

Melodic Direction

With the large number of chords and extensions we have covered so far, it is difficult to know where to start and how to put all of these chords together. There are literally hundreds of combinations possible. A good starting point to create good sounding chord progressions is to focus on the top note of the chords. Listen to a jazz musician accompany a vocalist or soloist and you will here that their comping is usually characterized not only by good voice leading but a clear sense of direction in the top notes of the their chords. As a starting point, we will focus on creating simple melodies and harmonize them with chord voicings.

We will use three simple melodic ideas:

ascending motion

descending motion

chromatic motion

The idea is to choose a direction, pick a starting note for the first chord and then try to find voicings which fit both the chord and melody notes you have chosen. The following example uses Drop 2 voicings with no extensions. The melody of the progression ascends from an Ab to C then descends to a B natural.

The image shows two staves of handwritten musical notation in 4/4 time. The first staff contains four chords: Fm7, Bbm7, Eb7, and Abmaj7. The second staff contains five chords: Dbmaj7, Dm7(b9), G7, and Cmaj7. The melody line is written above the chords, starting on Ab, moving up to C, and then down to B natural.

Even though there are no extensions in the chords, the progression sounds strong. The melody ties together the voicings to produce an effective chord progression. The use of extensions on the chords will not only add to the overall sound and richness of the progression, but also make it easier to create more interesting melodic lines by providing a wider selection of tones for your top notes.