

PIANO FINGERS — LESSON ONE

by Dean Slocum

In this series, we'll be focusing on how to create or play piano/keyboard parts from simple chord charts in various commercial and jazz styles. The objective here is to offer useful tips that can be applied to everyday performing and/or sequencing situations.

If piano is not your primary instrument, you can still benefit from this study as long as you have at least a basic understanding of chord structure. Even though some of the examples may require an experienced musician to play in real time, they will be helpful to any electronic musician in creating more professional sounding keyboard sequences and in improving arranging and compositional skills. When you're performing from a chord chart, you are, in fact, arranging and even composing at times.

After graduating from North Texas State University's jazz program, I moved directly to Nashville. One of the first drummers I worked with was the late Larrie London, a wonderful musician and busy session drummer at the time. One night during a break on a live gig, he called me aside and asked, "Man, can you just play triads once in awhile?" I appreciated the wake-up call. That night was the beginning of a life long pursuit to play with taste, not clusters! Taste is simply playing what's most appropriate for the occasion. Sometimes it's knowing when not to play at all. Each style of music has it's own set of "rules" and voicings.

The more you know about chord voicings, the more colors you'll have to choose from and the more styles you'll be able to play or write well. We'll be devoting a great deal of time to chord vocabulary and voicings. There are, however, musical styles that dictate simplicity and restraint, such as in Example 1. The melody is provided as a reference but is not meant to be played. That will be covered by the vocalist. The chords are simple triads to be played behind the vocalist.

Ex. 1. Voice with piano accompaniment.

♩=88 pop or contemporary country ballad

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff starts with a treble clef, a 4/4 time signature, and a tempo marking of ♩=88. The melody begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note F4. Above the staff are chord symbols: C above the first measure, F above the second measure, G above the third measure, and C above the fourth measure. The second staff starts with a treble clef and a 7/8 time signature. The melody begins with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note F4. Above the staff are chord symbols: C above the first measure, F above the second measure, Dm above the third measure, and G above the fourth measure.

Boring, right? That's why we're not going to play the chords literally. It is possible to keep your nose to the rhinestone without falling asleep. And as you'll see, the following tips work equally well in any jazz or pop situation. We'll begin by adding the second scale degree to a few chords to add richness without losing the simplicity. To "add 2" to any chord, just add the note that's one whole step (two half steps) above the root. This technique is often the perfect solution when other chord types such as major 7ths are inappropriate. For example, if the vocalist is sustaining the root of a chord, a major 7 might sound harsh or cause intonation problems. We wouldn't want to be the cause of a vocalist singing out of tune, now would we? Adding the 2nd will give the chord some depth without interfering with the vocal.

Ex. 2. Chords used in Ex. 1 along with the “enhanced” versions, and passing chords used in Ex.3.

Chords shown in Ex. 2: C, C² (or C add2^{*}), F, F², G, G², G sus, G⁷, G² (or G⁹^{**}), Dm, Dm⁷.

and a few useful voicings for C² along with spellings by interval to aid in transposition:

C major scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1

C² voicings: 1-5-2-3, 1-2-3-5, 3-2-5-1

- * Not to be confused with sus 2, which means to play the 2nd *instead* of the 3rd.
- ** Since the 2nd and 9th scale degrees are the same letter name (the 9th is an octave higher), G⁷(2) and G⁹ contain the same notes. However, if you’re writing a chord chart, you can somewhat influence the performer’s choice of voicings by the way you describe the chord. In this case, if you want the 9th to be voiced in the lower octave (as the 2nd), label the chord as G⁷(2).

In Ex. 3, I left the original chords from Ex. 1 above the vocal line for easy comparison to the new ones above the piano part. As you can see, I’ve applied the “add 2” technique to the 1, 4 and 5 chords (C, F and G). Also notice the addition of the 7th (ten half-steps above the root or two half-steps below the octave) to the 2 minor and 5 chords (Dm and G).

Besides embellishing the written chords from Ex. 1, I’ve also added a few “passing” chords that work well with the melody and help to add interest to the arrangement. Some of these added chords (bars 1-2 and 5-6) provide rhythmic “pushes” as well as harmonic interest. Notice that the passing chords all contain the melody note for that beat.

