

Music Teacher

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IT'S G13 (B9) WHERE'S YOUR PIANIST?

by Fred Hughes

How many of you have looked at your pianist's part and it looked like example 1 below?

Example 1



After you think, "What the heck ...", the next thing that goes through your mind is ... "now what?"

Well, you're not alone. Many pianists and teachers think the same thing. So what do you do? Put the chart back in the library? Resign yourself to grade 3 charts?

How about this scenario? Your band's grooving through a chart and you realize if the pianist just dug in a little more the group would sound like Count Basie, Gordon Goodwin's Big PHAT Band and McConnell's Boss Brass all rolled into one. You stop the band and excitedly say to your pianist, "C'mon man, dig in! Feel the groove, react to the band!" Your pianist looks back at you, not understanding at all your enthusiasm and retorts, "I'm playing what's written." You run back to the piano figuring there's got to be a hipper part only to see...

Example 2



Not to worry you think. Just tell the pianist, "This is just a guide." "Figure out your own part, that's why the chords are written on the top." Your pianist, now more dejected than ever because he or she has been practising the part day and night figuring they had it nailed, looks at you and says ... "how?"

The Piano's Roll

The pianist in a jazz ensemble probably has more latitude than any other player in the group. Yes, that's right, more than the drummer and bassist combined. How you ask? Because in the truest forms of the jazz ensemble piano part, the player is adding rhythmic

accompaniment (drums and bass do this), harmonic accompaniment (bass does this) and counter melodic accompaniment (voice leading provided by the movement from chord to chord) all at once with little or no guidance from the written part. Wow, that's a lot of responsibility!

Playing the Chords

A pianist can play chords with the left hand, right hand or both hands. However, most advanced players have a left hand chord vocabulary that acts in the same fashion as the alphabet does in creating words in our written and speaking vocabulary. In other words, a pianist starts with a basic foundation of memorized left hand voicings and adds or subtracts notes, plays in different inversions or adds more notes with the right hand depending on what the playing situation calls for. But, at the core of it all, is an arsenal of memorized left hand voicings that allows for the brain to process what to play without thinking ... "what chord is that and where do I play it?"

Chords - Some Background Information

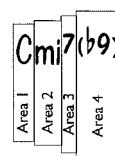
A chord is a group of three or more notes played simultaneously. At the core of each chord is a three-note grouping called a triad. Each triad has a unique sound or color that forms the foundation for every chord in the jazz vocabulary no matter how many notes are added to the chord. By adding notes to the triad we construct six, seven, nine, eleven and thirteenth chords. But, remember, at the core of every chord is a triad

Rules to Remember

There are four simple rules that are essential to the understanding and memorization of every chord notation. Remembering these rules will enable you to understand and play even the most complex chord notation.

First, let's look at the chord abbreviation setup in example 3. Although there are four areas in chord notation, only area 1 is required. If only area 1 is present, the chord is a major triad. For example 3, that would be a C major triad. The remaining areas tell you what notes to alter and/or add to the basic triad and are explained below.

Example 3



The Four Rules To Remember

Rules 1 and 2 apply to the triad and appear in area 2 of the chord notation.

1. Minor: If the abbreviation -, m, mi or min is written, then lower the third of the chord. This notation pertains to the third of the chord only.

2. Augmented: If the abbreviation + or aug is written as in C+ or Caug, then raise the fifth of the chord. This notation pertains to the fifth of the chord only.

Rules 3 and 4 pertain to the seven and these instructions appear in area 3 of the chord notation. Be aware that area 2 may not be present in chord notation and its absence would indicate a major triad.

3. Dominant Seven: If a "7" is written as in C7 or C-7, then add the lowered (flatted) seventh note of the major scale to the chord.

4. Major Seven: If the abbreviation (7, ma7 or maj7 is written as in Cmaj7, then add the seventh note of the major scale to the chord.

chord, the student learns all the keys and basic compositional movement via the circle.

The subsequent tonality's require altering one or two notes of the major triad. In other words, once the student has memorized the major triad, the minor triad is memorized by lowering the third of each chord, raising the fifth to create the augmented triad and lowering the third and fifth to create the diminished triad.

The Foundation

Example 5

The Memorization Process

Now that we have an understanding of chords and how they're constructed, it's time to start the memorization process. As was discussed in the beginning of this article, the pianist must have a group of chords which are the foundation for which he or she plays without thought. Example 4 below shows the left hand voicing for all the major triads.

Example 4

As you see in example 4, the inversions in which these triads are played are not necessarily the root or 1-3-5 position. Ease of hand movement is obviously one consideration as jumping from root position to root position triads would be awkward. The other is moving from chord to chord in a chord sequence. A II-V-I progression of say D-G-C requires only two notes to move from each chord when playing the cadence.

The D stays constant for the move from D to G and the G stays constant for the move from G to C. By learning and memorizing these chords in this sequence (the circle of fifths and backwards for the circle of fourths) and realizing which notes are the 1-3-5 of each

As you see in example 5, the process begins with the major triad and moves from triads to six and seven chords, nine chords, thirteen and eleven chords. Obviously, the scope of this article doesn't allow for elaboration on the intricate details of example 5, but the learning and memorization process should be clear.

This memorization process ensures that your students will have a strong understanding of theory, will learn all twelve keys and understand how all chords are built from the triad on up. No longer will you have a student asking, "What chord is this?" As long as the foundation is built and understood, the rest is just layering. A G13(b9) consists of a G major triad, a G dominant seven chord, a G seven flat nine chord, a G eleven flat nine chord and finally, the G thirteen flat nine chord.

Fred Hughes is a pianist, composer, author and educator residing in suburban Baltimore, Maryland, USA. His book, The Jazz Pianist: Left Hand Voicings and Chord Theory is published by Warner Bros Publications. He welcomes your questions and comments to Fred@FredHughes.Com.

