

HARMONISING A MELODIC LINE

There are various ways you can harmonise a melodic line when writing an arrangement or when playing a keyboard instrument. Read on.

HARMONISATION OF A MELODIC LINE

One of the big problems faced by pianists in the jazz field is being able to fit chords to a flowing melodic line, whether it be a tune, an improvised line or a fill. What is involved here is a separate chord for each note.

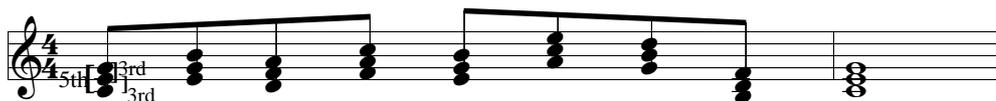
There are 2 ways to approach this problem:

1. diatonically, ie by staying within the key or the underlying scale where certain chord progressions require changes to the key
2. chromatically.

Traditionally, the solution has been to use triads and their inversions throughout: The choice of which inversion to use depends upon the melody note in relation to the key and to the different sound that is produced. The root position (see *a*), while being easiest to remember, has a rather basic and static feel to it; the 1st inversion (*b*) has a gentler and more flowing characteristic; the 2nd inversion (*c*) is more powerful than the 1st, yet is still capable of producing flowing lines.

Diatonic approach

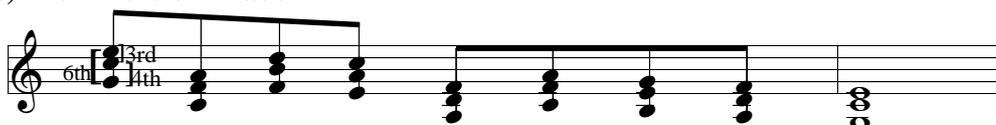
a) root position triads



b) 1st inversion triads

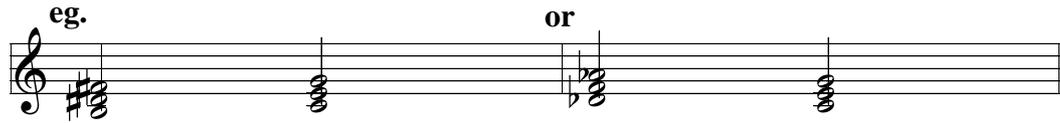


c) 2nd inversion triads

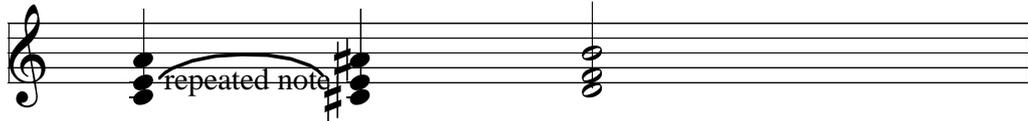


The important point to remember when playing these is the nature of the intervals. You will see that at times the intervals of a 3rd and 6th may be either major or minor, and the 5th may be either perfect or diminished. Provided the notes of the scale are borne in mind this need not be anything to worry about.

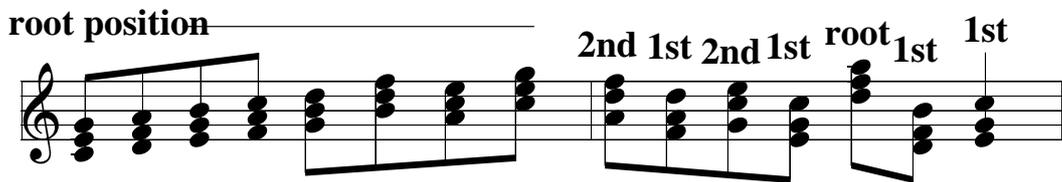
Notes which are foreign to the key (Db, Eb, Gb, Ab, Bb or their namesakes in sharps) can usually be accommodated by using the same type of chord and inversion a semitone above or below the note to which it resolves:



Sometimes it may be necessary to repeat 1 of the notes in the new chord which may give rise to a diminished triad:



Using just triads it is possible to mix and match inversions to fit the melody with the harmony:



Notes may also be doubled an octave lower to get a fuller sound.

The same principles would also apply:

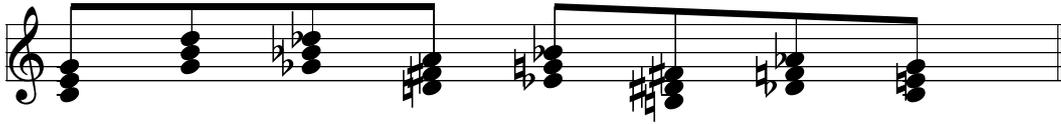
1. to a minor key where the ascending form of the melodic minor scale or the harmonic minor scale would be used. Of these the former is easiest to deal with since it differs from the major key only in that it has a minor 3rd instead of a major 3rd;
2. to one of the modes (the major scale starting on one of the other notes). The Dorian (starting on II,) Phrygian (starting on III) Lydian (starting on IV) and Mixo-Lydian (starting on V) have strongest characteristics.

