

Comping

“Comping” (accompanying) is a specialized art form that is found in all styles of music. As there are those who specialize in accompanying in classical music, there are pianists in jazz who are known for their accompanying expertise. Also, there are many jazz pianists that although haven’t established careers as accompanists are known for their artistic accompaniments. A short listing of some of these great compers would include: Herbie Hancock, Wynton Kelly, Cedar Walton, Hank Jones, Horace Silver, and many more. In addition to being great accompanists, most are great soloists as well. There are many pianists in the jazz world who have made accompanying their specialty and have not developed an improvisational voice of note – most of them are associated with the great vocalists. Any jazz pianist that has put in time with any of the great vocalists certainly has developed excellent comping skills. Also of note is that most of the pianists that have spent time in the Miles Davis bands have developed into great compers – Miles knew what he wanted and how to get it from his sideman.

One of the important attributes to being a good accompanist is to be aware of the “big picture” in a musical performance – being able to contribute to the performance as orchestrator, coordinator, and director. One must possess the attitude and belief that musical satisfaction comes from creating a group product rather than making a presentation of self.

In addition to those mentioned above, the required skills of a comper include extensive knowledge of chord construction, voicings, inversions, harmonic styles, rhythmic accuracy, rhythmic styles, rhythmic patterns, riffs, grooves, dynamics and many other musical descriptions – but it all comes back to the ability to coordinate and direct all toward a final product. This book of course is presenting the introductory material, the orchestral skills must be attained by first agreeing with the importance of merging oneself into the musical product, and by extensive listening to the accompaniments found on the many recordings that are listed in the discography in the appendix. Enough of this stuff, on to the technicalities of comping.

Range Limits

One of the problems the author has detected in student’s comping is that of not being aware of the relationship of the sound of a chord to its register, and to the distance between the right hand grip and the left hand root. Chords that are not played in the right register can sound either too thin or too muddy. Having too little, or too much distance between the grip and the root also has the same effect as the reader may recall from the concept of **balance** given in chapter I. In addition to

assuring balanced and clear sounding chords, by having a set register to which all chords are limited, an added benefit is that it tends to force good voice-leading of connected chords. Bear in mind that we are referring mainly to the grip portion of the chord.

The recommended limits for chord playing are:

- Right Hand – baby finger no higher than the 2d E above middle C, no lower than 1st E above middle C; thumb no lower than the E below middle C.
- Left Hand – the baby finger no higher than F below middle C, no smaller interval than a b6 between right and left hand

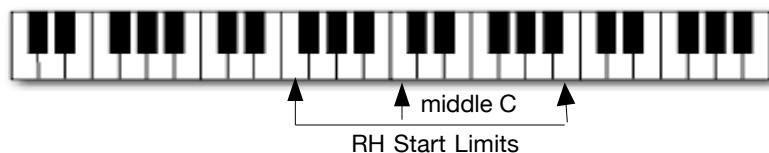
Of course, there are exceptions to the above, and some chords sound all right with less than a b6 between them. You probably noticed some in examples found in previous chapters. One is the altered chord constructed of a triad grip over a root and third. Chords with transparent density have a wider acceptable range. What counts more than anything is how it *sounds*; let that be your set of rules.

Starting Register

In addition to a range limit for the right hand, there is a range limit of where to start a chord progression. Considering that chords are going to be heading up or downward depending on the progression, one must pre plan to keep within the prescribed range limits. If it is predicted that there will not be an extreme amount of travel, the following range is suggested. If you think the chord movement is going to stress the limits, start at the high end of the limits if going downward, the lower end if going upward. To maintain a range limit, one must use grip inversions.

Starting Register Limits

- Right Hand – baby finger no higher than the B above middle C, no lower than F above middle C; thumb no lower than F below middle C.
- Left Hand – as in the previous comment.



Harmonic Melodies

One of the “secret techniques” that reveal the difference between the beginner and the developed accompanist is the ability to add melodic material which has the effect of connecting chords, filling empty space where the harmonic rhythm may stop, defining a stylistic quality, and offering a means of personal expression.

Melodies associated with accompanying include: guide tones, obligato melodies and melodic fills.

Guide Tone Melodies

To create guide tone melodies one simply selects one of the set of pitches of a prominent voice-led group. Usually it is the set of 3ds to 7s to 3s; or the compliment: the 7s to 3s to 7s. It is preferred that guide tone pitches are selected that define a chord’s modality as well as its function.

An effective device is to expose the guide tone by separating it and its root from the rest of the chord pitches with either a delayed playing of the other pitches or by delaying the guide tone and its root.

Example 3.2.1 Guide Tone melodies

A. 7s to 3s

B. Separated

One can use other voice pitches as the guide tone melody. The only requirement is that the guide tone melody be voiced on the top of the chord for aural exposure.