

## CHAPTER 8

## Open Voicings

Open voicings are 4-part chords that are spread larger than a single octave. Jazz pianists frequently use open voicings when harmonizing a tune, comping, and soloing.

## DROP VOICINGS

## Drop-2

A drop-2 voicing is an open voicing built from a basic 4-part close voicing by dropping the voice that is second from the top down an octave. Use the following steps to make a drop-2 voicing:

**Step 1.** Start with a basic 4-part close voicing.



*Fig. 8.1. Basic Close Voicing*

**Step 2.** Lower the voice that is second from the top, or the first note below the melody note, down an octave. All other voices remain in place.



*Fig. 8.2. Drop-2 Voicing*

## Drop-3

A drop-3 voicing is an open voicing built from a basic 4-part close voicing by dropping the third voice from the top down an octave.

Using a drop-3 voicing is not as common as the drop-2 voicing. It works nicely if the root is added to the voicing, especially in the inversion below. (Doubling the root in an inner voice is okay.) The voicing creates a second interval at the top, which sounds weak harmonically. The added root makes the voicing sound stronger.

**Step 1.** Start with a basic 4-part close voicing.



Fig. 8.3. Basic Close Voicing

**Step 2.** Lower the voice that is third from the top, or the second note below the melody note, down an octave. All other voices remain in place. Note that the top voice is doubled.



Fig. 8.4. Drop-3 Voicing

## Drop-4

A drop-4 voicing is an open voicing built from a 4-part close voicing by dropping the fourth voice from the top down an octave. Like the drop-3 voicing, it is not as common as a drop-2 voicing.

**Step 1.** Start with a basic 4-part close voicing.

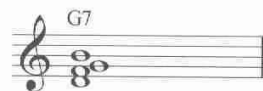


Fig. 8.5. Basic Close Voicing

**Step 2.** Lower the voice that is fourth from the top, or the third note below the melody note, down an octave. All other voices remain in place.

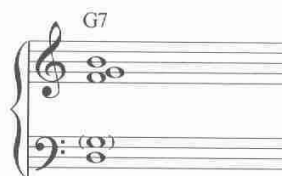


Fig. 8.6. Drop-4 Voicing

## Drop-2 and -4 Voicings

Dropping two voices on the same chord is a common technique, the most frequently occurring of these being the drop-2 and -4 voicing. Since the intervals between the notes of this voicing are more equidistant than those of any other voicing, it has the most balanced sound amongst them.

**Step 1.** Start with a basic 4-part close voicing.



Fig. 8.7. Basic Close Voicing

**Step 2.** Lower the voices that are second and fourth from the top, or the first and third notes below the melody note, down an octave. All other voices remain in place.

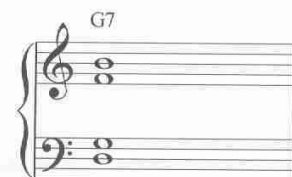


Fig. 8.8. Drop-2 and -4 Voicing

## ADDING THE ROOT

On any open voicings, the chord root (or its substitutes:  $\flat 9$ , 9,  $\sharp 9$ ) can be included as an inner voice. Especially the root adds stability to the chord's identity.

## SUBSTITUTE TENSIONS

The final step to creating a drop voicing is to substitute tensions where possible.

Here is the drop-2 voicing from above (figure 8.2) with tension 13, E, replacing 5, D. The root is doubled.

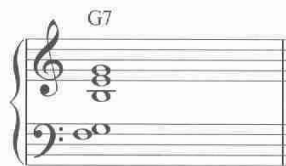


Fig. 8.9. Drop-2 Voicing with Tension 13

In general with open voicings, avoid creating a flat-9th interval between any two voices in the drop-2 voicing, since it results in strong dissonance. The basic rule for avoiding a flat-9th interval is not to combine natural and altered tensions of the same degree, such as  $\sharp 13/\flat 13$ ,  $\sharp 9/\flat 9$ ,  $\sharp 5/\flat 5$ , or  $\sharp 5/\flat 13$ . The forbidden  $\flat 9$  interval may be neutralized by inverting to a Maj7 interval, thus reducing the sharp dissonance of  $\flat 9$ . This could be considered to become a transitory matter of personal taste.

Here is the drop-2 and -4 voicing from above (figure 8.8) with tensions 9,  $\flat 13$ , and 13. The  $\flat 13$  and  $\sharp 13$  create a flat-9th interval that should be avoided.

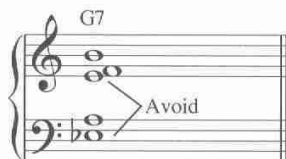


Fig. 8.10. Drop-2 and -4 Voicing with Tensions

Substituting tensions may cause open voicings to sound incomplete. Add the root in any voice to create stability.

Here is the drop-4 voicing from above with substitute tensions 9 for 1 and  $\flat 13$  for 5. The root is added to give the chord more stability.

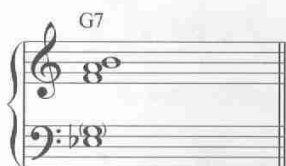


Fig. 8.11. Drop-4 Voicing with Tensions and Added Root

## RANGE

Each kind of voicing is typically used in a certain range on the keyboard:

Upper Range

(About middle C up to A an octave above)

Drop 2 and 4

Middle Range

(About D below middle C to A above middle C)

Drop 2, Drop 3, Drop 4

Lower Range

(Anything lower than D below middle C)

Closed

## PRACTICE

The following exercises will help you to become comfortable with drop voicings. Use the following approaches with them.

- Practice the top line in the right hand. Then play the melody in the right hand and play the harmonizing close chords in the left hand.
- Practice the open voicings so that the right hand takes the top voice and the left hand plays the bottom three voices. If the left hand is unable to reach all three, have the right hand play the voice(s) it cannot reach.

Once you have mastered them, apply the techniques used to the lead sheets in appendix A.



TRACK 24

### Exercise 8.1. "Theme for John"

Ray Santisi

The musical score for Exercise 8.1, "Theme for John" by Ray Santisi, is presented in two systems. The first system consists of three staves: a top staff with a melody, a middle staff with a bass line, and a bottom staff with a bass line. The second system also consists of three staves, showing a more complex harmonic exercise with various chords and voicings. Chords are labeled as F-6, Eb-7, Ab7, Db6/9, Db6, D7, and Db6. Fingerings are indicated with numbers 1-5. A "Drop 2+4" voicing is specifically noted in the second system.

## Exercise 8.2. "Ramblas"

Practice the following tune, "Ramblas," in the same manner as explained in exercise 8.1.

Ray Santisi

The musical score for "Ramblas" is presented in four systems, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The first system features chords FMaj7, EMaj7, A7, and DMaj7. The second system includes FMaj7, EMaj7, A7, DMaj7, and GMaj7. The third system includes A-7, C-7, Gb7, CMaj7, Bb7, A7, and BbMaj7(#11). The fourth system includes EbMaj7, E-7, A7, D°7, and D6/9. Fingerings and articulation marks like "Drop 3" are present throughout the piece.

## Exercise 8.3. Tunes with Drop Voicings

In appendix B, "Like, Blues," "Little Sue," "Perry's Parasol," "Take Two," and "Theme for John" all contain drop-2 voicings. Choose a few that you like and practice them.