

Berklee Jazz Keyboard Harmony Using Upper Structure Triads

Berklee Jazz Keyboard Harmony: Mastering Upper Structure Triads

Berklee College of Music's renowned jazz curriculum emphasizes a deep understanding of harmony, and upper structure triads are a cornerstone of that understanding, particularly for keyboard players. This approach provides a powerful framework for improvising, composing, and analyzing jazz music. This article delves into the intricacies of Berklee jazz keyboard harmony using upper structure triads, exploring their application, benefits, and practical implementation. We'll cover topics such as **secondary**

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dominants, altered dominants, and voice leading, all essential elements of this technique.

Understanding Upper Structure Triads

Upper structure triads represent a sophisticated method of understanding and building chord progressions. Instead of viewing chords as isolated entities, this approach considers them as layers built upon a fundamental chord. We identify the root, third, and fifth of a 7th chord and then build triads from the notes *above* the root. This allows for a more fluid and expressive harmonic vocabulary. For instance, a dominant 7th chord (G7) can generate several upper structure triads, each contributing a unique color to the overall harmonic texture.

Identifying Upper Structure Triads

Let's take a closer look at the G7 chord (G-B-D-F). The upper structure triads are:

- **G major triad (G-B-D):** This is the root triad, the foundation of the G7.

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- **B minor triad (B-D-F):** Built on the 3rd of the G7.
- **D dominant 7th triad (D-F-A-C):** Built on the 5th of the G7. This triad leads strongly to G major (a common resolution) because of the leading tone C to G. This highlights the importance of **voice leading** in the context of upper structures. You'll often find yourself smoothly resolving these triads to create satisfying progressions.

These triads can be used individually or in combination, allowing for a vast array of harmonic possibilities beyond the basic G7 sound. The beauty of this approach lies in its ability to generate interesting chord substitutions and create unexpected harmonic twists.

Benefits of Using Upper Structure Triads

Employing upper structure triads offers several advantages to jazz keyboard players:

- **Enhanced Improvisation:** Upper structure triads provide a rich palette of melodic and harmonic ideas for improvisation. By targeting specific triad tones,

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you can create lines that naturally fit the underlying harmony.

- **Sophisticated Voicings:** Creating sophisticated voicings becomes easier. Instead of merely playing rootless voicings or inversions, you can strategically employ different upper structure triads, enriching the texture and depth of your playing.
- **Improved Composition:** Understanding upper structure triads enables you to write richer and more interesting chord progressions, moving beyond basic ii-V-I progressions. You can explore secondary dominants and alterations more effectively.
- **Deeper Harmonic Understanding:** This system fosters a deeper understanding of harmonic function, moving beyond simple chord names to explore the relationships between different chord tones.

Practical Applications and Exercises

Implementing upper structure triads requires consistent practice and experimentation. Here are a few exercises to help you develop proficiency:

- **Chord Substitution:** Start by substituting a basic ii-V-I progression (e.g., Dm7-G7-

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CMaj7) with upper structure triads. Replace the G7 with its upper structure triads (Bmin7, D7) to create a richer harmonic tapestry.

- **Secondary Dominants:** Explore how upper structure triads facilitate the use of secondary dominants. For example, a secondary dominant leading to a specific target chord within the progression.
- **Altered Dominants:** Experiment with altered dominants (altering the 7th, 9th, 11th, or 13th of the dominant chord) using upper structure triads. This adds a great deal of spice and color to a standard chord progression. This is another key area where **Berklee jazz keyboard harmony** instruction excels.
- **Comping:** Use upper structure triads to create interesting comping patterns. Experiment with different voicings and rhythmic patterns to add interest and variation to your comping.

Remember, consistent practice is key. Start with simple progressions and gradually increase the complexity as your understanding grows.

