
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.

Using Avoid Notes in Improvisation, No. 1

Motivation

The twelve tones available in Western music provide the fundamental palette from which all melodies and harmonies are created. But in any given harmonic context the tones have different effects – some consonant, some dissonant. Hence, each key or chord seems to invite the use of certain tones and discourage others. The term ‘avoid’ notes is commonly used to identify these difficult tones, and every chord in each key carries an associated set of tones which a composer or improviser may consider problematic.¹

Development Strategy

In this note, examples of the use of avoid notes taken from jazz performances and classical literature will be examined. It will then be shown that it is possible to use any tone on any chord if the preceding and following tones form an appropriate context.

¹These typically include any tones which conflict with the color tones of the current harmony.

First, consider the musical fragment following, which appeared in an improvisation by Billy Taylor in a recording of “Purple Mood” – his tribute to Al “Jazzbo” Collins.²



Example 1: Billy Taylor Improvisation

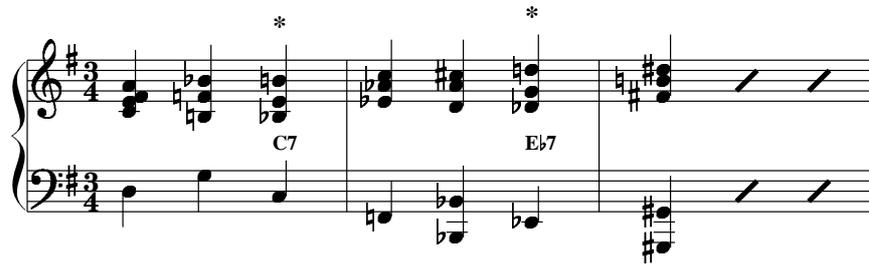
Analysis

The above example provides a good starting point for our discussion. Attention is drawn to the chromatic scale which is harmonized with a **ii-V** progression. The scale, which covers the octave below high C, contains all twelve tones yet there is clearly no evidence of dissonance.

The obvious explanation is that the tones are played in rapid succession as passing tones. Hence, the horizontal (temporal) logic of the sequence is sufficient to override any strict requirement for individual harmonic consonance. Passing tones, in general, are not perceived as dissonant.

Another example of a chromatic treatment is shown in the following example.

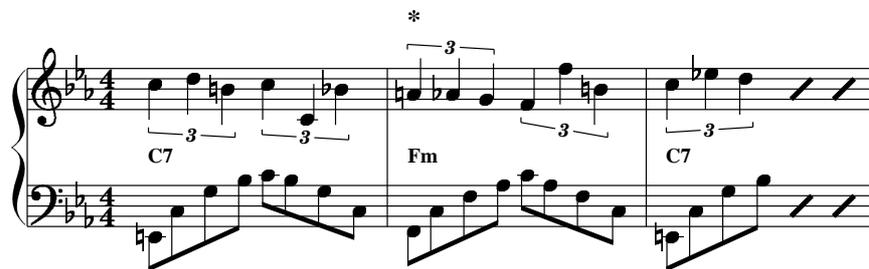
²Billy Taylor, “Purple Mood”, *A Touch of Taylor*, PRLP 7001, Prestige Records Inc.



Example 3: Excerpt from Adelaide³

The asterisks mark the combinations of interest. These chords do sound dissonant if taken out of context, but it is unlikely that anyone listening to a performance would perceive them as such. The explanation is the same as for Prof. Taylor’s example. Namely, that the melodic line forms a chromatic scale and the horizontal motion overrides the need for consonant vertical harmony.

In minor keys, a commonly accepted avoid note is the major third. But here is a striking example of its use.



Example 4: Excerpt from Trois Etudes⁴

Note that this major third usage, indicated by the asterisk, is part of a descending chromatic phrase.

³M. Ravel, ADELAIDE, “Valses nobles et sentimentales”, *Durand & Cie*, Paris, 1911.

⁴F. Chopin, “Trois Etudes, No.1”, *Méthode de Moscheles et Fétis*, G. Schirmer, Inc.

Examples and Extensions

If avoid notes could only be used as passing tones, this paper would be of little value. However, the following paragraphs present a method for extending the application of avoid notes to cover a larger range of possibilities.

To begin, consider the following simple motif where we focus on the presence of the major 7th (B \natural) over the Cm7 chord.



Example 6: Reference Phrase

Now consider this phrase as an *outline* for a more elaborate sequence. The next example embellishes the sequence in a way that interrupts the chromatic motion.



Example 7: Embellished Phrase

Another, even more elaborate extension, appears in the following example.



Example 5: Use of Avoid Note (B \flat)

The possibility of interrupting the chromatic sequence without producing ‘wrong’ tones suggests that the real issue is one of tension and resolution –

not necessarily chromatic motion. In fact, avoid notes can even be sounded without preparation as long as a convincing resolution of the tension follows.

Example 6: Use of Avoid Note on IImin7

The examples above include phrases with an unprepared attack on each note in the chromatic scale. Each phrase begins with this note on the 1st beat of the 1st measure of a **ii-V-I** progression (marked for emphasis). The musical quality of these examples is, admittedly, low but they are simply contrived to illustrate a specific point.⁵

Clearly a similar treatment could be given to the dominant, tonic or any chord in any key. The quality of the results will depend on the ingenuity of the composer.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that prepared or unprepared avoid notes can be treated as tension points with immediate or delayed resolution. Gaining some experience and facility at using them will greatly expand the jazz performers options for improvisation. This ‘stretching out’ of the narrow harmonic

⁵These are examples of how the notes *could* be played, not necessarily *should* be played.

bounds usually imposed, supports and encourages innovation, novelty and creativity.

Comments

The realization that any tone of the chromatic scale can be sounded against any chord in the current key is something of an epiphany for many musicians. It is said that when Charlie Parker discovered this for himself it profoundly influenced his later musical development.