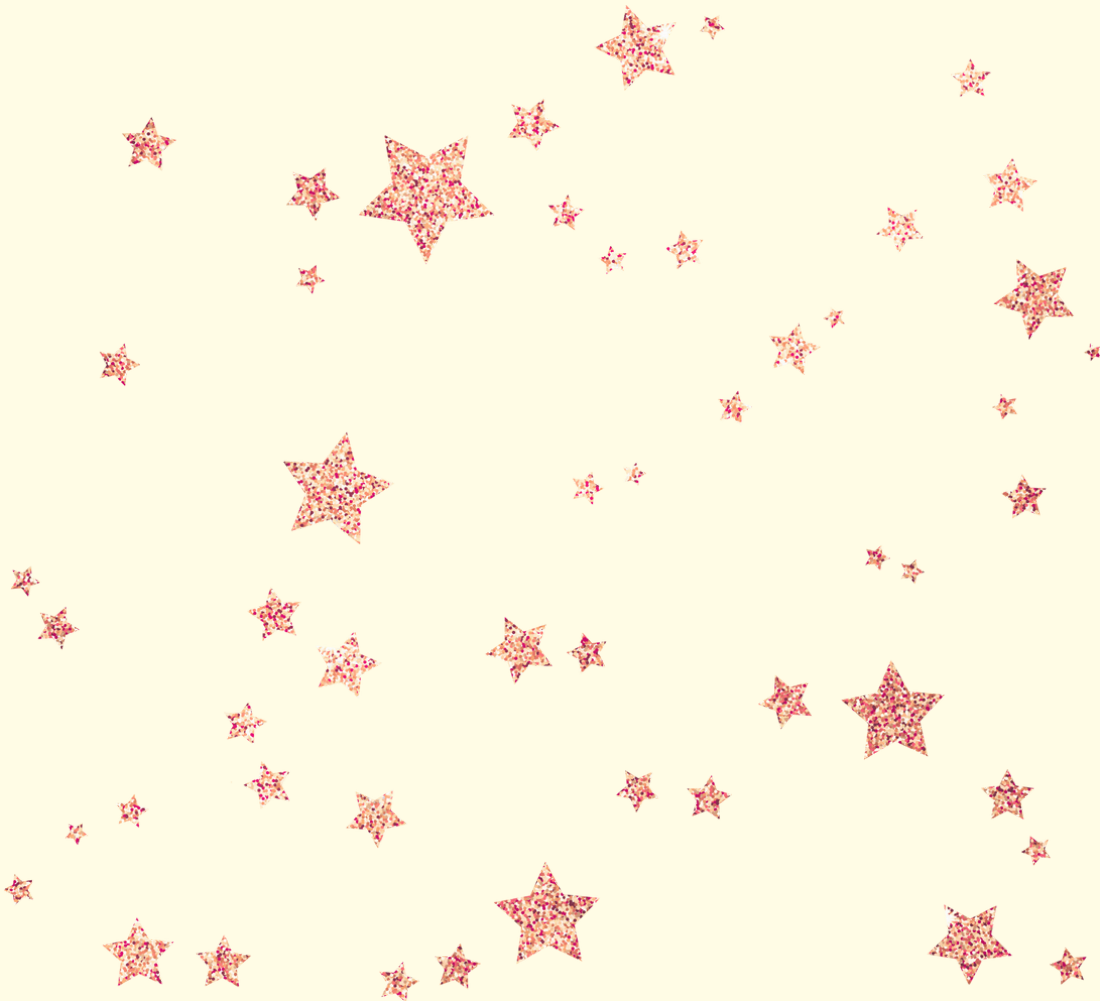
- True
- False

Answers
True, A note or chord played half a beat early, False

Key Words

Push: A strong note or chord that has been 'pushed' forward by half a beat, for emphasis.

'and of': Is how we refer to specific swung beats in the bar, e.g. the 'and of' 1.

If you have any questions about the content within this worksheet, please contact us on projects@nyjo.org.uk.

This resource pack was created by:

Andrew Chen: NYJO Pianist

NYJO

National Youth Jazz Orchestra

Woolwich Works, The Fireworks Factory, 11 No. 1 Street, London SE18 6HD
www.nyjo.org.uk | +44 (0) 330 500 2000 | info@nyjo.org.uk