CHAPTER 1:

Four-Part Chords

Jazz harmony is fundamentally built from **four-part chords**. Created by adding a chordal 7th or 6th to a major, minor, diminished, augmented, or suspended triad, such sonorities can appear in various guises: as independent formations, as incomplete and rootless voicings, as well as upper structures of larger harmonic units. In this chapter, we will discuss 14 four-part chords divided into four tonal categories: major (4 chords), minor (3 chords), dominant (4 chords), and half-diminished/diminished (3 chords). This categorization is based on their shared characteristics and allows you to use them interchangeably in similar tonal and harmonic situations. As will soon become clear, the chords in each category are grouped hierarchically according to their chromatic tension. This hierarchy reveals ways in which chords from the same category (major/minor/dominant/half-diminished/diminished) are utilized in different harmonic scenarios.

Major Chords

Example 1.1 illustrates the four **major four-part chords** arranged in close position.

Example 1.1 – Major Four-Part Chords

Each chord contains a major triad and a minor 7th or a major 6th. The CΔ7(♭5) and CΔ7(♯5) chords include two chromatic pitch alterations: ♭5 and ♯5. The perfect 5th – along with its two chromatic lower and upper neighbors – is an expandable chord member whose alternate versions control and manipulate the degree of chromatic tension occurring within a chord.

Minor Chords

Example 1.2 shows the three minor four-part chords arranged in close position.

Example 1.2 – Minor Four-Part Chords

Each chord contains a minor 3rd and a perfect 5th, along with a major 6th, a minor 7th or a major 7th. The Cm(Δ7) chord replaces a minor 7th with a major 7th, which functions as a chromatic pitch alteration. When comparing the sound of these chords, notice that Cm(Δ7)

sounds most dissonant because of the presence of the major 7th within its pitch structure. A more detailed analysis of Cm(Δ7) reveals the presence of two interlocking triads: Cm (C, E♭, G) and E♭+ (E♭, G, B).

Dominant Chords

Example 1.3 provides four **dominant four-part chords** arranged in close position.

Example 1.3 – Dominant Four-Part Chords

These chords contain a major 3rd and a minor 7th, though the former is replaced by a perfect 4th in the C7sus. Whereas C7 and C7sus also contain a diatonic fifth, C7(♭5) and C7(♯5) alter this pitch chromatically with ♭5 and ♯5. The intervallic structure of C7sus is particularly significant because it departs considerably from the tertian pitch organization. The combination of the perfect 4th and the minor 7th gives the sonority a distinct quartal structure. This feature makes it an important sonority, especially in modal jazz.

Half-Diminished/Diminished Chords

To conclude our discussion of four-part chords, Example 1.4 includes the remaining three half-diminished/diminished four-part chords.

Example 1.4 – Half-Diminished/Diminished Four-Part Chords

These chords contain a minor 3rd and a diminished 5th. They differ in the nature of the 7th: Cm7(♭5) includes a minor 7th, Cdim7 chord adds a diminished 7th, and Cdim(Δ7) contains a major 7th.*
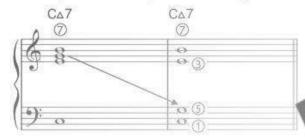
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* Although in this example the spelling of the diminished 7th is correct, in actual practice the spelling of these chords is simplified in order to avoid the use of double flats or double sharps.

"Drop Two" Technique

The **"drop two" technique** transforms close-position chords into open-position voicings. With their less predictable intervallic structure, **open voicings** are generally far more attractive and useful in the context of harmonic progressions. Not only does the intervallic compactness of close-position chords prevent them from being effective in linear progressions, but it limits them in more straightforward harmonic progressions. Meanwhile, the intervallic transparency of open voicings makes them ideal for use in different harmonic scenarios. The process of opening a close-position chord follows a simple rule: transfer the second [note] from the top of a chord down an octave. Example 1.5 illustrates this process. Circled Arabic numbers indicate the chord member occurring in the soprano and other voices. 7 indicates a 7th, 5 stands for a 5th, 3 for a 3rd, etc.

Example 1.5 – "Drop Two" Voicing for C△7

Example 1.6 shows the three **close-position** voicings for C△7 — the root position with a major 7th on top, the 1st position with a [third] on top, and the [2]nd position with a perfect 5th on top.

Example 1.6 – Close-Position Voicings

The location of the chordal root, C3, remains fixed when the upper-structure Em triad is [rotated]. With this simple upper-structure rotation, C△7 becomes more transparent. These [three close-position] voicings of the C△7 chord in Example 1.6 (or any four-part chord) – [root position,] 1st position and 2nd position – will be used to generate three different "drop [two" voicings].

When the voicings from Example 1.6 undergo the "drop two" process, the newly created [chords] show an even more compelling intervallic architecture than those given in Example 1.6. Example 1.7 illustrates open voicings for C△7. Compare the intervallic structure of voicings in Example 1.6 to that in Example 1.7.

