

THE EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF CHORDS

This is a subject which I have never seen addressed in jazz tutorials before so I think it is high time to talk about it.

In language, words can have various meanings or nuances, depending on certain factors. For example, "Come into the garden, Maud" can be said in different ways. Without any other punctuation it is an invitation; with an exclamation mark after Maud, it is an order, the strength of which depends upon how forcefully it is said. With an emphasis upon the word Come, it is stressing movement; with emphasis upon garden, it is differentiating between the garden and maybe the bedroom; whereas emphasising the word Maud shows that she is the one that you want to show your onions to, and not Mabel or Mildred. All of these variations have an emotional background, be it pride in wanting to share the pleasure of showing her your prize cucumber; undisguised lust if you have a secluded bench or garden shed; happiness or unhappiness if you want to tell her something personal in the privacy of your garden; or hatred or envy if you intend to chop her fingers off with your garden shears for being a better musician than you are.

Take another example. Supposing someone is visiting you at home and is beginning to outstay their welcome. How do you get rid of them? In England, you start by offering them another cup of tea or coffee (or beer/wine/gin/absinthe/meths). So you say: "Would you like another coffee? (or whatever)". This means, in effect, that the visitor is boring the pants off you and you wish they would leave right now. The guest then has to work out whether you mean it or whether it's a hint indicating that it's time to go. So the guest says: "I'd love to..."(slight pause while he/she tries to decipher your facial expression) and follows it up with either "Thank you", or "But I must be going", followed by some excuse or other. In this case, the whole process may be repeated several times over. So it is the way things are said and the muddled emotional messages that are put over that is more important than the words themselves.

In music, sounds also are loaded with emotional content. Let's have a look first at melody in relation to harmony. It has been said that there are two types of tunes: male and female. In "male" tunes, the melody on the on-beats corresponds largely with the underlying (basic) chords, and much of the melody consists of notes which are arpeggios or repeated notes. In this category you find most anthems, marches and hymn tunes. It stresses obedience, whether to your country, your regiment, your church or other group. For example - "God save our gracious queen"/"My country 'tis of thee" used in various countries. Note how the notes on the beat are the rootnote, 3rd and 5th of the underlying chords. The American anthem - "The Star-Spangled Banner" (the music of which was written by the British composer John Stafford Smith sometime in the 1770s) is an example of a tune in which there are many simple arpeggios, as illustrated also by the Marseillaise - one of the longest anthems that exist. (As an aside, I remember once at an official function where there was a visiting French delegation. Just before we started the Marseillaise, the drummer fell on to his snare-drum and looked to be unconscious. He had to remain there, dead or alive, until we had finished the anthem. He survived.) Out of interest the Marseillaise was written by an Italian - Giovanni Batiste Viotti.

Some people tend to find "male" tunes stirring, I suppose because it stresses the basic harmony which in turn affects such basic emotional responses as patriotism, blind obedience and sense of unquestioning duty. These tunes also seem to have an impact on the testosterone glands in

the young, so it is not surprising that it is found in many pop songs, particularly those which wind people up turning them into hooligan yobos.

Then there are "female" tunes. In these, there are more suspensions (oops, nearly wrote suspenders) and higher chordal intervals. There are also more scalar runs in these tunes. Think of Jacques Brel's song: "Ne me quitte pas" (Don't leave me) or many of Michel Le Grand's songs, such as "What are you doing the rest of your life?" or the songs of Henry Mancini as good examples of these. The emotions conjured up by this type of tune are more subtle, more questioning and more sophisticated.

Today, you would be accused of sexism to divide up tunes into male and female. There are many females who are more manly than men, and vice versa and then there is the issue of transgender. But good news for people who have transgender leanings - most tunes are a mixture of both male and female categories.

When it comes to trying to conjure up an emotion in a tune, it is not always as easy as you imagine. Trying to portray happiness is to me the most difficult of all. Happiness might be all sorts of things to the designers of greetings cards, but it is not necessarily just major chords. Major does not equate to happiness, nor does minor relate to sadness. The sad song "Everytime we say goodbye" is in a major key. "Summertime" - not a sad song at all - is in a minor key.

A lot of "happy" tunes I regard as being superficial from an emotional perspective. A predominance of simple major chords may be perfect for dancing in night-clubs to loud pop music, but it is hardly a moving experience having to listen to them (no pun intended). But that is not the objective, which is to make loads of money (for the artists and recording companies) and to enable youngsters to dance, which is enjoyable for them and good physical exercise too.

To get down to individual chords - a major triad is rather bland in the jazz field. Emotions can be superimposed on it by a soloist using higher intervals but in itself it is like soya or quorn in that it needs something extra to bring out or add flavour. A minor triad has more impact, for some reason which must relate somehow to the harmonics produced by the minor third note. It does have a sad or tragic sound when used in the right place (but not always). It can also be used as a tonic chord against which the blues scale is used in fast (happy) or slow (unhappy) tempos. (Tempos are also part of the emotional equation.)