Analyzing Jazz Standards with Upper Structure Triads

Analyzing existing jazz standards through the lens of upper structure triads significantly enhances your understanding of the composer's harmonic choices. Take "Autumn Leaves," for instance. By identifying the upper structure triads within the chord progression, you will discover how the composer created a specific mood and harmonic tension and release. This analytical approach strengthens both your theoretical knowledge and improvisational capabilities.

Conclusion

Mastering Berklee jazz keyboard harmony using upper structure triads empowers you to become a more versatile and expressive jazz musician. This approach unlocks a deeper understanding of harmony, providing a powerful toolset for improvisation, composition, and analysis. Through consistent practice and experimentation, you'll find that this method significantly enhances your overall musicality.

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FAQ

Q1: Are upper structure triads only applicable to dominant 7th chords?

A1: No, upper structure triads can be applied to any chord type—major 7th, minor 7th, half-diminished, augmented, etc. The concept remains the same; you build triads from the notes above the root of the given chord.

Q2: How do upper structure triads relate to voice leading?

A2: Effective voice leading is crucial when using upper structure triads. Smooth transitions between triads create a more cohesive and listenable harmonic progression. Avoid large leaps and strive for stepwise motion whenever possible.

Q3: What are some common pitfalls to avoid when using upper structure triads?

A3: A common pitfall is neglecting voice leading, resulting in jarring harmonic shifts. Another is overusing complex alterations without a clear harmonic purpose. Start simply

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and gradually increase complexity.

Q4: How can I incorporate upper structure triads into my improvisations?

A4: Target specific triad tones within the upper structure during your solos. This will help your melodic ideas naturally connect to the underlying harmony.

Q5: Are there specific Berklee curriculum materials that cover this topic extensively?

A5: While Berklee doesn't have a single book solely dedicated to upper structure triads, this concept is integrated throughout their harmony and jazz improvisation courses and textbooks. Their materials often use this technique to illustrate advanced harmonic concepts.

Q6: Can I apply this concept to other instruments besides the keyboard?

A6: Absolutely! Although we've focused on the keyboard, the principles of upper structure triads are universally applicable to all instruments. Understanding this concept

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significantly enhances your harmonic awareness regardless of your instrument.

Q7: How does understanding upper structure triads improve my composing skills?

A7: By utilizing upper structure triads, you can create more sophisticated and less predictable chord progressions. You can build more compelling harmonic tension and release, adding depth and interest to your compositions.

Q8: Are there any online resources that can help me learn more about this topic?

A8: Many online resources exist, including YouTube tutorials, online courses, and various blogs dedicated to jazz theory. Searching for terms like "upper structure triads," "jazz harmony," and "Berklee jazz theory" will yield helpful results. However, remember that dedicated study with a qualified instructor is always the most effective approach.

Berklee Jazz Keyboard Harmony Using Upper Structure Triads: A Deep Dive

Unlocking the secrets | mysteries | magic of advanced jazz harmony can feel | seem |

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appear daunting, especially for keyboard players. But a powerful tool readily available | accessible | at hand to unleash | liberate | free expressive improvisational possibilities lies in understanding and mastering upper structure triads. This technique, heavily featured | emphasized | highlighted in the Berklee College of Music curriculum, provides a systematic | structured | organized approach to building complex and sophisticated voicings from | out of | starting with simple chord progressions. This article will explore | investigate | examine the core | essence | heart principles of this approach, providing practical examples and strategies for implementing | applying | utilizing them in your own playing.

Understanding the Foundation: Diatonic Triads and Seventh Chords

Before delving | diving | exploring into the fascinating | intriguing | captivating world of upper structure triads, it's crucial | essential | vital to have a solid | strong | firm grasp of diatonic triads and seventh chords within a given key. A diatonic triad is simply a three-note chord built from the root, third, and fifth of a scale degree. For instance, in C major, the I chord (C major) is formed from C-E-G. Seventh chords add a seventh interval to this foundation, resulting in more complex harmonic color. In C major, the dominant seventh

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chord (G7) is G-B-D-F.