The Gsus in the first half of bar 8 adds some welcome tension that is resolved on beat three with a G triad. To play a G triad for the entire bar would have been less interesting. By dividing the measure into two halves, we create movement, especially important in ballads. But use your ears at all times. If the vocalist is singing the 3rd of the chord, you must accommodate by also playing the 3rd. The “sus” chord just wouldn’t work in that case.

A general performance note: Making use of the sustain pedal, especially during arpeggiated passages such as those in bars 3 and 4, will give a smoother performance. In fact, in Ex. 3, it would be advisable to leave the sustain pedal down throughout, only releasing it momentarily each time the chord changes or when the singer misses an entrance. In that case, you’ll need your right foot for “vocal coaching.” (And you thought us Nashville musicians wore boots with sharp pointed toes just to be fashionable.)

Ex. 3. Vocal with piano notated.

$\text{♩} = 88$ pop or contemporary country ballad

System 1 (Measures 1-3):
Vocal: 1
Piano: 1
Chords: C, F, G

System 2 (Measures 4-6):
Voc.: 4
Pno.: 4
Chords: C, C2, $\frac{G}{C}$, C, $\frac{C}{F}$, F, G, G2

System 3 (Measures 7-9):
Voc.: 7
Pno.: 7
Chords: Dm, G, C, Dm7, G sus, G, G7(2), C

Moving on to Ex. 4, the chord progression remains the same, but the left hand (or the bass player if you're working with a rhythm section) gets in on the rhythmic action in bars 1 and 2. Though this changes the "feel" significantly, neither way is better than the other. It's a matter of personal preference.

Ex. 4. Alternate bass line to follow chord progression in bars 1 and 2.

Ex. 4. Alternate bass line to follow chord progression in bars 1 and 2. The score shows a vocal line and a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The vocal line starts with a rest in bar 1 and a melody in bar 2. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic bass line in both hands starting in bar 1. Chords are labeled: C, C2, G/B, C, C/E, F.

Now check out Ex. 5a and 5b. They both begin with bar 5 from Ex. 3. They offer two alternative chords for the fourth beat of bar 5. Again, the alternate chords (Bb and Gm) both contain the "D" melody note as does the original G chord in Ex. 3. That's why they all work interchangeably.

Ex. 5a. Alternate passing chord, end of bar 5.

Ex. 5a. Alternate passing chord, end of bar 5. The score shows a vocal line and a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time, starting at bar 5. The vocal line has a melody starting in bar 5. The piano accompaniment features a rhythmic bass line in both hands starting in bar 5. Chords are labeled: C, C2/E, Bb/F, F, Em7, Dm7.

Ex. 5b. Yet another choice for passing chord, end of bar 5.

One more use for the add2 voicing would be where one chord is played repetitively as in Ex. 6a. Take a look at Ex. 6a-6d. They're self-explanatory.

Ex. 6a. Not too interesting unless you're looking for a particular effect. (It did work in *The Rose!*).

Ex. 6b. This variation creates a little more motion.

Ex. 6c. By adding a major 7th chord in the second measure, we create a 2-bar phrase (less repetitive).

Musical notation for Ex. 6c. The piece is in 4/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays chords in the first two measures of each bar. The left hand (bass clef) plays a single note (C) in the first two measures of each bar. The chords are: C2, C, Cmaj7, and C.

Ex. 6d. The same principle applied to a minor key (great for you young and restless types!).

Musical notation for Ex. 6d. The piece is in 4/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) plays chords in the first two measures of each bar. The left hand (bass clef) plays a single note (C) in the first two measures of each bar. The chords are: Cm2, Cm, Cm2, and Cm.

So that you don't get the wrong idea, I don't really dislike singers. I just enjoy kidding around with them. Isn't it great playing a keyboard that never goes out of tune, or a piano that can be way out of tune, but it's still not our fault!

In Lesson Two, we'll be exploring contemporary jazz voicings and performance (real time arranging) techniques. Learn how changing or adding just one note in a voicing can jazz up your style.

Dean Slocum is a Nashville pianist and composer whose formerly sharp pointed boots are worn down to mere nubs. He's the author of a contemporary piano instructional book, *Between the Lines*. web site: www.deanslocum.com email: pianodean@deanslocum.com.

All text and musical examples copyright ©2002 Dean Slocum