

CHAPTER 3

Harmonizing the Melody

Harmonizing a melody means reinforcing it with chords. This provides a bigger, richer sound than the melody alone (also called a “lead line”). Jazz pianists generally harmonize melodies with 4-note chords.

To harmonize a melody, first determine which melody notes are *chord tones* (notes in its associated chord) and which are *non-chord tones* (i.e., notes not in that chord, also called “dissonances”). Most melodies have both chord tones and non-chord tones.

Figure 3.1 consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time. The first staff shows four measures with chords B-7b7, E7, A-7, and Eb7. The second staff shows four measures with chords D-7, Ab7, G7, and C6. In both staves, the melody notes are written above the staff, and the chord tones and non-chord tones (NCT) are indicated below the staff. For example, under B-7b7, the notes B, D, and F are marked as chord tones, while the note E is marked as NCT. Under E7, the notes E, G, and B are marked as chord tones, while the note D is marked as NCT. Under A-7, the notes A, C, and E are marked as chord tones, while the note D is marked as NCT. Under Eb7, the notes Eb, G, and Bb are marked as chord tones, while the note A is marked as NCT. In the second staff, under D-7, the notes D, F, and A are marked as chord tones, while the note C is marked as NCT. Under Ab7, the notes Ab, C, and Eb are marked as chord tones, while the note D is marked as NCT. Under G7, the notes G, B, and D are marked as chord tones, while the note C is marked as NCT. Under C6, the notes C, E, and G are marked as chord tones, while the note F is marked as NCT.

Fig. 3.1. Chord Tones and Non-Chord Tones

Once you know which melody notes are non-chord tones, you can fill in the remaining three chord tones beneath the melody. If the melody note is a chord tone, set the notes directly underneath it. If it is a non-chord tone, omit the first chord tone beneath the melody (giving space to the dissonance), and then fill in the remaining chord tones.

Figure 3.2 consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time, showing the same chords and melody as Figure 3.1. The first staff shows four measures with chords B-7b5, E7, A-7, and Eb7. The second staff shows four measures with chords D-7, Ab7, G7, and C6. In both staves, the melody notes are written above the staff, and the chord tones and non-chord tones (NCT) are indicated below the staff. For example, under B-7b5, the notes B, D, and F are marked as chord tones, while the note E is marked as NCT. Under E7, the notes E, G, and B are marked as chord tones, while the note D is marked as NCT. Under A-7, the notes A, C, and E are marked as chord tones, while the note D is marked as NCT. Under Eb7, the notes Eb, G, and Bb are marked as chord tones, while the note A is marked as NCT. In the second staff, under D-7, the notes D, F, and A are marked as chord tones, while the note C is marked as NCT. Under Ab7, the notes Ab, C, and Eb are marked as chord tones, while the note D is marked as NCT. Under G7, the notes G, B, and D are marked as chord tones, while the note C is marked as NCT. Under C6, the notes C, E, and G are marked as chord tones, while the note F is marked as NCT.

Fig. 3.2. Harmonized Melody

HARMONIZING CHORD TONES VS. NON-CHORD TONES

Harmonize a chord tone as close as possible.

Harmonize a non-chord tone by skipping the chord tone closest to it, so as not to create unwanted dissonance. *This is an essential jazz piano skill.*

Generally, only the most important melody notes are harmonized—notes that occur at the beginnings and ends of phrases or on the strong beats of the harmonic rhythm. Notes of a melody are also important if they are isolated and bear the sound that their chord symbols indicate.

COUPLING NOTES

A *coupling note* is a chord tone used to harmonize a melody note, creating chord fragments. They are used to emphasize important points of the melody. Tensions also can be used as coupling notes (see chapter 4).



TRACK 19

Theme for John

Ray Santisi

The musical score for "Theme for John" is presented in two staves. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 4/4. The first staff begins with a "N.C." (No Chord) symbol. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes. Chord symbols are placed above the staff: F-6, Db7, F-6, and F-7. Fingerings (1-5) are indicated above the notes. The second staff continues the melody with chord symbols F-6, Eb-7, Ab7, and Db6. Fingerings are also indicated for the notes in this staff.

Fig. 3.3. "Theme for John" Using Coupling Notes

Notice that fingering has been included in this example. Whichever finger is placed on the melody note will make certain fingers below it available for coupling notes. For example, in the pickup measure in figure 3.3, the 3rd finger is placed on the + of beat 4, allowing fingers 1 and 2 to play coupling notes.

The left hand supports the melody and coupling notes with 4-part closed chords with tension substitutions.

FINGERING FOR COUPLING NOTES

These fingering tips can lead to interesting coupling note options. Refer to exercises 4.4(a), 4.4(b), and 4.4(c) as examples.

1. Use consecutive fingers (1-2-3, 3-4, 4-5, etc.) to play a melody so that other consecutive fingers are available to play coupling notes.
2. The 2nd finger on the melody releases the thumb for coupling activity.
The 3rd finger on the melody releases the thumb and 2nd finger for coupling activity.
The 4th finger on the melody releases the thumb, 2nd, and 3rd fingers for coupling activity.
The 5th finger on the melody releases the thumb, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers for coupling activity.
3. The coupling notes can have either the same or different rhythmic activity as the melody notes they are harmonizing.
4. In the special case of the thumb on the melody note, the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th fingers are able to play coupling notes above the melody.
5. The thumb can play two coupling notes at the same time; playing minor or major 2nd intervals adds tension to a voicing.

PRACTICE

Exercise 3.1. "Limehouse Blues"

Practice the following harmonization of "Limehouse Blues." Note the different ways that chord tones and non-chord tones are voiced.

Fast Swing Philip Braham/Douglas Furber

The score consists of six staves of music. The first staff shows the melody with a $\text{Db}7$ chord above it. The second staff continues the melody with an AbMaj7 chord. The third staff shows the bass line with chords $\text{C}7$, $\text{F}-6$, $\text{Bb}7$, and $\text{Eb}7$. The fourth staff continues the bass line with a $\text{Db}7$ chord. The fifth staff shows the bass line with chords $\text{Bb}7$, AbMaj7 , and $\text{F}7$. The sixth staff continues the bass line with chords $\text{Bb}-7$, $\text{Bb}-7\text{b}5$, $\text{Eb}7$, $\text{Ab}6$, and $(\text{D}9)$. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above or below notes.

Exercise 3.2. Lead-Sheet Practice

Practice these harmonization techniques in the lead sheets in appendix A. Determine which melody notes are most important, decide fingerings for these melodies, and then practice harmonizing them using the methods shown.

Another excellent source of lead sheets is *The Berklee Real Book* (Berklee Press, 2008). Practice these skills by reading through at least three new lead sheets per day.

Exercise 3.3. Adding Bass Lines

Add bass lines while you play harmonized melodies.