Building Upper Structure Triads: A Step-by-Step Approach

Upper structure triads are created by stacking triads on top of a seventh chord, using the notes *within* the seventh chord itself to create these added harmonies. Let's illustrate | demonstrate | show this with the G7 chord in C major again. The notes are G, B, D, and F. We can then build triads from this set:

- **G7 (Root):** G-B-D (The root triad)
- **B minor (Third):** B-D-F (A triad built from the 3rd of the G7)
- **D major (Fifth):** D-F-G (A triad built from the 5th of the G7)
- **F major (Seventh):** F-G-B (A triad built from the 7th of the G7)

Notice how each of these triads is a subset of the G7 chord's notes. These upper structure triads offer a range of harmonic possibilities, each adding a unique flavor | shade | hue to the underlying G7 chord. They can be used to create rich | lush | full voicings and exciting chord substitutions.

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Practical Applications and Voicings

The power of upper structure triads is not solely in their theoretical basis but in their practical application. For keyboard players, this means creating compelling | engaging | striking voicings. You can experiment | play | try with different inversions of these triads, combining them in various ways to create a tapestry of sound. For instance, you could voice the G7 chord and its upper structure triads simultaneously, creating a thick, rich cluster of notes. Alternatively, you could sequentially | successively | progressively use these triads, creating a shifting | moving | evolving harmonic landscape. This allows for improvisation that flows | moves | glides smoothly and organically.

Beyond Simple Seventh Chords: Expanding the Palette

The technique | method | approach is not limited | restricted | confined to seventh chords. You can apply it to alterations, extensions, and other chord types. For example, you can build upper structure triads on altered dominant chords (e.g., G7alt), 9th chords, 11th chords, and even more complex harmonies. This expands the possibilities significantly, allowing | enabling | permitting for a wider range of expressive choices.

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Improvisational Strategies: Utilizing Upper Structure Triads in Soloing

The true magic | power | potential of upper structure triads unfolds | reveals itself | appears when used in improvisation. Instead of just playing single notes over a chord, you can target specific notes from the upper structure triads, thereby creating a stronger | more cohesive | better integrated relationship between your solo and the harmony. This results | leads | produces in more interesting melodic ideas and a more sophisticated harmonic vocabulary.

Implementing this in your practice involves several steps:

1. **Analyze the Harmony:** Before you start soloing, carefully analyze the harmonic progression. Identify the seventh chords and their extensions.
2. **Identify Upper Structure Triads:** For each seventh chord, identify its upper structure triads.
3. **Target Notes:** During improvisation, aim to use notes that belong to these upper structure triads.

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4. **Experiment:** Don't be afraid to experiment | play around | try different things with different voicing and sequencing. Find what sounds best to you.

Conclusion

Berklee's approach to jazz keyboard harmony using upper structure triads provides a practical | useful | functional and powerful | robust | effective framework for building sophisticated and expressive voicings and solos. By understanding | grasping | comprehending the underlying principles and applying | using | implementing them in your practice, you can significantly enhance | improve | boost your harmonic skills and unlock | unleash | free new creative potential | capacity | ability. This method | technique | approach is a valuable | invaluable | priceless tool for any jazz pianist looking to elevate | raise | improve their playing to the next level.

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

1. **Q: Are upper structure triads only used in jazz?** A: While heavily featured in jazz harmony, the concept of building triads from the notes within a chord can be applied to various genres, enriching harmonic possibilities.

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2. Q: How do I learn to hear upper structure triads in existing music? A: Begin by transcribing solos and analyzing the chord progressions. Try to identify the upper structure triads used by the soloist and how they function within the context.

3. Q: Can I use upper structure triads in different voicings? A: Absolutely! Experiment with different inversions, close and spread voicings to achieve varied textures and sounds. There's no one "right" way.

4. Q: Is this approach difficult for beginners? A: While the concept might seem complex initially, practicing slowly and systematically with simple progressions will build a solid understanding. Start with diatonic seventh chords and gradually progress to more complex harmonies.

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