

Thickening the melodic

Tim Richards suggests some ways of adding character to piano improvisations



When first learning a melody at the piano, whether playing by ear or following a lead sheet (melody and chord symbols), one usually plays the right hand in single notes. This article intends to show various useful ways of adding notes to the melody in order to thicken it, creating texture and generally adding interest. Once these techniques are assimilated, with practice they can be applied to improvised lines too.

Octave doubling

The most obvious way to thicken a line, and a very simple one for beginners, is to play the line in octaves, adding notes above the melody so as not to interfere with the left hand (which will probably be playing an accompaniment). Example 1 shows a phrase given this treatment:

Example 1



With busy melodies that contain lots of quavers, or faster passages, it is often more effective to double just the main notes of the melody in octaves. Deciding which notes get this treatment is partly a question of taste and style, but the solution may also depend on technical considerations – i.e. what feels comfortable, as well as what sounds good. Example 2 targets the accented notes in the melody:

Example 2



Accenting individual notes in this way gives a very personal touch, avoiding the heavy-handed sound which can result when the whole line is doubled. Because the technique is also very pianistic, it is used frequently by professional players.

For beginners, providing they have large enough hands, the advantage of using octaves is that no knowledge of harmony is required, since no new notes are added. The next few techniques essentially harmonise the melody, which will require choices to be made, according to the underlying chords.

Thirds

Thirds are an obvious choice for melodic passages that move stepwise (i.e. follow a scale). Notes are added below the melody, since when two or more notes are played together, the ear generally retains the upper note. Adding notes above the melody would change the sound in an unacceptable way:

Example 3



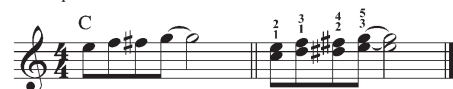
Ideally, you should be able to hear which notes blend in with the harmony and you may end up trying several possibilities before settling on the best option. At this stage, some consideration of chord-scale relationships can be useful, since successful harmonies often draw on notes from the scale of the underlying chord. Clearly, for a tonic major chord, notes will be chosen from the major scale:

Example 4



Note how the diatonic thirds in Example 4 vary – some are major, some minor. Chromatic passing notes in the melody can also be harmonised, as in the following commonly heard motif:

Example 5



At this point it would be a good idea to familiarise yourself with some basic scales and modes in double thirds. You may wish to review my previous article 'Scaling up' in the March

line

2006 issue of *Music Teacher*. For dominant sevenths, the Mixolydian mode should be used (like a major scale with a flat 7th):

Example 6



For minor-seventh chords, use the Dorian mode (flatten the 3rd and 7th of the major scale on the same root), or in some cases the natural minor (which has the flat 6th as well):

Example 7



Minor melodies may require the use of the harmonic minor scale. This has the unique property of containing two major thirds a semitone apart:

Example 8



Sixths

Often overlooked by beginners as a way of harmonising a melody, sixths provide a great alternative to thirds, with a similarly pleasing sound, since the two intervals are inversions of each other. If the motif in Example 5 were present over a C7 chord, it could be harmonised as sixths going up in semitones, parallel with the top note:

Example 9



It is often effective to combine sixths and thirds in the same phrase, as they blend in so well together:

Example 10



Practise scales and modes in sixths, in a similar fashion to the scales in thirds shown above. Take time to work out suitable legato fingering, using either thumb or index on the bottom notes, fourth or fifth fingers on top, as shown in Example 9.

Triads

Combining a third and a sixth in the same chord gives either a first or second inversion triad shape. The middle note must be compatible with the underlying harmony:

Example 11



Inverted triad shapes generally sound better in this context than root position ones. Many interesting and stylish effects can be obtained by experimenting with different triads, as in the following example:

Example 12

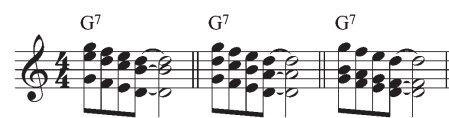


The G7 triad used in Example 12 adds colour by bringing in notes 'outside' the F7 tonality. In these situations always resolve back to the chord at the end of the phrase.

Filled in Octaves

We return now to our starting point to develop the octave-doubling approach, this time adding a third note in the middle to fill out the right-hand harmony. This note is usually either a third below the melody, a fourth below, or a sixth below. Each of these gives a different colour:

Example 13



Jazz pianist Red Garland based his block chord sound on this right hand approach. His

middle note was usually a fourth below the melody, moving parallel with it, even when 'clashes' occur. You can hear this technique throughout his solos on classic 1950s Miles Davis albums such as *Cookin'*, *Relaxin'*, *Workin'*, *Steamin'*.

Top harmony

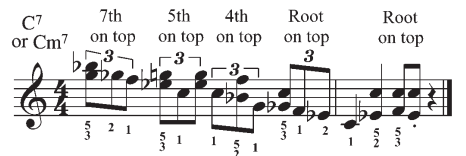
I've left this important technique until last, as it is completely different from all the others. Originating in blues piano, it has become widespread in jazz, gospel, country and pop styles. Rather than adding notes parallel to the melody, the added top harmony note stays the same, and is placed above the melody line. It is most commonly used with pentatonic melodies, to which the root can often be added on top:

Example 14



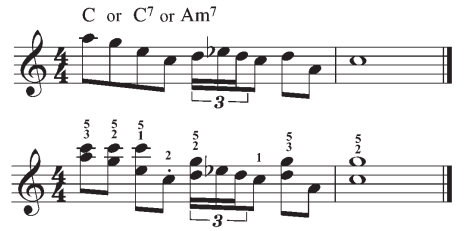
If you've ever used the blues scale, adding top harmony will make it sound much more authentic. Any note of the minor pentatonic scale can in fact be used as the top harmony note:

Example 15



Here's a final example, using a C major pentatonic scale. Since this scale has no seventh, it can be used with either C major or C7 (and also over Am – the relative minor):

Example 16



Tim Richards is a jazz pianist and composer best known for his leadership of the bands Spirit Level and the nine-piece Great Spirit. He is also the author of the Schott publications Improvising Blues Piano and Exploring Jazz Piano and currently teaches classes at London's Goldsmiths and Morley Colleges. www.timrichards.ndo.co.uk