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If approached by *chromatic* movement, **the intervals must stay exactly the same** between each note throughout the section involved to be effective. This works best when the chord remains unchanged for a long period or where there is a bass pedal note of where the bass is absent. It is a very simple way to get a modern atonal sound.

Chromatic movement of triads

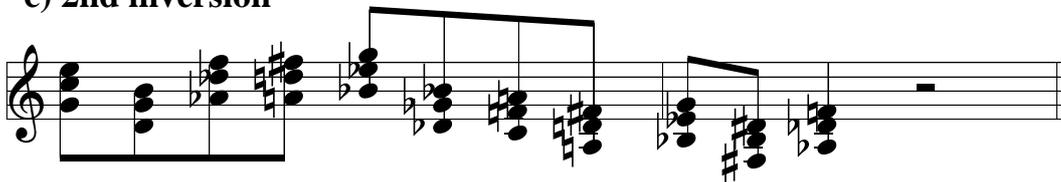
a) root position



b) 1st inversion



c) 2nd inversion

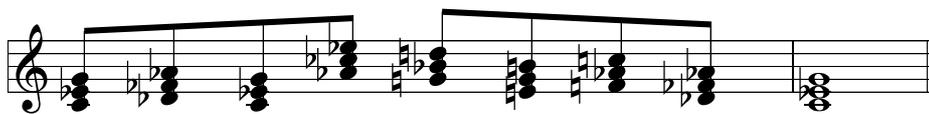


The root position and 2nd inversions work best.

Other chords could also be used: augmented triads give a Debussy-like impressionistic feel, which has been rather overdone in films:



Minor triads can also be used effectively:



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Larger chords offer much more scope for enriching the harmony although they can be unwieldy unless exactly the same approach is adopted as with the triads.

Pianists have often coped with this by resorting to the Shearing sound in which the melody is doubled with the left hand an octave lower than the lead. The right hand provides all the harmony notes as well as the lead voice. Higher intervals of the chord can therefore be accommodated. Certain notes have to be omitted to make this possible:

some examples

Cm9
 root omitted

Cm11
 9th and
 root omitted

9th
 root omitted

#11
 3rd and
 root omitted

13th
 #11 and
 root omitted

13th
 3rd and
 root omitted

dominant sevenths

Finding a semitone between the lowest 2 voices gives the chord the familiar Shearing ring. Because fast passages can be ungainly, the middle chordal notes can be omitted in places where the harmony remains unaltered.

The Shearing style is designed to fit in with a given chord progression and does not lend itself as readily to the chromatic approach where frequent repetition of the minor second interval can become tiresome and lose its effect.

The chromatic approach can, however, be applied to successive diminished, minor 7ths, major 7ths, dominant 7ths, 6ths, minor major 7ths, major sevenths with sharpened or flattened fifths, and so on.

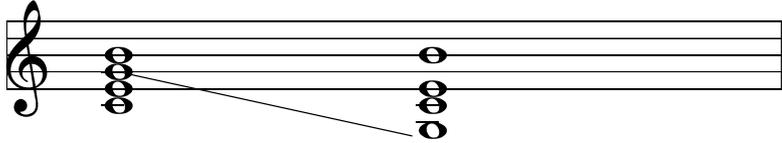
Melodic lines harmonised purely by diminished chords are indeed a familiar Classical music device:

Diminished chords can be enriched by adding the notes of another diminished chord a tone away from the root note of the chord. One of the original notes in the chord can be omitted when this is done:

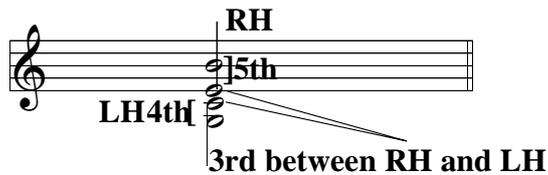
The minor 7th interval between the top and bottom notes gives this chord its degree of tension.

