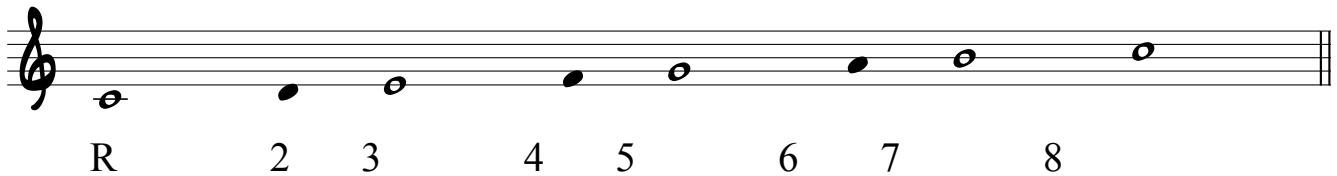


Basic Rootless Piano Voicings

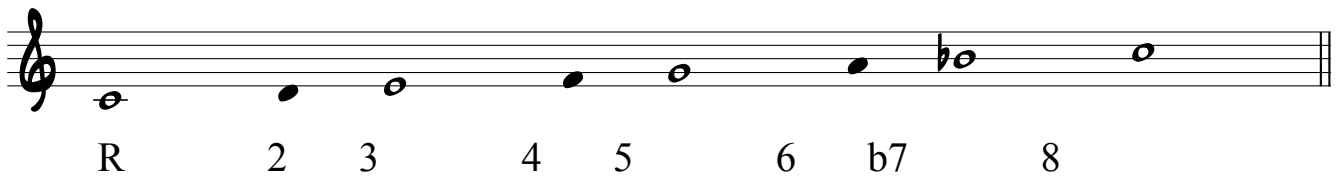
by Chris Fitzgerald

Ex. 1 The three most basic scales: Major, Dominant, and Minor. Notice that the only differences between these scales relate to alterations of the 3rd and 7th scale degrees, as all other degrees are common to all three scales. Learn to hear the sound of each scale degree as it relates to the root of each scale. Learn to play each scale fluently in all 12 keys.

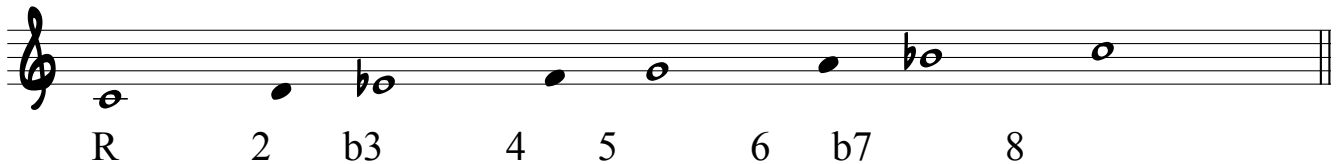
Major



Dominant (Major w/ lowered 7th)



Minor (Dorian minor - Major scale w/ lowered 3rd & 7th)



Since the only differences in these three scales are variations on their 3rd and 7th scale degrees, the 3rd and 7th of any chord built around these basic tonalities of Major, Dominant, and Minor will be referred to as "guide tones" (i.e. - they enable you to determine the quality of the chord). All other tones which may be added to a chord only serve to add color to the quality of chord established by the guide tones, and will be referred to as "color tones".

Ex. 2 Basic two-note "guide tone" voicings, containing only the 3rd and 7th of each chord. For our purposes, all voicings built up from the 3rd will be referred to as "Type I" voicings, and those built up from the 7th will be called "Type II".

Diagram showing basic two-note "guide tone" voicings in bass clef for C major, C7, and C minor. The voicings are categorized as Type I (built from the 3rd) and Type II (built from the 7th).

Type: I II I II I II

Ex. 3 Basic one-hand voicings created by adding color tones to the guide tones in the previous example. For Major and Minor chords, the color tones added are the 5th and 9th; for Dominant chords the 6th is substituted for the 5th, which sounds a bit stale.

Diagram showing basic one-hand voicings in treble clef for C major, C7, and C minor. The voicings are categorized as Type I and Type II.

Type: I II I II I II

Ex. 4 Voice Leading is the science of moving from one chord voicing to the next with as little motion as possible. Since we are only using two types of voicings (Types I and II), we can reduce voice leading to a simple two-step process:

- Determine the intervallic distance between consecutive chord roots, then;
- Voice lead according to the guidelines below.

If the consecutive root movement is by:

- Major or minor 2nd, retain the same voicing type.
- Major or minor 3rd, either voicing type will lead equally well.
- Any type of 4th or 5th, switch from one voicing type to the other.

Root Motion by 2nd

Diagram showing voice leading for root motion by 2nd in treble clef. The voicings are categorized as Type I and Type II.

Type: I I I II II II

Root Motion by 3rd

Chord progression: C Δ , A-7, A-7, C Δ , Eb-7, Eb-7

Type: I, I or II, II, II or I

Root Motion by 4th or 5th

Chord progression: D-7, G7 or A-7, G7 or A-7, D-7, G7 or A-7, G7 or A-7

Type: I, II, II, II, I, I

Ex. 5 Two different versions of the ii-V7-I progression, arguably the most common chord progression in jazz. Note that the root motion in both parts is by 4th or 5th. All previous rules of voice leading by voicing type apply.

Chord progression: D-7, G7, C Δ , D-7, G7, C Δ

Type: I, II, I, II, I, II

Ex. 6 One-hand voicing range: It is important to make sure that voicings stay in an acceptable sonic range, otherwise they may sound too muddy (too low) or too thin (too high). The range listed below, while somewhat arbitrary, is suggested as a basic guideline.

Highest Note

Lowest Note

Ex. 7 Two hand open position version of basic ii-V7-I progression.

Diagram showing two systems of chords for Ex. 7. The first system consists of D-7, G7, and CΔ. The second system consists of D-7, G7, and CΔ. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 on the right hand and 1-3 on the left hand.

Type: I II I II I II

Ex. 8 Five note ii-V7-I voicings based on construction in 4ths: a more open sound.

Diagram showing two systems of chords for Ex. 8. The first system consists of D-7, G7, and CΔ. The second system consists of D-7, G7, and CΔ. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 on the right hand and 1-3 on the left hand.

Type: I II I II I II

Ex. 9 The minor ii-V7-i progression. Notice that the root is substituted for the 9th in the ii chord, and the 5th and 9th of the V7 chord are altered.

Diagram showing two systems of chords for Ex. 9. The first system consists of Dø, G7+9, and C-7. The second system consists of Dø, G7+9, and C-7. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 on the right hand and 1-3 on the left hand.

Type: I II I II I II

Ex. 10 Two hand open-position version of the minor ii-V7-i.

Diagram showing two systems of chords for Ex. 10. The first system consists of Dø, G7+9, and C-7. The second system consists of Dø, G7+9, and C-7. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 on the right hand and 1-3 on the left hand.

Type: I II I II I II