

# Harmonic Embellishment

Harmonic embellishment is the use of multiple vertical note structures, or “secondary” chords, to decorate, ornament, or colorize the principal or “primary” chord in a chord progression. This is a technique that all jazz pianists and other chordal instrumentalists use regularly when comping, soloing, or playing solo ballads. The practice is used to generate rhythm, extend a chord temporally, create textural variety, and produce harmonic interest in stagnant, dull, or simple chord progressions.

Harmonic embellishment can be as simple as arpeggiating a chord or moving from a root position chord to an inversion, but more commonly it involves using some note variety beyond the basic chord. Sometimes the chords that are used to embellish the primary chord are directly related to it; they have notes or extensions that are commonly associated with it. Other times, the secondary chords have no direct relationship to the primary chord, much as non-chord tones have no direct relationship with a chord they embellish as part of a melody.

In neighbor chord embellishments, the primary chord typically moves up or down a half step or a whole step, and then back. The key to harmonic embellishment, rather than to move to a different chord, is typically a return to the *same* chord. The rhythmic placement and emphasis, additionally, tends to favor the primary chord.

Diatonic embellishments usually involve chords that are indigenous to the prevailing key. Example 1 gives four examples of diatonic neighbor embellishment. The first two measures give major chord diatonic neighbor embellishments; measures three and four show minor chord diatonic neighbor embellishments.

CMaj7 Dmin7 CMaj7    EMaj7 D#min7b5 EMaj7    Cmin7 Dmin7 Cmin7    Emin9 D13 Emin

**Example 1: Diatonic Neighbor Chord Embellishment**

Chromatic neighbor embellishments regularly involve chords that are foreign to the prevailing key. Example 2 has four examples of chromatic neighbor embellishment. In the first two measures, chromatic neighbor chord embellishments are created through the use of parallelism; the same voicing is used for the upper and lower neighbor chord. In the next two measures, the voicings are similar, but not parallel.

C9 Db9 C9      C9 B9 C9      CMaj9 Db13b5 CMaj9    Cmin6/9 Bo9 Cmin6/9

**Example 2: Chromatic Neighbor Chord Embellishment**

Example 3 shows a few examples of common harmonic embellishments that combine diatonic and chromatic passing chords. The first measure moves from a root position chord by way of a diatonic and chromatic passing chord to the same chord in first inversion. The second and third measures, a common embellishment in rock and pop, suggests two quick plagal cadences. Major and minor plagal cadences demonstrate harmonic embellishment: the decoration of the final, tonic chord of a phrase or section. The phrase in the last two measures is simply a decoration of the C seven chord using chromatic passing chords that move down two half steps and back up. The D minor seventh flattened-fifth is an F minor sixth in first inversion; this also suggests a plagal cadence by way of the E diminished seventh that passes down and back.

CMaj7 Dmin7 D#o7 CMaj7/E C    F/C C7 F/C C      C7/E Ebo7 Dmin7b5 Ebo7 C7/E

**Example 3: Chromatic and Diatonic Passing Chords**

Example 4 shows a very common embellishment using diminished seventh passing chords.

C6 Bo7/D C6/E Bo7/F C6/G

**Example 4: Diminished Seventh Passing Chords Embellishing C6**

Example 5 is an example of Arpeggiation. Here the voicings differ enough to make the arpeggiation sound like embellishment. They are, however, all the same chord.

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system is labeled 'C7b9' and the second is labeled 'Co9'. Each system consists of two measures of music. The first measure in each system shows a standard chord voicing, and the second measure shows the same chord with its notes arpeggiated (played one by one in sequence). The voicings are different enough to make the arpeggiation sound like an embellishment.

Example 5: Arpeggiation

Line clichés (Examples 6 and 7) are also a form of harmonic embellishment. Line clichés are a repetition of the same chord with the upward or downward movement, often chromatic, of one voice.

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system is labeled with chords: C, C+, C6, C+, C. The second system is labeled with chords: C, Cmaj7, C6, Cmaj7, C. Each system consists of five measures of music. In each measure, one voice (treble or bass) moves up or down chromatically while the other voice remains stationary, creating a line cliché.

Example 6: Major Chord Line Clichés

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system is labeled with chords: Cmin, CminMaj7, Cmin7, CminMaj7, Cmin. The second system is labeled with chords: Cmin, Ab/C, Cmin6, Ab/C, Cmin. Each system consists of five measures of music. In each measure, one voice (treble or bass) moves up or down chromatically while the other voice remains stationary, creating a line cliché.

Example 7: Minor Chord Line Clichés

Sometimes the line between the harmonic embellishment of a chord, and the move to a different chord with a contrasting function in the progression is a blurry one.