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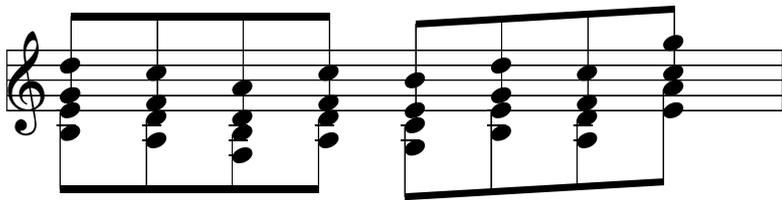
When the second highest note in a closed position 4-note chord is put an octave lower we have what is known as a drop-2 voicing:



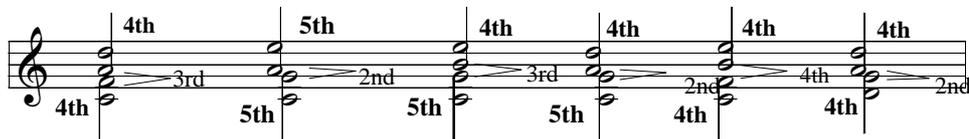
This new voicing can be played with the right hand playing the top 3 notes and the left hand the lowest note. Or 2 notes can be played in each hand. The second method is more useful in remembering the intervals between notes when playing a line:



Here is a phrase harmonised in this way:



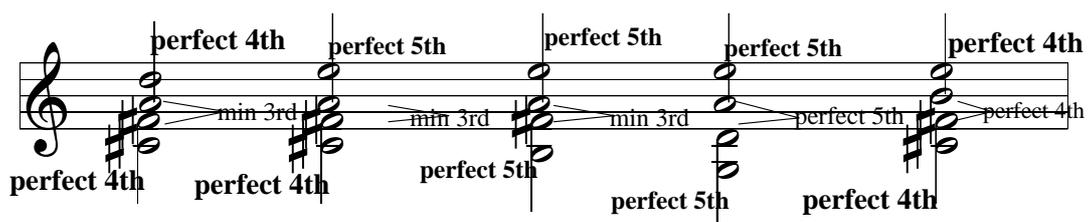
A few other variations are:



Mixing and matching is also possible, in fact it is desirable in certain instances. What this usually boils down to is alternating between 4ths and 5ths in the left hand to fit in with the harmony.

Remember to stick to the notes of the scale/key.

Some extra chord patterns for chromatic treatment are these:

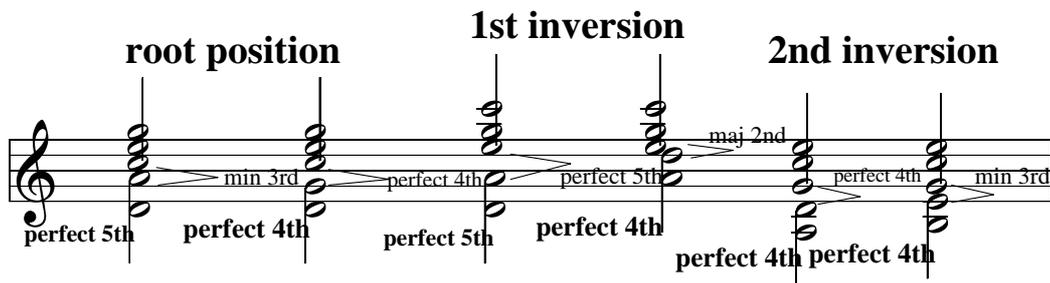


The last one in which there is a perfect 4th interval between notes is very effective in chromatic passages. Likewise the voicing in the previous diagram in which there is a fourth between adjacent notes is very useful in a diatonic situation.

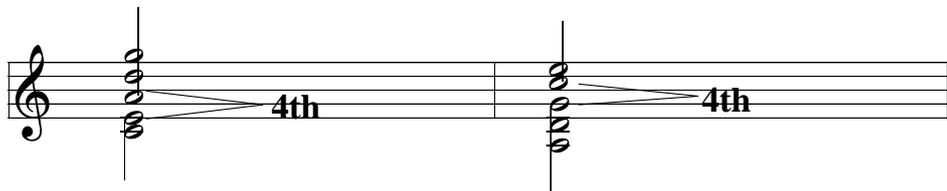
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Two notes in each hand gives a lot of flexibility in playing moderately fast passages with occasional large intervals in the tune itself. Where a thicker sound is wanted and where there are few large intervals in the tune, it is possible to play 3 notes either in the left hand or in the right or very occasionally in both.

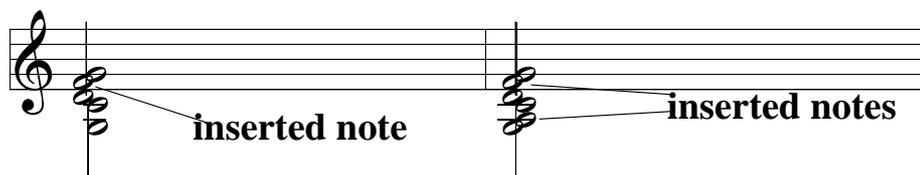
The 3 notes in one hand can take the form of triads, for example:



The 3 notes in the one hand could alternatively be made up of fourths:



Additional notes can also take the form of infilling:



This does not exhaust the range of possibilities so experiment. You don't know what you might unexpectedly come up with.