
Opera Minora

brief notes on selected musical topics

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In the notes of this series the focus will be on bridging the gap between musical theory and practice. The target audience is the jazz performer who reads music and has a good understanding of chord progressions and traditional harmony.

Piano Voicing in Improvisation, No. 1 Voice Leading in Rootless Voicings

Motivation

Rootless voicings have become popular in jazz piano for a number of reasons. First, small jazz groups usually include a bass which plays roots and root progressions. In these cases the addition of the root in piano chords is redundant and replacing it with other chord tones or extensions adds color. Second, even if the piano performance is a solo the roots are implied by the harmonic context and may be replaced by other chord tones to good effect.

This is the first of a group of notes on the inexhaustible subject of piano voicings. Only the simplest examples will be presented here and these will be restricted to voice leading variations in rootless voicings. Tone clusters, chords built on fourths and other topics will be taken up elsewhere.

Development Strategy

One method for creating a rootless voicing will be briefly explained and variations on the **ii-V-I** progression via voice leading will form the basis of the development.

A typical close voicing¹ for a **ii-V-I** progression is shown in the following figure. The inversions of the second and third chords are consistent with conventional voice leading practices.

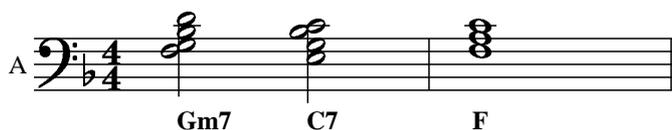


Figure 1: Traditional Voicings for **ii-V-I**

The next figure shows how a rootless voicing can be created.

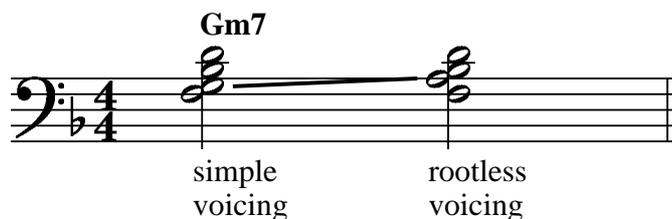


Figure 2: Rootless Voicing

Analysis

In Figure 2, the root tone has been replaced by the 9th. This creates tension because of the minor second interval between the A and B \flat in the resulting chord. The tension adds character, particularly when the chords are used percussively as is the usual case in jazz piano performance.

Note that changing one of the chord tones will also affect the voice leading to the following chords. If they are also to be rootless, the progression can be voiced in one of the following ways.

¹'Close' voicings are those using strictly consecutive chord tones.

Figure 3: Alternate Voice Leading with Rootless Voicings

The variations involve the dominant chord, as is typical with any voicings. Choosing the best of these will depend on the melodic line.

Examples

Here is an example of a melodic line arranged for piano using rootless voicings.

Example 1: Melodic Line Over Rootless Voicings

Chord Reduction

It may be desirable to explore the use of three-note rootless voicings as an alternative to the four-note voicings shown above. A melodic line arranged for these is shown in the next example.

Example 2: Three Note Rootless Voicings

Further reduction, to two-note clusters, moves the subject matter into the kinds of techniques explored by Thelonious Monk and his followers.

Conclusion

A simple method for creating rootless voicings and applying traditional voice leading techniques to a **ii-V-I** progression has been presented. Several examples illustrating variations in the method were shown.

Rootless voicings combined with voice leading can be applied to any progression and the opportunities for creative and novel treatments are endless. Considerable tone color can be added to piano arrangements which would otherwise be bland or unimpressive.

Comments

The techniques presented in this note are particularly well-suited for piano stylings which use the accompaniment in a percussive manner. Open voicings and free-flowing arpeggiated lines are different styles which require different treatments.