Example 1.7 – Open-Position Voicings

Examples 1.5-1.7 summarize the procedures for generating "drop two" _____. The ___ step process remains exactly the same regardless of the complexity of close-po_____ ___. The first step involves the rotation of the upper structure of a chor____ ile keeping th__ ___ the lowest note of the chord in the same location. This step ___antees th__ all possibl___ ___rangements of close-position chords have been explored. The _____d ste__ ___lves the ___lication of the "drop two" technique to each close-posi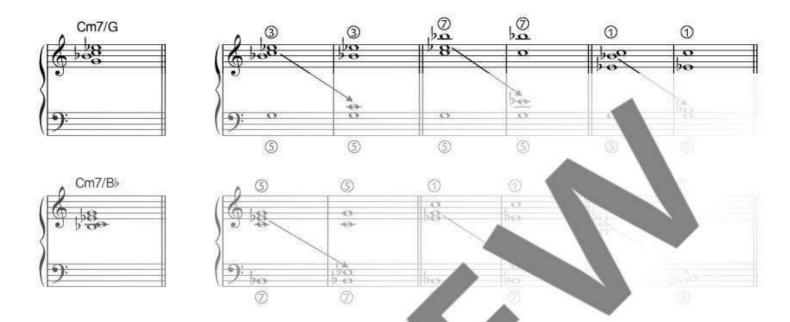tion voicing ___ ___ond no___ __ the top is dropped down an octave to create an open ___ ___. This _____ ____que for close-position chords will apply to larger chords type___ ___ll. For ____ _____ __ four-part chord has three possible close-position configu_____ons, the ____part ch___ __tions, and the six-part has five. The root/lowest note always ___mines the ____ __mmatial status of ___ chord regardless of various pitch arrangements tha___ ___ht occur___ __ __ upper parts____

All in all, this simple two-step pr___ __ creates a__ ___ressi__ ___mber of voicings that ___ greatly enhance our harmonic vocab____ _ _ach____ __y___ ___ four-part chord___ ___re are six different voicings: three cl___ positions a____ ___ __ _____ions. Now let's____pan__ this to include the root position ___ the three inversion___ _ __ __our-part chord. ___ __ inversion with a 3rd as the lowes___ ___ the 2n__ ___ersion ___ __ __th at the bottom ___d 3rd inversion with a 7th/6th as the lowe___ __ ___ _umber__ ___ __itial voicings re___ __ __staggering num-ber of 24 possibilities. Exam__ ___ ____illus____ ___ __ ___ voicings for Cm7__

Example ___ __ __ Voic____ for Cm7 __ __

While listening to the Cm7/Eb, notice that the chord sounds more like a major chord than a minor chord, however, the quality of Cm7/G or Cm7/Bb is harder to determine. Inverted chords do not rely on the chordal root to determine their intended quality or functionality, and since many musicians are preconditioned to generally listen from the lowest pitch to define the chord's harmonic status, inverted formations have the chance of being reinterpreted, thus having a completely different tonal and functional status. For instance, the Cm7/Bb chord sounds exactly the same as Eb6 while Cm7/Eb sounds exactly the same as Ebmaj. The tonally ambiguous nature of inverted chords, however, does not prevent using them in a variety of harmonic situations and capitalizing on their multiple harmonic meanings. On the contrary, their inherent ambiguity is their biggest asset and renders them particularly useful as rootless voicings, i.e. chords without the root.

Piano Textures

As we begin to internalize "drop two" voicings, it is important to differentiate between the two piano textures featured in this book: **keyboard style** and **chorale style**. In keyboard style, the left hand controls the lowest note of the chord while the right hand (usually) supplies the remaining pitches: three in the case of four-part chords, and four in five-part chords. In the chorale style texture, the distribution of voices between hands is more equitable, two plus two in the case of four-part chords (or incomplete five- or six-part chords), or three plus two (or three plus two) in the case of five-part chords. While keyboard style enables the realization of harmonic progressions in a vertical fashion, the chorale style texture offers a more nuanced approach to jazz harmony. With equal distribution of voices between hands, the focus is more clearly on the design of individual voices and treats them as melodic lines interacting with one another. The result of such an interaction, which is characterized by the melodic independence and rhythmic complementarity between voices, culminates in linearly or contrapuntally conceived harmonic progressions. The chorale style texture enables one to approach harmony from a horizontal rather than a vertical perspective.

Example 1.9 compares keyboard and chorale style realizations of a **ii-V⁷-I progression** in the key of C major. Notice that the voicings in chorale style result from the application of the "drop two" technique to the keyboard style voicings. The individual voices will be referred to as bass, tenor, alto, and soprano counting from the bottom.

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