

## CHAPTER 13

## Introduction to Improvisation

To communicate to listeners the chord progression used during an improvisation, jazz pianists can do two things: play chord tones in strict or varying patterns, or play the chord tones that determine the chord's identity on the strong beats of the progression's harmonic rhythm.

The resulting series of notes are called "lines." You can create basic lines using only chord tones, or embellish the lines using additional notes, such as tensions and approach notes. Many of these techniques will be discussed in this chapter.

## BASIC MELODIC LINES

To begin improvising, you can use several standard techniques that have already been discussed:



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- Playing chord tones in any order will create a melodic line. (See the "Melodic Chord Tone Units Exercise" in chapter 1.)



Fig. 13.1. Chord Tones

- *Guide tones* (the 3rd and 7th degrees of a chord) give the chord its distinctive quality. Using guide tones in your melody strongly communicates the harmonic progression.



Fig. 13.2. Guide Tones

- Playing broken chords with tensions is an easy way to improvise over a progression. (See the "Melodic Tension Units exercise 4.3.")



Fig. 13.3. Broken Chords with Tensions

## CARRIER CHORDS

*Carrier chords* are broken chords with tensions that move to a target note (3rd, root, or fifth). Play only the first note of the melody in each measure, and then play the chord indicated by the chord symbol at that beat as a broken chord with tensions, as in figure 13.4.

### a. Given Melody

### b. Melody with Carrier Chords



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Fig. 13.4. Carrier Chords

## APPROACH NOTES

Approach notes added to a melodic line can give that line a more interesting sound, as they did in bass lines (chapter 7) and approach chords (chapter 12). Chord tones can be approached from below or above, either by a diatonic scale step (including tensions) or chromatically. Use scale steps or chromatic approaches in any order and combination to give your lines variety. Approaching chromatically from below only creates a scale-like melodic line, which can be desirable.

The following melody uses chromatic approach notes from below and scale notes from above.



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Ch: Chromatic  
CT: Chord Tone  
S: Scale Note

A-7b5                      D7                      G-6

Ch CT Ch CT      Ch CT \* CT      Ch CT S CT      S CT Ch CT

\* N.B. For major chords, you can approach 5 with flat 6.

Fig. 13.5. *Melody with Chromatic Approaches*

In figure 13.6, the top staff is the original melody, and the second staff shows that melody embellished using tension resolution (or chord scale-step approaches down) and chromatic approaches up.



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A-7b5                      D7                      G-7                      C7

11 - b3 11 - b5 b7 - 3      b9 - 1 #11 - 5 b7 - b3      9 - 1 Ch. - 5 b7 - 3      b9 - 1 #11 - 5 13

C-7                      F7                      Bb6

- b7                      b7 - 3                      9 - 1 #11 - 5      b13 - 3

Fig. 13.6. *Melody with Tension Resolution*

## DELAYED RESOLUTION

Delayed resolution is a technique of playing neighbor tones before resolving to a chord tone. Upper and lower neighbor tones are the scale notes that directly follow or precede the chord tone, respectively.

For variety, you can also include the chromatic between the neighbor tone and the resolving note. Usually, these auxiliary notes occur on weak beats. The figure below illustrates delayed resolution.



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T = Target Note

The chart illustrates delayed resolution for five chords in C major:

- C6:** Root, 3, 5, 6. Target notes are circled and labeled 'T'.
- C-6:** b3. Target notes are circled and labeled 'T'.
- C-7:** b7. Target notes are circled and labeled 'T'.
- C-7(b5):** b5. Target notes are circled and labeled 'T'.
- C7:** 3, 5. Target notes are circled and labeled 'T'.

Fig. 13.7. Delayed Resolution Chart

Below, see how delayed resolution can enhance a melody. The top line shows the chord tones that are embellished using delayed resolution in the bottom line.



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The melody in Figure 13.8 uses delayed resolution to embellish the chord tones of the following chords:

- F-7**
- B $\flat$ -7**
- E $\flat$ 7**
- A $\flat$ 6**
- D $\flat$ 6**

Fig. 13.8. Melody with Delayed Resolution

## PRACTICE

These exercises will help you to become more familiar with the above improvisation techniques. Then improvise on your own to the progressions from the lead sheets in appendix A.

