



Sound Enhanced

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• Thursday, November 15 • 2 P.M. • Vibraphone Clinic •

Mallet-Keyboard Accompanying in a Small Group

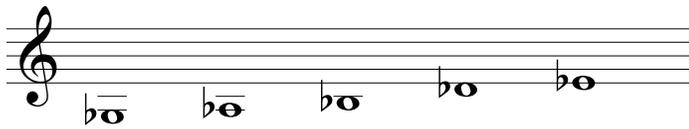
BY BILL MOLENHOF

You probably enjoy playing music with your friends and are active in lots of ensembles at your school, through your teacher's studio, in community groups, and ones that you organize on your own. I hope you are interested in creating your own musical ideas and that you would like to try this on a mallet-keyboard instrument within a small group. I feel that it is very important to bring mallet instruments to a wider audience and acceptance through more music-making with other people. If you can help make someone else sound great through your skill in accompanying, there will be more playing opportunities for you, for mallet instruments, and for creative percussionists.

The goal of this article and my group's clinic at PASIC 2001 is to help percussionists who wish to play vibraphone and/or marimba in "improvised music" settings. The better we are at serving, the better we are at leading. Increasing your ability to accompany will improve your soloing and writing, and help you to make music a personal, creative activity.

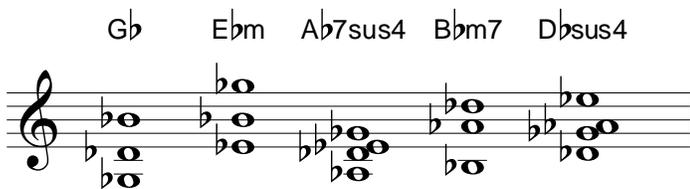
A good place to start is the pentatonic scale. It is found in music around the world and in most music-history periods, and it is very flexible and useful. The "black keys" on a vibraphone (or marimba) are a good starting place, because you are presented with three octaves of the G-flat pentatonic scale.

Example 1



My students and I have found that learning to combine these notes in lots of different ways has dramatically improved our ability to solo and "comp." It is an excellent idea to practice the pentatonic scale while listening and imagining each scale member in the bass.

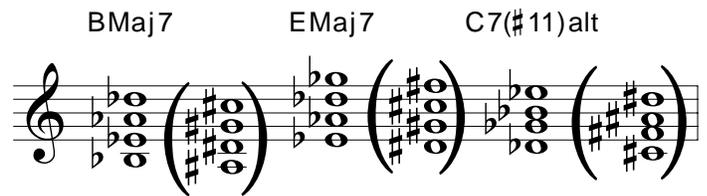
Example 2



The trick is to know how these tones fit in at any given moment to create the sound impression you want to make. Sometimes we can use the basic pentatonic material to good effect when the bass note is a different tone than the scale members. You could call this "common tone" or even "common picture" playing. I also call it "more bang for the practice-time buck" be-

cause you can take one piece of material (in this case, G-flat pentatonic) and use it in other situations to good effect. The tones in Example 3 will show you what I mean about playing the same scale with other tones in the root than the most obvious choice. Look—and listen at the PAS Web site—to how many different harmonic situations you can cover with the knowledge of only five notes!

Example 3



Knowing where the bass tone is in the music is always crucial. A good way to practice these skills would be to play, record, or program a very simple bass pattern, until you have it in your ear and mind. Here's an example:

Example 4



Now start combining the tones of your pentatonic scale to see what kind of an effect they have on you when played over the bass line.

Example 5a



Example 5b

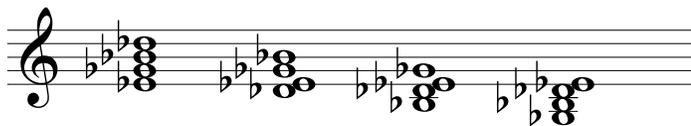


Example 5c

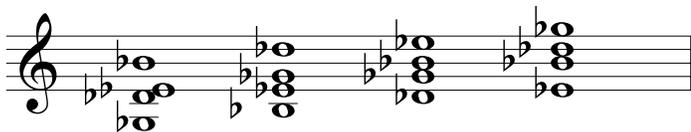


It is very important to know as many voicings for a given chord as possible so that you can provide the best possible accompaniment based on the music being played in that moment. This becomes an automatic, aural response. For example, at the height of my friend's tenor saxophone solo, I certainly don't want to stop and ask myself, "Bill, what are the notes in an E-flat m7 chord in closed position using the 2nd inversion?" So I practice all of that in advance, and with the other members of the rhythm section—not just alone. Different "sizes" of notes make a different effect, as do different registers, ranges, and dynamics. And different positions make for a logical flow or voice-leading.

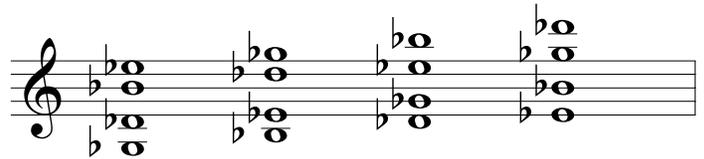
Example 6a
"Closed" chord tones



Example 6b
"Half" spread, or "drop 2 & 4"



Example 6c
"Spread" or "open"



It is very important that our accompanying sounds musical and that it can "stand on its own." If I work on this material with the drums and bass, I want to easily be able to hear whatever tune the group is playing. Simple is usually the best; really concentrating and listening to the soloist or primary voice is most important.

When accompanying, I want to be an effective background voice, and a clear, simple rhythmic format leaves the soloist more freedom for his or her rhythmic invention. The listener will then "feel" the drumming and groove better. Some breathing room in the music is always necessary for the listener to be able to absorb and reflect on what we are playing.

It is a supreme feeling to know and feel the communication in a group that is improvising well together. The audience's positive response lets us know that we are sending our music across in a clear and understandable way. Good accompanying is the "teamwork" of any successful musical performance.

If you have any questions please feel free to contact me at bill@molenhof.com and/or speak to me any time at PASIC.

Bill Molenhof is on the faculty at the Meistersinger Konservatorium (Hochschule) in Nürnberg, Germany. He has performed with guitarists Wayne Johnson and Pat Metheny, singer Oleta Adams, pianist James Williams, singers Jackie Cain and Roy Kral, cornetist Ruby Braff, cellists David Darling and Hank Roberts, saxophonists Tim Berne and Zbigniew Namyslowski, and drummers Alan Dawson, Danny Gottlieb, and Keith Copeland. His collection of solo pieces for the vibraphone, *Music of the Day*, is published by Kendor Music. PN

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