

Jazz Keyboard Voicings and Bass Line Writing

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Goals

- Understand the inner workings of jazz theory in regards to keyboard voicings and bass lines
- Learn how to teach this to your young students in the most effective way
- Demonstrate ways to incorporate their learning throughout the rehearsal
- Encourage student learning independence inside/outside of the classroom

Basics

Voicings on the Piano

- Left Hand (LH) consistently plays the 3/7th of the chord, along with additional notes as necessary.
- Right Hand (RH) is responsible for 'filling out' the sound of the chord. For our beginners, this will be the 2/5 of the chord, but in advanced voicings, can include any number of tones or structures.
- 3/7th tricks: In any 2-5-1, our voicings never have to resolve by more than a whole-step.

Note: I purposefully did not identify the chords correctly. A basic 'Dm7' voicing is boring, and a hindrance to authentic voicings. Pianists treat 7th chords like 9th chords, to avoid sounding corny.



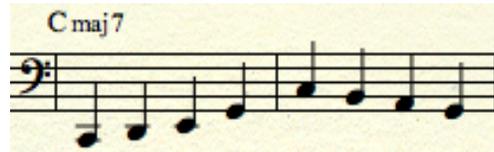
Each tone resolves into the opposite tone of the following chord (i.e., the C (7th) of Dm7 turns into B (3rd) of G7)

- This point is crucial for the jazz pianist; it takes a little bit of extra 'math' at the beginning, but will create more efficient practices, and encourage **voice leading**. Expect your pianists to have these voicings and patterns solid before you start adding excessive extensions.

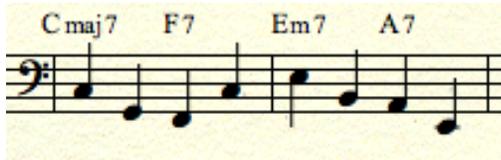
Bass Lines

- Make sure your students get these basic technique rules from the beginning:
 - The right hand (walking hand) is going to play with the side of the finger, which is not like classical pizzicato. They will develop calluses differently, and cause a bigger sound. Also encourage that they begin 'walking' using both their pointer and middle finger, though I wouldn't require it immediately.
 - The left hand (on the fingerboard) will also develop calluses, make sure your student understands that their hands will get beat up!

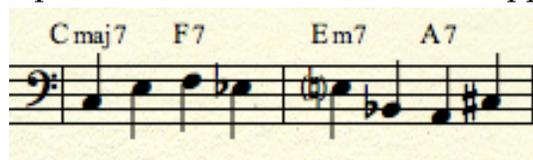
- Here are the steps for creating bass lines, and being comfortable with the role of bass player.
 - Bass players should begin playing just the root first. This will be easy for some and tough for others. Make sure they can stand on their own before moving on.
 - Chords that span 4 beats: Two simple patterns which are based off of the scale degrees: 1-2-3-5 or 1 (down to) 7-6-5.



- Chords that span 2 beats: First, make sure your student can navigate on the roots alone (2 beats each). Then you can have them try the following:
 - 1-5 for each chord.
 - Root first, then select a note a half step above or below the chord that appears next.



or



Running a Rhythm Sectional

This is the crucial moment to deliver clear, concise information about their role as a rhythm section player. I will include details for your drummer as well, so that he can understand his role as well.

Lay the Ground Rules (and reinforce them OFTEN!)

- Being in a rhythm section means we are checked into the music at all times. If you get lost, forget where you are, it's your responsibility to get back on the train.
- Our ears are always turned on, listening for the groove, the beat, and the feel. We are also listening to each other, so that we can react and compliment each other's parts.
- We take every moment in rehearsal, in class or during sectionals, to either make something sound perfect, or try something new. Those are your only choices.
- "Repetition in the key!" We will play tunes over and over again, it's the only way that we can really learn and explore. Nothing in jazz is ever perfect, so you can always try something new.

The Progression of Roles - This section will discuss what steps your rhythm section can make in one sectional, and based on their achievement, how much they can accomplish together.

1. After your pianists and bassists have been given the information presented above, and have spent some focused time thinking about it in the context of a tune (Lady Bird, probably one of the easiest 'cool' tunes) then we can start playing together.
 - a. Your pianist (who has spent some time developing the basic voicings) will be assigned a rhythm to start. Keep it simple, but a basic Charleston is ideal (dotted-quarter, eighth note). **Never force a young pianist to play two eighth notes in a row, it is rarely rhythmically precise, and they inhibit their learning.**
 - b. Your bassist begins with roots only, but if he is solid, graduate him to the basic rules of walking bass lines (1-2-3-5, etc.).
 - c. Your drummer is going to start with **quarters on the ride ONLY**, hi-hat on 2/4.
2. Play through the form, perhaps with an upper-classman horn player on the melody. Check in with what they are doing, work on tough spots, give feedback, etc.