### Exercise 13.1. Approach Note Practice



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Exercise 13.1. Approach Note Practice

Chord progressions: B6, D7, G6, Bb7, Eb, A-7, D7, G6, Bb7, Eb6, Gb7, Cb.

### Exercise 13.2. Delayed Resolution Practice

Practice the given patterns for each chord quality in the delayed resolution chart up and down the keyboard. Try them in any key, and then vary the note order, just as you did with the Melodic Chord Tone Units (1.2) and Melodic Tension Units (4.3) exercises.

### Exercise 13.3. Delayed Resolution Study

F-7      B $\flat$ -7      E $\flat$ 7      A $\flat$ 6  
 D $\flat$ 6      G7      C6  
 C-7      F-7      B $\flat$ 7      E $\flat$ 6  
 A $\flat$ 6      A-7      D7      G6  
 A-7      D7      G6  
 F $\sharp$ -7 $\flat$ 5      B7      E6      C+7  
 F-7      B $\flat$ -7      E $\flat$ 7      A $\flat$ 6  
 D $\flat$ 6      D $\flat$ -6      A $\flat$ /C      B $\flat$ 7  
 B $\flat$ -7      E $\flat$ 7      A $\flat$ 6

## Exercise 13.4. Broken Chords with Tensions

In this exercise, the tensions appearing in each broken chord are indicated in the chord symbol. Also, the left hand is playing the same chords in close position.

The musical score for Exercise 13.4 is presented in three systems, each in 4/4 time. The right hand plays broken chords with tensions, while the left hand plays the same chords in close position.

**System 1:**

- Chord 1: A-7(b5, 11) (Right hand: A5, Bb3, D2, E1; Left hand: A2, C3, E3, G3)
- Chord 2: D7(b9, 13) (Right hand: D3, Eb2, F#1, G2; Left hand: D2, F#2, Bb2, D3)
- Chord 3: G-7(9) (Right hand: G2, Ab1, Bb1, C2; Left hand: G2, Bb2, D3, F3)
- Chord 4: C7(b9, 13) (Right hand: C3, Db2, Eb1, F2; Left hand: C2, Eb2, G2, Bb2)

**System 2:**

- Chord 5: C-7(9) (Right hand: C4, Db3, Eb2, F2; Left hand: C3, Eb3, G3, Bb3)
- Chord 6: F7(b9, 13) (Right hand: F3, Gb2, Ab1, Bb1; Left hand: F2, Gb2, Bb2, D3)
- Chord 7: Bb6(Maj7, 9) (Right hand: Bb3, C4, D4, Eb4; Left hand: Bb2, C3, D3, F3)
- Chord 8: Eb6(Maj7, 9) (Right hand: Eb3, F4, G4, Ab4; Left hand: Eb2, F3, G3, Bb3)
- Chord 9: Ab-7(9) (Right hand: Ab3, Bb2, Cb1, D1; Left hand: Ab2, Bb2, D3, F3)
- Chord 10: Db7(b9, 13) (Right hand: Db3, Eb2, F2, G2; Left hand: Db2, Eb2, G2, Bb2)

**System 3:**

- Chord 11: Gb6(Maj7, 9) (Right hand: Gb3, Ab4, Bb4, C5; Left hand: Gb2, Ab2, Bb2, D3)
- Chord 12: B6(Maj7, 9) (Right hand: B3, C4, D4, Eb4; Left hand: B2, C3, D3, F3)
- Chord 13: C-7(b5, 11) (Right hand: C4, Db3, Eb2, F2; Left hand: C3, Eb3, G3, Bb3)
- Chord 14: F7(b9, 13) (Right hand: F3, Gb2, Ab1, Bb1; Left hand: F2, Gb2, Bb2, D3)
- Chord 15: Bb6 (Right hand: Bb3, C4, D4, Eb4; Left hand: Bb2, C3, D3, F3)