

Jazz Harmony: Terms & Definitions

Alteration: An alteration is the changing (through sharpening or flattening) of a note in a diatonic chord associated with a key. For example, in the key of F major, a C7 would be the unaltered V7 chord within the key, while a C7#5 would be an altered chord (the sharp fifth is the alteration.)

Bass: The pitch succession created by the lowest pitched voice in a composition or improvisation.

Chord Quality: The basic, reduced harmonic content of a vertical pitch structure, represented as a pitch-class collection with a defined root. A chord quality can be represented by a *chord symbol*. Example: B (root), C#, D#, F, A; this chord quality is represented by the chord symbol "B9(b5)."

Chord Sonority: The expression or manifestation of chord quality as an arrangement of simultaneously sounded pitches on a particular instrument or combination of instruments. Chord sonority defines the register, vertical spacing, and octave doublings of pitches in the arrangement.

Chord Voicing (also referred to as *Voicing*): An arrangement of tones sounded simultaneously that forms a vertical pitch structure or chord. A chord voicing creates a chord's sonority. The term, however, usually describes commonly used harmonic structures that are easily recognized by jazz musicians, or any formula used by musicians for creating vertical pitch structures.¹

Chorus: A single statement of the form of a composition (the portion used by the improviser), either as a harmonized statement of the theme (melody), or as an improvisation that takes place over the composition's harmonic template.

Compound Melody: A musical part with polyphonic implications created by a monophonic voice. Skips are common (and may be prevalent) in compound melody.² Example: A piece with a texture consisting mainly of broken chords such as a Bach cello suite.

Consonance/Dissonance: The level of vertical stability a tone maintains with any simultaneously sounding tones. The term is a relative one. For example, a tone may be dissonant but still somewhat stable given that it may serve as a resolution for another tone (in the same chord) that is more dissonant and less stable.

Contrapuntal: A polyphonic texture within which the individual voices manifest a certain degree of melodic and rhythmic independence.

¹ Unlike chord sonority, which always describes the entire sounded chord, the term "chord voicing" refers to the harmonic element only (e.g., chords played by one particular instrument in a group), leaving out the bass or melody tone, which may be played by other instruments.

² Compound melody is also understood as *virtual or implied polyphony*.

Counterpoint: Polyphony, wherein the number of musical parts (e.g., lines or melodies) equals the number of voices present and the rules and procedures that govern their relationships.³
Example: a four-voice fugue or a chordal texture such as a four-voice chorale.

Displacement: The conceptual abrogation of a pitch that may occur through step (half step or whole step) motion to a following pitch. The term also refers to a tone (or tones) that is delayed through some form of rhythmic activity, and occurs later in time in relation to some reference.

Doubling: A musical part with monophonic implications simultaneously created by two or more voices.⁴ Example: A line produced by one voice that is duplicated by a second voice an octave lower.

Embellishment (Melodic): The use of the individual tones of a melody (typically, but not always outside of a chord) to decorate, ornament, and express a chord or the individual notes within it.

Embellishment (Harmonic): The use of tones, chords, chord structures, voicings, and clusters, (typically, but not always outside of a chord) to decorate or ornament a chord.

Extension: A note that is added to the basic seventh chord (the basic seventh chord contains the root, 3rd, 5th, and 7th) that creates additional color and tension. These tones are understood and labeled as the *ninth*, *eleventh*, and *thirteenth*. Extensions may be altered or unaltered.

Figure: A horizontal pitch succession that stands out (in relation to a background texture) as a result of dynamic, rhythmic, textural, timbral, or articulatory uniqueness or emphasis. The term is also used to describe a short pitch sequence similar to a motive or a turn, which may be repeated.

Function: The tendency of a chord to move; its ability to be stable or unstable; its need to resolve to another chord or to express a resolution. Function is often labeled and described in three categories: stable (tonic), unstable (dominant), or neutral (subdominant).

Harmonic Template (also referred to as *Template*): A chord progression of a jazz standard or composition that provides the harmonic foundation for the melody and any improvised sections.

Interchange of Mode (also referred to as *Modal Interchange*): The borrowing or use of chords from parallel scales/modes to create harmonic variety, e.g., a major scale and its parallel harmonic minor.