Adding a sixth to a major triad makes it a bit more happy-sounding but it can sound dated too. A lot of the Swing era big band arrangements consisted of many many major sixth chords and they helped to make a lot of people happy in those days. A minor sixth on the other hand has a tinge of sadness to it which has not dated, at least that much.

A major seventh always sounds sophisticated to me. It changes the blandness of a major triad into a meaningful resonant chord. It was used at the turn of the 19th century by English composers such as Delius, Vaughn-Williams, Elgar and Frank Bridge. They can bring to mind pastoral scenes and induce nostalgia. It can also reflect a feeling of contentedness (long-term happiness). Major sevenths and major ninths are found a lot in bossa novas producing an urban air of sophistication with rather complicated emotions. In "The Girl from Ipanema", for instance, it helps to portray a classy lady (even if aloof). If the girl in question had been a

right old scrubber, simple triads would have been more suitable.

The addition of a ninth (and sixth) to a major seventh compounds these emotions. To jazz musicians, this is very much of a run-of-the-mill chord but to anyone outside of jazz, it can be off-putting in its complexity. A major seventh with or without other additions plus a flattened fifth produces a bitter-sweet flavour. It is also a favourite in bossa novas and ballads.

In a major seventh with a sharpened fifth, the altered note gives it an unsettled sound - wanting the progression to move on to something more settled. It can also be a very unhappy little chord when it stays around for a while.

Minor sevenths can be a little bit sad-sounding if the chord is prolonged, otherwise the emotional impact, as in a 2 5 1, is too fleeting to have any meaning. The seventh note suggests that a change to the dominant seventh (with a major third and perhaps a natural ninth) is not far off so it doesn't dwell on any unhappy moments for long.

The minor ninth is to my ears one of the saddest of chords, particularly when the ninth itself is in the lead. Adding the eleventh (and thirteenth) to the chord can produce a very intense impact which can almost be overwhelming, so it is sometimes best to reserve the full minor thirteenth chord for special moments and not squander it. The minor thirteenth is a seven-note chord which is very powerful emotionally.

Plain dominant sevenths are functional chords without much built-in emotion, but they often do feel as if they should be resolved, so they can give rise to a feeling of suspense. The same can be said when you add higher intervals to it, extensions and alterations, except that when you do so, you add on a whole panoply of emotions. A ninth, for instance has a much more cheerful impact than a flattened or sharpened ninth which is much sadder and creates a strong desire to be resolved.

If you want to build on that feeling, delay the onset of the next chord. Similarly a natural fifth in a dominant seventh is much more neutral than an altered fifth. Music which has a succession of passing intervals (natural ninth to flattened ninth, for example - a feature of Bill Evans and others) presents a kaleidoscope of emotions within an overall mood. Dominant sevenths with every possible addition you can think of can, like minor thirteenths, can be too intense to use all the time.

They can effectively be used to create a feeling of anger, as can clusters. The intensity within a piece should change according to where you want to build climaxes. It may be a fact that in female tunes there are more climaxes than in male tunes, but thereagain, I may be joking!

Diminished chords were always used in classical music of the Romantic era to build suspense. In jazz today, they can sound puny and other notes need to be added to them (notes taken from the diminished chord a semitone below the root-note) to create any emotion. When this is done, the chord, which is usually used very temporarily between more stable chords, has a good deal more clout. It can also be used as a tonic chord where a diminished scale is used to solo over it.

This gives it an exotic appeal suitable for mock-Middle Eastern sounds.

Half-diminished chords are also temporary by nature and have the same yearning quality looking for resolution. A half-diminished chord on a root not a perfect fifth below the chord root can be more long-tem and suggest a Spanish mood, using the Phrygian mode with it.

The sus 4 chord, which has neither a major or minor third, is very good at creating a feeling of suspense although it does not need to be resolved. The dominant seventh with a sus 4 has an even stronger desire for resolution and can be used for emotions like fear or yearning.

Apart from these chords there are others, many of them being chords with incorporated pedal notes. Depending upon what note the pedal note is in relation to the chord, you can adjust the amount of tension you wish to produce. Greater tension equates to more discord, which is unsettling for many people. Like pain-threshold and hotness of curries, individuals react in a different way to different degrees of dissonance.

Voicings are also important. A stark voicing with few notes and unexpected close intervals makes people respond in a more alarmist way than a voicing in which the notes are evenly distributed and there are no minor second intervals. The latter intervals can produce intense feelings of sadness or anger. Much depends upon which intervals are used in this way and in the dynamics.

Finally, chords voiced in fourths, which is common these days, can suggest various emotions as well as sounding almost robotic/ technological and can be very powerful-sounding.

This is only scratching the surface of how music challenges people's emotions. I would suggest people follow the example of many classical composers and sit at a piano and play a chord over and over to reveal its hidden emotional content.

When you combine various chords to build up a sequence in relation to a melody, think of what chords and what voicings would be really suitable to produce a homogenous end-result.

Final word: It may be worth while telling the audience what it is you are aiming for. If it is a piece about the futility of war then their mindset is already prepared for what is to come. This way, they will accept the music, which could be very dissonant, far more readily.