# 1. Introduction

Although a cluster chord or voicing can be defined in many ways, it is defined here as a chord voicing comprised predominantly of closely spaced intervals such as half-steps and whole-steps. Typically, clusters may occur in groups with as few as three or four tones, or as many as six, seven, or more (Example 1). Cluster voicings have a unique and characteristic sound. They are dense, compact, and may occasionally sound dissonant to the listener.
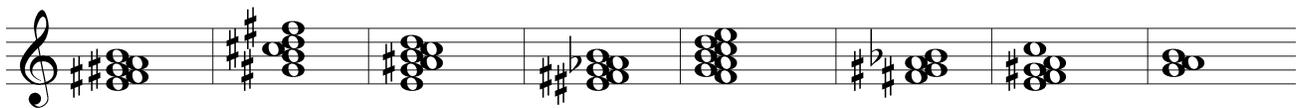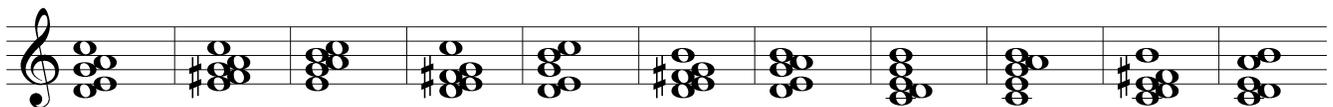

Example 1: Clusters

Although many jazz pianists use clusters to emphasize rhythmic and textural elements (for example Thelonious Monk, Horace Silver, Cecil Taylor, and Chick Corea), herein the cluster voicing is explored mainly as a harmonic element.

Cluster voicings are used in both tonal and atonal contexts. Since jazz harmony is essentially tonal and functional, the clusters that are most common in jazz are those that work effectively within tonal, functional chord progressions. Clusters can be used as chord voicings, to extend a chord harmonically, to provide color or tonal effect, or used in various combinations to embellish a single chord.

Although there are a wide variety of clusters that can be found in jazz piano and many other musical styles and idioms, the clusters that will be discussed and explored in this text consist mainly of five different notes within an octave, and appear most frequently in the right hand with the melody as the uppermost note. Since jazz is essentially a melodic music, the technique will be explored mainly as a technique for the harmonization and embellishment of melodies. Nevertheless, other applications will be explored including left hand and two hand cluster voicings.

While we think of cluster voicings as harmonic in nature, the individual notes that appear in cluster voicings create *color* when they are used in these (as well as other) types of voicings. When we look at all of the cluster voicings of five notes that can be used for CMaj7, (including CMaj9, C6/9, CMaj13, and others), the number of ways that cluster voicings "color" this chord quality is quite remarkable (Example 2).

Example 2: Clusters for C Major With Sixths, Sevenths, and Extensions

In this example, we can see the possibilities for chord content and color that cluster voicings allow even when only five notes are used with only B or C as the upper tone.

There are likely other possibilities for five note clusters with only B or C as the uppermost tone. Any five (or more) notes from C, D, E, F#, G, A, and B can be used for this chord. So as you can see, the possibilities for using clusters that color and shade chord qualities seems almost limitless. Some of the many possibilities for the C minor chord quality are given below (Example 3).

Example 3: Clusters for C Minor With Sixths, Sevenths, and Extensions

In the harmonization of melodies, the cluster voicings explored typically "isolate" the melody by spacing it at least a minor third away from the note below it. If you play through the clusters in Examples 2 and 3, you will notice how the uppermost tone sounds more clearly when the tone below it is greater than a whole-step. Half-steps between the melody tone and the tone below it, in particular, tend to obscure the clarity of the melody tone. Although it might occasionally be appropriate or even desirable to voice a chord with a tone a half-step or whole-step below the melody for a certain effect, color, or quality, the discussion below will explore cluster voicings that, for the most part, support and maintain the projection of each tone in the melody.

As you work with cluster voicings, you will begin to think about voicings not only as a form or a commonly used vertical structure (the way we typically learn chords and chord voicings), but also as a technique for exploring the color content of chord qualities and voicings. As a result, your sense of harmony will move from a chord voicing formula to a greater awareness of sound and color. It is not unlike a painter who, rather than painting by numbers or always selecting the same kind of blue, for example, combines different shades and colors to produce the exact shade of blue that he is looking for. The balance between the tones in each voicing (how each tone is emphasized or weighted), moreover, is another important and relevant aspect of this color.