Line: Any temporal pitch succession, consisting of diatonic or chromatic steps, which suggests a continuity, and creates a salient or discernible stratum in relation to or in contrast with a background texture.⁵

³ Contrapuntal is also understood as *real polyphony*.

⁴ Doubling is also understood as *virtual or implied monophony*.

Line Cliché: A harmonic embellishment created by a line's movement during a single chord. A line cliché creates melodic and rhythmic interest during a static harmony, and the illusion of harmonic motion.

Melodic Function: The principles that apply to the movement of a structural or registral line, or voice, as it operates in relation to the harmony.⁶

Modulation: The movement from one key to another where the new key is protracted and has structural or formal importance.

Octave Equivalence: What occurs when a pitch class member in one octave register functions in a manner analogous to the same pitch class member in a different octave register.

Polyphony: A musical texture consisting of more than one voice.

Register Transfer: "The general situation of change of octave of a specific note."⁷

Registral Line: A structural line created by a pitch succession that maintains a proximal registral relation.

Simple Melody: A monophonic (single) line created by a monophonic (single) voice. Steps are predominant in a simple melody.⁸

Soprano: The succession of pitches created by the highest voice in a composition or improvisation.

Structural Line: A fundamental linear connection or strand in the music that is characterized by the tendency of its pitches (or pitch classes) to move in step motion (chromatic or diatonic) according to recognized patterns of linear/melodic function and basic voice leading principles.⁹

⁵ In certain textures, where a horizontal pitch sequence is texturally isolated (such as the bass), a line may include skips. Moreover, the pitches that form a line may be temporally *contiguous* or they may be separated temporally by intervening pitches. In this study, however, the term refers to contiguous pitches moving by step.

⁶ Melodic function is also referred to as *linear function*.

⁷ Allen Forte and Steven Gilbert, *Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1982), 260. A registral line often involves an abrupt transfer of register of one or more of its pitches to an adjacent register. Typically, the transfer is to a pitch that functions as an octave equivalent substitute for one that is directly related in register to the pitch that precedes it.

⁸ Simple melody is also understood as *real monophony*.

⁹ A structural line is understood as a line produced by a single, conceptual voice. The number of structural lines that may be used to describe the voice leading does not necessarily have any correlation with the number of actual voices present in the musical passage from which the structural lines are derived.

Substitution: The use of an alternate chord to replace a chord. A substitution functions the same as the chord that it replaces. Substitutions typically involve a chord with a *different* root, while alterations change the chord's quality but keep the same root.

Tension Tones: Pitches (or pitch classes) that are sustained through a chord progression and assume various degrees of intervallic stability within each chord.

Tonicization: A chord progression, typically through the use of an applied dominant (secondary or tertiary), that temporarily creates an alternate tonic chord.

Vertical Fill: Chord components (any note or note combination) that maintain a more important role in the production of a chord sonority than in any horizontal or linear relationship the components may have with pitches that are temporally adjacent.

Voice: A performing force capable of producing a succession of tones, one tone at a time, such as a single human voice or solo (monophonic) instrument.¹⁰

Voice Leading: The methods and procedures by which various chord components are connected horizontally with adjacent chord components and the overall principles that govern these connections. The term also applies to the manner in which the various voices interact within the musical texture in relation to each other and in relation to the basic harmonic progression of the composition.

Voice Model: A notated example (based on a chord progression derived from a musical passage) that represents the harmony and suggests or defines structural and functional linear connections.

Voice Part: The specific pitches associated with or produced by a particular voice.

Voicing Block: Any part of a chord sonority, consisting of two or more tones, that may be treated, considered, or moved independently of other tones in the sonority. For example, a voicing block could be the upper three tones (which would include the melody) of a six-tone chord. Voicing blocks are used as harmonic embellishments.

¹⁰ The number of voices present in a composition (or part thereof) could be understood as the number of simultaneous tones sounding at any given moment. Accordingly, a chord consisting of five simultaneously sounded tones would require five voices; however, an arpeggiation of these same five tones could be produced by a single voice.