3. Here are ways to continue to progress your rhythm section players after they are 80% or better on the first roles stated above.

a. Pianist:

- i. Change rhythms, using one-bar and two-bar patterns, then allow them to freely play rhythms of their choice.
- ii. As their basic voicings become solid, begin having them use the flat-9th on most dominants that lead as a 5-1.
- iii. Give a short lesson on chord extensions, and how to find them in the scale and where to voice them (RH in most circumstances).
- iv. Discuss the role of range on the piano:
 1. Accompanying soloists: Try to avoid voicings in the range of the voice/instrument that is soloing (i.e., keep your voicings in the mid-range of the piano for a trumpet solo).
 2. Spread out voicings played strongly with an octave filled out by an upper-structure triad (see below) broadens the sound of the band.
 3. A closed voicing in the center will draw the listener in. We also use 'cluster' voicings in here, which include several half/whole steps next to each other (*a la* Bill Evans).
 4. A unison line, doubled two octaves apart, is a clever trick (*a la* Norah Jones)
- v. Introduce the idea of voicings that within the context of a single chord include a 'moving voice' on top or within the texture of the chord.



Recall that pianists will take a basic chord and embellish as desired. Notice the voicing does not move in the left hand, but that the top voice in the right hand outlines a G-major triad, which provides the listener a harmonic 'handle', so to speak.

- vi. Advanced: Upper structure triads. Combining basic scale degrees and certain extensions, we can create upper structure triads that more clearly express the quality of the chord. It also provides that necessary harmonic 'handle', mentioned above in our moving voicings. For example:



C9: A G-minor triad is formed in the top between the 5-b7-9

C13 #11: Between the 9, #11, and 13, a D-major triad

Cm11: A Bb-major is formed between the 7-9-11

b. Bassist:

- i. Allow them to explore new patterns from the scale, inventing their own lines or from listening to examples.
- ii. Combine scale patterns with half-step leading.

- iii. Allow them to sneak an eighth note 'skip' in between quarters, but only when they can prove to you that they have their quarters solid. Start the skip on the same note as the preceding note, and then work on skipping between different notes.
 - iv. Discuss the role of range on the bass, and how moving between registers can affect the sound.
 - 1. Leading up slowly builds tension during 'light' moments.
 - 2. Dropping suddenly down from this can create a sonic collapse.
 - 3. Making small movements in the low register, like repeated notes, half, and whole steps can create a purposeful 'lull' in the line.
 - 4. Contrarily, big interval movements cause excitement.
- c. Drummer:
- i. As soon as their quarter notes 'swing' with the rest of the rhythm section, move them to freely adding the eighth note on occasion. Let them explore the patterns they can create, and how it affects the sound of the section.
 - ii. Have them create fills every four bars, then every eight bars, then sixteen, and then at the end of each chorus leading back into the top. This becomes their responsibility in the rhythm section, and is crucial to keeping your young musicians together in the form.
 - iii. Introduce the snare and bass drum as having comping voices, which can help support a rhythmic idea either in the piano, soloist, or big band. Encourage them to listen to rhythms found in the pianist's comping patterns, and either match them, echo them, or 'respond' to them with a different but supporting idea.
 - iv. Hold the knowledge of 'the bomb' over them like a carrot on a stick. The bomb is an old be-bop trick, first used by Kenny Clarke, where the drummer hits a loud crash/snare/bass drum combo at the same time (or one or two of them).

Transcribing

Within a few months into their learning, take one sectional and do a listening/transcribing lesson. It is unreasonable to tell a student to 'go listen to record' without some prior skill in it. That is why every student should listen and analyze "Solar" from Bill Evans *Live at the Village Vanguard*. There are a million things to be learned from this album, and this song specifically. **Always listen on good speakers with a strong bass/subwoofer.** Here's the process:

1. Listen freely for about 2 minutes, and ask for observations. Lead and direct the discussion
2. Ask the students to see if they can identify the length of the form (12 bars)
3. Have the students sing/hum the melody as Bill Evans plays it.
4. Listen beyond the melody, into the first few choruses, and have them listen for fragments of the melody being played in the piano, bass and drums.
5. Have them clap at the beginning of every 4 bars (for 3 choruses or so) then just at the beginning of the form. This is **CRUCIAL** to building rhythmic spatial awareness
6. For homework: Have them transcribe (which means both playable and in written form) any one chorus from the piano solo section (including drums and bass). It doesn't need to be the same one, we are not trying to have them replicate directly; we want them to understand the techniques and tricks used by the 'greats' to incorporate into their own playing.

Gigging

Encourage your students to 'gig' outside of the classroom. There are so many events where students can earn money, experience, and recognition for your school. As a director, you too can hire out combos and ensembles for private events, either for the benefit of donation to your program, or for your students to be introduced to the life of gigging. We were all professional musicians, so give them some of these tips (and any of yours), and you will have professional musicians in your rhythm section in no time.

1. Make business cards for yourself, and a clean, professional display for performances.
2. Be personable, charming, and courteous with the people who hire you.
3. Load in/load out quietly, quickly, and with minimal disturbance.
4. Prepare a set-list, or at the least, a long list of tunes to call.
5. Bring your music! Even if you have 300 standards memorized, someone may request the only tune you don't know.
6. Learn a large variety of tunes, from all areas of jazz, funk, latin, fusion, pop, etc.