

Jazz Piano Master Class - Tune Preparation

1. Harmonization -

Determine if substitutions and/or additional chords will enhance the sound of the harmony of the tune.

- a) Older standards often benefit from things such as:
 - 1) Improved turnarounds at phrase endings.
 - 2) Secondary dominants or II-V's preceding new key areas.
 - 3) Tri-tone subs for many dominants.
 - 4) III chords substituting for I following a V.
 - 5) VI chords following I to add harmonic motion.
 - 6) Suspended V chords replacing II-V's.
- 7) Extension of simple triads, 6th and 7th chords.

- b) Substitutions and additions should probably not be used on more contemporary jazz compositions with highly specific chord extensions and alterations. However, some earlier jazz compositions can still be enhanced by extensions without using any additional chords or substitutions.

2. Colorization -

Once the harmonization is set, decide on the specific chord/scales for each chord. There may be only one choice which is acceptable or there may be two or more options, as there often are with dominant chords. Many of these choices will be determined by one or more of the following:

- a) Functions of tonality such as:
 - 1) II-V-I in major can be bracketed by the major scale of the key.
 - 2) II-V-I in minor can be bracketed by the harmonic minor scale of the key.
 - 3) In a major key, a II chord is Dorian, III is Phrygian, IV is Lydian, etc.

- b) Specifics called for by the chord symbols such as:
 - 1) +11 in a major family chord requires a Lydian scale.
 - 2) A minor 6th or 13th requires Dorian.
 - 3) Altered dominants should be treated as specifically as possible.

- c) Melody notes which are alterations or unique to certain scales.

- d) The chords surrounding a particular chords may enter into the choice. For example, if the chords on either side both contain Eb in their chord/scales, you may have these options:
 - 1) Choosing a scale with Eb will sound very natural or normal.
 - 2) Choosing a scale with E natural may sound awkward or may produce a pleasant surprise.

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3. Left Hand Voicings -

Make sure that you have a voicing that you can play for every chord in the tune and that they all connect smoothly from one to the other. These may be:

- a) Rootless voicings (inversions) with three or four notes built on the 3rd or 7th.
- b) Other inversions built on tones such as the 5th, 7th or 9th.
- c) Modal voicings derived from the chord/scale(s) assigned to the chords.
- d) 4th shells for a more open sound; these may be built on any chord tone.

4. Left and Right Hand Integration -

Play each scale and its related voicing(s). Make sure the two hands always agree. For example, don't play a natural 9th in the left hand and an altered 9th in the right hand. At this point, some mechanical practice with a metronome will show security (or the lack of it!) with the voicings and chord/scales. Set the metronome to a medium tempo and do the following:

- a) Play the voicings in the left hand and the scales in the right hand, stepwise in 1/8's, triplets or 1/16's.
- b) Do the same but play the scales in broken intervals such as 3rd's 4th's, etc. Be sure to break the intervals both up and down.
- c) Again, with the voicings, play the diatonic triads and 7th chords or the scales.
 - 1) Play them as block chords
 - 2) Play them as broken chords, working from different tones such as 1-3-5-3, 3-1-3-5, 3-5-3-1, 5-3-1-3, 1-3-5-7, 7-5-3-1, 3-1-3-5-7, 5-7-5-3-1, etc. Try using different rhythmic values again.
- d) Repeat letter a) but this time play all the scales from the same note or the one a 1/2 step above or below. For example, you can play all of the scales for any tune from either C or C#. This will help remove the serious limitation of depending too much on the roots of the chords for security. Repeat letters b) and c) in this format.
- e) Improvise without any tempo, staying on each chord until you're comfortable and finding ideas that are satisfying to you. It may take several minutes to play one chorus this way.
- f) Work on pairs of problem chords to find a way to move smoothly through the first chord and lead to an attractive resolution in the second. This will usually be a tone such as a 3rd or 7th or some alteration that identifies the sound.
- g) Experiment with guide tones which can move through the harmony as common tones or which lead stepwise.

Now enter the musical stage of practice, still working with a metronome or playalong record to reveal any insecurities. With difficult material, start at a slower tempo until you develop confidence. At this point, if you don't have the tune memorized, do so. Once free of the music, you can concentrate on really listening to what you are doing. Make sure you can play the melody of the tune accurately with a good feeling and refer to it in your solo.