

Left Hand Voicing Guidelines

1. Keep the left hand in the register that tends to work the best for voicings. This is between the C below middle C (C3) and the G above middle C (G4).

2. The *third* and the *seventh* are typically necessary if they are in the chord indicated by the chord symbol. *Perfect fifths* (the fifth in a major seventh, dominant seventh, and minor seventh) may be omitted, but may also be included in the chord; the particular voicing may determine whether the perfect fifth may actually help or hinder the voicing. Avoid roots of chords in the left hand voicings when playing with a bass player or supplying the bass note (typically the root) on a separate beat. The most effective three note chord voicings tend to consist of the 3rd, 7th, and one additional tone such as the 9th, 13th, #5 or b5. Altered (sharped or flatted) fifths, as in the chords Cmi7b5 or C7#5, tend to be included in the chord. You may include the ninth, eleventh, or thirteenth as the fourth, fifth or sixth note in a chord when appropriate, but make sure that at least the third and seventh are also present.

3. In general, keep the number of notes in the left hand voicing at three or four. Occasionally, L.H. voicings of two notes and (less often) five notes may be used. As you move higher in register with your right hand, more notes are often appropriate in the left hand voicing—typically four or five. This complements the thinning texture of the right hand in the upper register and the emptiness produced by the lack of notes in the mid-range of the keyboard. When the right hand moves lower, toward middle C or below it, as few as one or two notes in the left hand may be appropriate and work best.

4. In ensemble jazz, where a bass player is playing alongside the pianist, left hand voicings tend to be compact; less than an octave in range (from the lowest note to the highest). In slow tempo tunes, however, such as ballads, the voicing may be greater than an octave in range and possibly arpeggiated.

5. Doublings (playing the same two notes an octave apart from each other) tend to be avoided. The melody tone, however, may be doubled by one of the notes in the left hand voicing.

6. The melody note may be considered as a chord component when realizing the chord. For example, if the melody is the third of the chord, it is not necessary to also include the third in the voicing below it, although you may. In other words, if the chord symbol is C9 and the melody note is D natural, it is not necessary to include the D in the left hand, but you can include it if you want. The chord symbol chosen, furthermore, should consider the melody note as part of the chord when an arrangement is created and chord symbols are considered and chosen.

7. The melody is the *most important* aspect of a tune, so always make sure that voicing choice supports the melody. Typically, thirds, fourths, fifths, and sixths are the most preferable intervals between the melody and the top voice of the voicing below it. In general, avoid

seconds (major and minor) between the melody and the voice below it. Major seconds (whole steps) between the melody and the voice below it are occasionally usable, but minor seconds (half steps) rarely work well, as they create a dissonant relationship with the melody. With regard to major seconds, different voicing scenarios (the particular voicing, register, tempo, etc.) will determine whether the major second sounds acceptable or not.

8. In *solo piano*, generally speaking, keep the large intervals on the bottom, and the smaller intervals in the middle of the chord voicing. The largest interval will tend to be between the bass and tenor voices. The preferred intervals between the bass and the tenor voices are sevenths, tenths, fifths, and occasionally thirds. Sixths are also appropriate.

9. In *solo piano*, the intervals between the bass and tenor voice should follow certain guidelines depending on the register (this rule will not always be strictly adhered to and depends on the particular voicing, and the harmonic and rhythmic context):

- a. Avoid using minor and major thirds lower than B \flat 2 to D3.
- b. Avoid using minor and major sevenths lower than E \flat 2 to D \flat 3
- c. Avoid using minor and major tenths lower than A \flat 1 to C2.

10. Use good voice leading. In other words, practice chord voicings that move from chord to chord in such a way that each note within each voicing moves by step to an appropriate tone in the next voicing. Often guide tone lines will result such as movement between the 3rd and 7th (and vice versa) 5th and 9th (and vice versa), and 9th and 13th (and vice versa). In most cases, the voices will move by *step* (half step or whole step), or the tone will repeat. The following will usually occur in descending fifth progressions (these form *guide tone* oriented lines):

- a. Voices will often repeat the note they are sounding
- b. Thirds will often become sevenths (and vice versa).
- c. Fifths will become ninths (and vice versa).
- d. Fifths may also move to the thirteenth (and vice versa).
- e. Ninths may move to thirteenths (and vice versa).

Using good voice leading all the time, however, may be boring and monotonous. Accordingly, if the voicing moves too low or high, the left hand may occasionally jump to a more appropriate registral position. This can serve to make the texture more interesting.

11. Generally speaking, you will have to balance and trade off voice leading (the horizontal connections) with chord voicing (the vertical structure). If you have to skip from one note to the next to make a vertical chord sound good, this is perfectly ok. Overall, the vertical chord sonority (the chord voicing) is more important than the voice leading to and from the chord. If one of the inner voices moves by skip while the other two or three move by step, this is generally acceptable. However, if two or more voices skip, particularly if they skip in the same direction, this may be best avoided. It is also worth noting the bass with respect to the

movement of an inner voice or voices. Avoid moving one or more of the inner voices in the same direction and interval the bass.

12. In ensemble jazz, keep the left hand rhythmic! The rhythm and the groove of the left hand is as important as that of the right hand. Use the left hand rhythmically in a way that complements the rhythm of the right hand. Think of the relationship between the two hands as one of interdependence. If the right hand is busy, keep the left hand less so, and vice versa. Also, in ensemble playing, when the hands are closer together in the middle register of the keyboard, this proximity increases the likelihood of both hands being heard as part of a single rhythm.

13. Choose your voicings at a piano or keyboard instrument while listening very carefully to each chord and each note within each chord with the melody. It's not a bad idea to sing each individual note within each voicing after you've chosen it. You can also play through the chord voicings *without the melody*; this will give you a better idea of what the voicings and voice leading sound like.

14. The use of fourths is particularly effective and appropriate in modern ensemble jazz piano. Generally, voicings consisting of two perfect 4ths (for example, E A D for C6add9) or one augmented 4th and one perfect 4th (for example, E Bb Eb for C7#9 or C7#5#9) are pretty common. Another particularly effective and idiomatic sonority that often appears in jazz piano is the use of thick left hand voicings of four to five notes in the same rhythm with right hand octaves in the higher register of the keyboard.