

Back to Bach: Keys to Jazz Piano Prowess

Playing solo jazz piano is a tricky business.

The piano alone, in the hands of a great proponent of the art, can be many things at once—or in succession: a large drum set with pitches, an orchestra, two (or three or four) simultaneous horn-like voices, a big band and more. One of the keys to success as a soloist is how the hands work together.

I have taught for many years, and with rare exceptions, the student ends up playing for me alone. And I have heard countless times, “I wish you could hear me with a trio—I sound much better.” Truly, the modern jazz piano approach stresses “voicings” (chords without roots) in the left hand and single-note lines in the right. At its worst, the left hand sounds like what I call “the claw” as it stabs out chords that are often played by rote. Such voicings usually aren’t heard clearly, due to the focus on the right-hand lines. They don’t help the lines and are often too loud. The hands hardly work together at all—partly because the lower part of the right hand is not used at all, as it is only playing single notes and has no chance to connect with the left.

I once heard it said that pianists practicing alone should learn every tune three ways: 1) as a solo piece; 2) as if you are accompanying an imaginary horn player or vocalist (that is, playing chords with roots in the lower and middle range of the piano that convey some knowledge of chord substitution and establish a groove); and 3) as if you are playing with an imaginary trio. To those I would add memorization, transposition into at least two keys and perhaps playing in a variety of tempi and meters.

The only textbooks I ever ask any student to buy are the *Charlie Parker Omnibook* (I recommend learning to play the heads and some of the solos in a relaxed, “non-fingery” and swinging way—they are almost small jazz etudes unto themselves) and *371 Harmonized Bach Chorales and 69 Chorale Melodies with Figured Bass*, Riemenschneider edition.

It’s also a good idea to collect as much material by Great American Songbook composers as you can afford so you can learn the lyrics and the correct melodies. And I encourage piano students to get the complete book of tunes by Thelonious Monk. I have never owned a *Real Book* and am proud of that fact!

The Bach chorale book is virtually a Bible of four-part voice leading. They were written to be sung by actual voices, so each part is melodic. Voice leading, in addition to harmonically opening up the tune, also serves a rhythmic function,



MARKS KAREN

each voice being rhythmically independent. But in order to make voice leading effective, pianists must learn from the root up, in four voices and by learning to pass the upper part of the left hand to the lower part of the right hand and vice-versa. Bach chorales are full of instances where the span between bass and tenor ranges from a 10th to an octave-and-five, so the tenor must be picked up by the thumb of the right hand. Refer to Examples 1a and 1b on the next page.

I thought it would be a good exercise to apply the principles of the chorales to the first four bars of a jazz ballad made famous by Coleman Hawkins. Something that I have found helpful is to restrict the top voice so that it must move on each successive chord but only up or down a half step or a whole step. It’s harder than jumping around but leads to smoother voice leading in the long run. If I were to do this linearly with eighth notes, it might look something like Example 2. (By the way, this approach can be used by any improviser to familiarize yourself with a set of chord changes and to overcome fear of “avoid notes” or routinely jumping to safe, triadic “in the chord” pitches). Don’t look for the “perfect” note, just keep the flow going; and sustain all of these activities for a period of time; I use a kitchen timer.

Now, using this top voice restriction, and changing chords/bass notes each half note,

and not doubling any voices, one might get Example 3. Remember that whatever chord you start on will impact where you can go, since you are restricted by the above-mentioned limits.

Using only passing quarter notes—with and without suspensions, and with half and whole steps in the top voice—might yield something like Example 4.

Now, where it gets really interesting is when you add in eighth notes and suspensions and achieve four really independent parts, à la Bach. See Example 5.

This is not easy! But I am convinced that if you practice each step as I have outlined above for a significant, sustained period of time, it is achievable.

Pick a tempo that is manageable and try not to stop—you may play a wonky chord, but just keep moving instead of stopping and looking for a perfect solution. And try to challenge yourself not to repeat the same chords every chorus—this requires knowledge of basic nuts-and-bolts jazz theory: passing chords, interpolated chromatic II-V chords, ascending and descending bass lines, changing roots and changing chord qualities (e.g., substituting a dominant seventh chord with a suspended seventh, or a dominant seventh chord for a seventh/flat-five). But this is only possible if you are really hearing all four

Example 1a**Example 1b**

(v=RII A=LII)

Example 2
Example 3
Example 4
Example 5

voices and your hands are used to passing lines between them.

Getting back to the Bach chorales themselves: There is an approach to playing them that may be helpful for you. Take the first phrase up to the fermata (usually two-to-three bars) and start by just playing the soprano and the bass, then alto and bass, tenor and bass, alto and tenor, soprano and tenor, and soprano and alto—all the pairs of two voices. Then, play through groups of threes: soprano, alto, bass; soprano, tenor, bass; alto, tenor, bass; soprano, alto, tenor. Only then should you proceed to play all four voices together. (You can also play three voices and sing the fourth.) Take the same

approach with the next phrase—when done, string the first two phrases together. Then, in an additive fashion, you will eventually play all the phrases in sequence after you have taken each one apart.

Do one Bach chorale each day, and you'll get through the entire book of 371 in about a year. A small amount of time spent daily with these treasures will yield enormous results on many levels. **DB**

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