

Understanding Piano Arrangements

There are a number of ways to approach playing the piano when it comes to melody, chords, and bass notes. Generally, piano arrangements will fall into either the category of *solo* piano or *ensemble* piano. These two settings are so different that the approach taken by the pianist in one setting may be quite different than the approach used in the other. The arrangement approaches below are organized roughly from the easiest to the most difficult, and represent various ways to think about the piano in terms of melody, chords, and bass notes:

Solo Piano Approaches:

1. Melody in the right hand, chords and bass notes in the left hand. A representative example of this would be *stride* piano, where the left hand plays single notes or octaves that are followed by a chord in the middle register. Teddy Wilson, James P. Johnson, Fats Waller, Art Tatum, and Earl Hines are jazz pianists who often use this solo piano approach. Many contemporary pianists, however, regularly use this approach.

2. Melody and chords in the right hand, and bass notes in the left hand. This is sometimes referred to as "pop style" piano, since many popular music pieces are arranged this way. In jazz oriented arrangements in swing rhythm, the left hand bass part would typically be a walking bass line. Oscar Peterson, Dave McKenna, George Shearing, and Lennie Tristano often use(d) this approach when playing solo piano. Arpeggios or root and fifth patterns are used in more pop oriented and Latin rhythm arrangements.

3. Melody in the right hand, and chords in the left hand. This is a somewhat less effective approach than number 1, above, particularly if it is the only texture used throughout the entire performance. In various solo jazz piano styles, however, it can be effective when bass notes are occasionally used to vary the range and texture, particularly if the rhythm is strong. Chick Corea and Bill Evans are two jazz pianists who use this approach when playing solo piano. Erroll Garner regularly used this approach when playing solo piano, using the Freddy Green guitar style chord strumming for his left hand approach. Here, the bass note and chord are close together with the chords played as quarter notes, with an occasional bass note added on an upbeat for added rhythmic emphasis.

4. Melody and part of the chord in the right hand, and bass notes and part of the chord in the left hand. This is a very common approach used by jazz pianists. Clare Fischer, Bill Evans, and Keith Jarrett often use this approach when playing solo piano.

5. Melody and chords in the right hand, and melody and bass notes in the left hand. This is more challenging than the approaches above, and somewhat uncommon.

Keep in mind that the various approaches above are often combined by pianists in the solo piano setting in a single performance of a jazz standard or popular tune. The tempo and style of the piece (ballad, medium swing, Latin, etc.), moreover, will also influence the approach the performer chooses.

Ensemble Piano Approaches:

1. Melody in the right hand, and chords in the left hand (a typical ensemble approach);
2. Melody (only) played by both hands, one or two octaves apart (no chords).
3. Melody in the left hand, and chords in the right hand.
4. Melody and chords in right hand, and melody (one octave lower) in the left hand (ensemble approach). Here the right hand plays four note block chords that include the melody. This style is often referred to Shearing block chord style.

Keep in mind that these arrangements do not include approaches to *comping*, which are playing chords only in support of another instrumental or vocal soloist. Typically, Comping involves playing four to eight note chord voicings in a way that complements the soloist or singer.