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Reharmonization Techniques

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Chapter 10

Basic Piano Voicing Techniques

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10

BASIC PIANO VOICING TECHNIQUES

Understanding the basics of piano voicings and the use of common tensions is a first step in creating effective orchestrations of reharmonized melodies.

CHORD TONES

To create effective voicings for various chord qualities, be sure to follow these guidelines:

1. Include the root of the chord in the voicing (assuming solo piano with no bass player).
2. Include the basic chord sound.

Chord Type	Basic Chord Sound (Chord Tones)
Triads	3, 5
Sixth chords	3, 6
Seventh chords	3, 7
Dominant 7sus4	4, 7
Minor 7(b5)	b3, b5, b7
Augmented seventh	3, #5, b7
Diminished seventh	b3, b5, °7

For seventh chords, the basic chord sound consists of chord tones 1, 3, and 7. For sixth chords, the basic chord sound consists of chord tones 1, 3, and 6. The third determines whether the chord is of major or minor quality and the seventh (or sixth) determines the chord function. The flat seventh gives the chord a dominant function, while a major seventh yields a tonic or subdominant function. Chord tone 5 is not considered part of the basic chord sound unless it has been raised or lowered (altered), or is part of a triad. Altered fifths are always considered part of the basic chord sound.

For best results, the basic chord sound (3 and 7) should be placed, or **voiced**, within the following range:

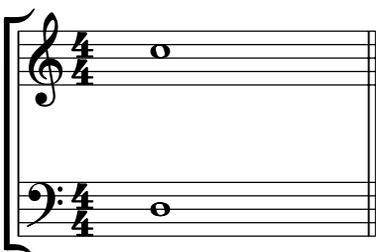


Fig. 10.1. Recommended range for voicing chord tones 3 and 7

BASIC PIANO VOICING TECHNIQUES

The following voicings illustrate the correct placement of basic chord sound for common chord types:

The image displays two rows of musical notation, each with five chord voicings. The first row shows F, F-, F-6, F6, and FMaj7. The second row shows F-7, F7, F°7, F-7(b5), and F+7. Each chord is represented by a treble and bass clef staff with notes placed on the lines and spaces. The bass clef notes are consistently placed on the bottom line (C2) or the first space (F2) to provide a solid foundation. The treble clef notes are placed on the lines and spaces to complete the chord's sound.

Fig. 10.2. Recommended chord voicings for various chord types

VOICE LEADING

Following voice leading principles will improve the sound of a progression. Voice leading connects notes smoothly from chord to chord with a blended, textural sound. It also makes the voicings easier to play on a keyboard.

Traditional voice leading focuses on the resolution of tendency tones and avoidance of such intervals as parallel fifths, octaves, and certain doublings of pitches within chords. Following voice leading rules will lend a recognizable stylistic sound and chord texture.

Current jazz and pop composers are less concerned with traditional voice leading rules, but still strive for balanced note spacing and reasonably smooth connection from one chord to the next. The following guidelines will help you create voice leading that is consistent with jazz/pop voicing practices.

1. Determine the basic chord sound for each chord.
2. If the root motion moves by perfect fourth or perfect fifth, resolve chord tone 3 in the first chord to chord tone 7 of the second, and chord tone 7 in the first chord to 3 in the second, as shown in the following examples. These resolutions produce a clear harmonic texture and minimize finger movement from chord to chord.

CMaj7 F#-7 B7 E-7 A7 D-7 G7 CMaj7

(3) ----- (b7) ----- (3)

(7) ----- (b3) ----- (b7)

Fig. 10.3. Correct resolutions for chord tones 3 and 7

3. If root motion moves by unison or second, move the voices in parallel motion. Parallel motion means that all voices move up or down by a similar amount. In the example below, D-7 to E-7 finds all voices moving up in diatonic seconds. (Roll over Beethoven!)

Optional: Change the octave position of the root while other parts move in parallel motion. For example, see the movement of E-7 to FMaj7 between measures 2 and 3 below.

CMaj7 C#°7 D-7 E-7 FMaj7 A-7 D-7 DbMaj7 CMaj7

Fig. 10.4. Correct resolutions when voices move in diatonic seconds

4. If roots move by third or sixth, use either parallel or contrary motion between the roots and the upper voices. Contrary motion means that voices move in opposite directions: the bass note moves down, while all other voices move up.

FMaj7 D-7 BbMaj7 G-7 FMaj7 FMaj7 D-7 BbMaj7 G-7 FMaj7

Contrary motion between roots and upper voices Parallel motion between roots and upper voices

Fig. 10.5. Correct resolutions when roots move by third or sixth

BASIC PIANO VOICING TECHNIQUES

5. If the basic chord sound appears to be heading out of range as the progression is voice-led, change the inversion of chord tones **within** the duration of a single chord and then continue voice leading normally into the next chord. Note that the roots of the chords are not included in the inversion shifts.

C-7 F7 Bb-7 C-7 F7 Bb-7

Voice leading moving out of range between F7 and Bb-7. The third of the Bb-7 chord is now too low for a clear voicing.

Range problem is corrected by changing the inversion of the upper chord tones within the duration of F7, then voice leading normally to Bb-7.

Fig. 10.6. Inversions help keep a progression within range

VOICE LEADING WITH TENSIONS

It is common for jazz-style piano voicings to contain additional tensions along with the basic chord tones. The following example shows available tensions placed above the basic chord sound.

G# on F#-7(9) and G# on B7(13) are available as tensions on these individual chords, though they are not diatonic to the key, C major. Be sure to include nondiatonic tensions in the chord symbol. Labeling for available tensions that are diatonic to the key is not necessary. In the following examples only nondiatonic tensions are indicated in the chord symbols, even though diatonic tensions are also being used.

CMaj7 F#-7(9) B7(13) E-7 A7 D-7 G7 CMaj7

Fig. 10.7. Nondiatonic tensions added to chord voicing symbols above the top note of the three-part voicing

CMaj7 F#-7(9) B7(13,9) E-7 A7 D-7 G7 CMaj7

Fig. 10.8. Tensions added between notes of the basic chord sound

The last example shows an additional tension placed a whole or a half step below the basic chord sound. **It is generally good practice to keep all tensions above the F found on the fourth line of the bass clef in order to avoid a muddy sound.**

CMaj7 F#-7(9) B7(13,9) E-7(9) A7(13) D-7 G7 CMaj7

Fig. 10.9. Tensions added below basic chord sound in second and third measures

VOICE LEADING OF INVERSIONS

Inverted chord structures should include all chord tones and use no more than one octave between adjacent voices. The only exception is the distance between the lowest two voices. If you are striving for a traditional texture, do not double the bass note when it is the third or the seventh of the chord. In the following examples, the "x" indicates chord voicings that would be inappropriate in a traditional context. The checkmark indicates chord voicings that would work well.

C/E C/E C/G C7/Bb C7/Bb C7/Bb

x ✓ x x ✓ ✓

3rd doubled 10th spacing on top 7th doubled

Fig. 10.10. Voicings of inverted chords

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