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**

| R | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |

**Dominant** (Major w/ lowered 7th)

| R | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | b7 | 8 |

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

| R | 2 | b3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | b7 | 8 |

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".

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.

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 3rd

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.

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

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

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.

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