



An Introduction to Voice Leading with 7th Chords

By Scott Blanchard

Do you want to take your chord knowledge further? Do you want to turn those ordinary block or barred voicings into beautiful, smooth, expressive music? If so, this is the place to start. In this edition of the Theory Corner, we're going to look at an excerpt from jazz keyboardist Noah Baerman's book, *The Complete Jazz Keyboard Method: Beginning Jazz Keyboard*, available through Alfred Publishing. Noah will introduce you to the broad concept of *voice leading*, in this case specifically with 7th chords, commonly found in the jazz repertoire and beyond. *Voice leading* can be defined as the smooth movement of voices (notes) from one chord to the next. Though we'll look at his text, explanations and keyboard examples, I've decided to also include some guitar examples you can try out. Each example illustrates a specific musical goal. One thing to keep in mind as you read is that this concept crosses into many genres of music, including but not limited to acoustic, rock, blues, classical, metal and more, and can make not only a huge difference in the way you play your music, but also in the way others hear your music.

Baerman's helpful explanations and solid examples make this book a great addition to any keyboardist's collection. The book includes a CD (DVD version also available) so you can easily follow along with all the examples. I've included a keyboard audio example in this document, so be sure to check it out!

Voicing 7th Chords

7th chords open up a whole new world of possibilities. It's funny to think that just one extra note per chord can greatly alter the sound, but dealing with 7th chords does just that. Voicing becomes much more important now that we're using 7th chords. More notes create more voicing possibilities. As jazz keyboardists, we strive to learn what those possibilities are, how to execute them and what impact each one may have on the overall sound.

Play these two examples of voicings for a ii-V-I progression in B^b Major.

Musical notation for a ii-V-I progression in B^b Major. The piece is in 4/4 time and features two systems of three chords each. The first system shows Cmin7 (ii), F7 (V), and B^bMaj7 (I). The second system shows Cmin7 (ii), F7 (V), and B^bMaj7 (I). The notation includes treble and bass staves with chord voicings and bass notes. Roman numerals ii, V, and I are placed below the chords in both systems.

Here's a similar version for guitarists.

Chords: C min7, F7, B \flat Maj7, C min7, F7, B \flat Maj7

Figured bass: ii, V, I, ii, V, I

TAB: 4 8 6 6 | 4 8 7 7 | 8 8 6 6 | 4 8 10 8 | 4 8 10 8 | 8 8 6 6

The first example makes more sense. Each voicing flows smoothly to the next one, and on the piano, the hands (guitar example: left hand) have to move very little to play the progression. In the second example the sound is broken up, and the right hand (guitar example: left hand) has to jump around to play the chords. The difference is that the first example uses good voice leading. *Voice leading* is the smooth movement of voices (notes) from one chord to the next. If your hands are jumping all over the place, you're probably not using good voice leading, and the music is unlikely to sound smooth or cohesive. To voice lead well, your hands should expend the least possible amount of energy. Imagine that, the easier it is to play, the better it sounds!

Check out this example of a iii-vi-ii-V-I progression in F Major with good voice leading.

Chords: A min7, D min7, G min7, C7, F Maj7

Figured bass: iii, vi, ii, V, I

Here's a similar version for guitarists.

Chords: A min7, D min7, G min7, C7, F Maj7

Figured bass: iii, vi, ii, V, I

TAB: 4 5 5 3 | 4 5 3 3 | 4 5 3 3 | 4 5 3 3 | 0 2 3 3

Each of the voices in the pianist's right hand (guitar example: left hand) moves very little as the chords change. Just like the individual singers in a choir, who can't jump around too much without getting tired and confused, the voices in a chord should avoid leaps whenever possible. The bass notes move around more but that's inevitable when the roots are moving in large intervals like 4ths and 5ths. (Piano example: since the left hand is playing one note at a time, it is not difficult to play.)

We have more freedom with piano voicing when the left hand plays the roots. So far, we've been playing four notes at a time in the right hand whenever we play 7th chords. Now that we're getting the hang of them, we can eliminate one of those notes. The right hand can play the 3rd, 5th and 7th of each chord and the left hand can take care of the roots. (Guitar example: note the 3rd, 5th and 7th of each chord in the three upper voices.)

Diagram illustrating piano voicing for three chords: Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7. The right hand plays three notes (3rd, 5th, 7th) and the left hand plays the root. Fingerings are indicated for the right hand.

Chord	Right Hand Notes (Fingering)	Left Hand Note
Dmin7	F (5), A (3), C (1)	D (Root)
G7	B (5), D (2), F (1)	G (Root)
CMaj7	E (5), G (3), B (1)	C (Root)

And now, a similar guitar example.

Diagram illustrating guitar voicing for three chords: Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7. The right hand plays three notes (3rd, 5th, 7th) and the left hand plays the root. Fingerings are indicated for the right hand.

Chord	Right Hand Notes (Fingering)	Left Hand Note
Dmin7	F (5), A (3), C (2)	D (Root)
G7	B (3), D (2), F (5)	G (Root)
CMaj7	E (7), G (8), B (9)	C (Root)

With this kind of voicing, the sound becomes more open. We don't lose the fullness because all four notes of each chord are still being played. Piano example: We still use the same method of voice leading, simply omitting the root from the right hand. Let's take the following progression in B Minor (the vertical slash marks underneath each chord are shorthand indicating the number of beats devoted to each chord).

Bmin7	Emin7	Bmin7	GMaj7	C#min7b5	F#7	Bmin7
//	//	//	//	//	//	////

Let's voice the progression in this style for the piano, with roots in the left hand, and 3rds, 5ths and 7ths in the right hand with smooth voice leading. (Guitar example: note the 3rd, 5th and 7th of each chord in the three upper voices.)

Here's a similar version for guitarists.

So, as you can see and hear from these examples, the point is to move from chord to chord as smoothly as possible. One good way to do this, as illustrated in many of the examples above, is to keep common tones, or notes that don't change from chord to chord. These help supply the overall sound with a cohesive jazzy feel. I encourage you to try playing these in different keys in different registers of the piano or guitar, whichever suits you best. This technique can really take your playing to a whole new level of competency and maturity. Experiment with these ideas, and give them time to grow on you. You'll be glad you did.

Conclusion

For more information on voice leading 7th chords, be sure to check out the Licks and Tricks section of this newsletter for some fun playing examples.

If this excerpt was right up your alley, order Noah Baerman's book, *The Complete Jazz Keyboard Method: Beginning Jazz Keyboard*, at www.alfred.com. In addition, be sure to check out his jazz seminar lessons on www.WorkshopLive.com today!

To learn more about voice leading, guitarists will want to check out any lesson where the focus is 7th chord arpeggios or progressions using 7th chords. Keep in mind that most lessons beyond the beginner skill level focus on teaching good voice leading when dealing with chord progressions, although it's also important to keep the style you're studying in mind, as all styles employ different musical language and tendencies.

Not a guitarist? Keyboardists should check out Noah Baerman's lessons "Voice Leading" and "Voice Leading with 7th Chords." Also, any lessons focusing on inversions will help you make smoother connections between your chords.

Bassists should look into lessons focusing on 7th chord arpeggios and inversions.

Take your time and have fun with this concept—see you in a couple short weeks!