

PREFACE

Coming from a classically trained background I could never understand the concept of improvisation. Having played all the favorite pieces composed by classical masters like Chopin, Bach, Beethoven and Clementi, I was always used to sight reading.

Six years ago, if you would've asked me to sit down at a piano and play something, I would've stared blankly at the keys and asked for some sheet music! Of course, there are those special pieces that I've committed to memory, (which are few) but still, I'd be playing songs written by some other chap. Although it did and still does bring me great enjoyment to play masterpieces written by others, it left me with a sense of incompleteness that I couldn't just sit down and play something cool.

I remember getting together with a college friend of mine who was a skilled improviser and thinking to myself how splendid it would be to be able to play like him. I had asked him for some advice on how to improvise, but he wasn't much help. Instead, he told me it would take me up to seven years to get to the skill level of improvisation he was at.

Seven years? I'd be old with gray hair by that time! I managed to pick up an "improv" book from the music store only to find it extremely theoretical and widely unintelligible. I have to say I was more than a bit discouraged, but not enough to stop me from trying. So I started tinkering on the piano, playing on only the white keys, experimenting with short melodies that soon became longer. I played around with chord structures and rhythm to see what sounded pleasant to my ear.

Eventually, I taught myself how to improvise, and it didn't take seven years! It took about six months for me to have a firm grasp of how to create my own songs. Developing blues and jazz techniques followed in the next couple of years.

I had been approached by my students to teach them how to improvise. After searching extensively in music stores for improvisation methods, I never found a book that taught from the ground up, how to improvise. Most books I've purchased for myself were based on jazz and blues improvisation techniques, which is far beyond the scope of someone who just wants to make up some cool sounding songs on the piano. This prompted me to reach back into my own learning process and document in an organized fashion, a step by step approach to learning how to improvise, without making it overly complicated.

All of these lessons and exercises are written in C major for the beginner improviser to avoid confusion with sharps and flats. Basically, we'll be playing only the white keys. This is how I got started.

Who should use this book?

This book is for anyone who wants to learn some basics of creating their own songs regardless of skill level, though the more advanced you are, the easier it will be to comprehend. Everything has been simplified and there is hardly any theory to know although some very basic theory is helpful when learning to improvise, but not knowing theory never stopped those who had the talent to play songs by ear and experimentation, so this book combines a little of both approaches. You'll be creating your own songs within a couple of weeks!

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EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 1

NOTE: Similar rhythms can be created through different note values, i.e:

is rhythmically similar to:

These two rhythms are similar because the chords in both examples are played on the 1 (1st beat) and 3 (3rd beat).

Breaking up the chord

How many ways can we break up this C major chord? It's made up of 3 different notes so there are several ways we can accomplish this. Below are some examples of how we might do this:



In both of these examples, we played the root C by itself, separating it from the other two notes and breaking the chord into 2 parts, changing the dynamic of the original chord by breaking the harmony which adds a very simple melody. Can you hear it? Play the above example and hum the melody you hear! Remember, you can use different note values. I've used only quarter notes in the samples above to show you some basic rhythm. More complex rhythm can be created by using different note values and rests!

Here are some examples:



Take a look at the first and third measures of the first example. If you play them side by side, you'll notice the rhythm is nearly identical. The same notes are played on the 2nd beat of both measures, but the first measure uses half notes and a quarter rest, and the third measure uses dotted-quarter notes. The only difference is the notes in the third measure are held a beat longer.

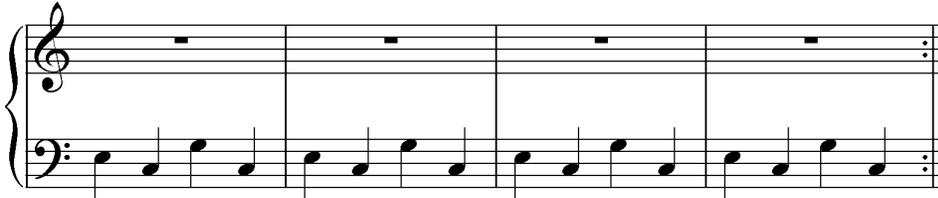
Broken Chords

Since this chord is made up of 3 notes, we can break down the chord even further making it a broken chord. Here is an example:



By playing broken chords, we are able to create more variations by using the same three notes we've been using (C, E, G). The above example starts with the G. What if we started with the C or the E? How would that change the melody?

This one starts with and E and is in a different order.



EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 4

Adding Chords to Our Melody

Up until now, we've learned how to create basic rhythm with chords in both hands and how to create simple 5 finger melodies with the right hand. It's now time to combine the two. Since chords are often, but not always, played with the left hand while the right hand plays melodies, this is what we'll learn first. Let's take a look at an example. Here we have the left hand playing a root position C chord in a whole note rhythm while the right hand plays a simple melody over it. First take a look at the example below and then play it.

Musical notation for the first example. The right hand plays a melody in 4/4 time: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (half), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter). The left hand plays a C major chord in root position (C4, E3, G3) as a whole note in every measure.

Let's look at some more examples. Please play the following:

Musical notation for the second example. The right hand melody: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (half), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter). The left hand plays a C major chord in root position (C4, E3, G3) as a whole note in every measure.

Musical notation for the third example. The right hand melody: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (half), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter). The left hand plays a C major chord in root position (C4, E3, G3) as a whole note in every measure.

Musical notation for the fourth example. The right hand melody: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (half), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter). The left hand plays a C major chord in root position (C4, E3, G3) as a whole note in every measure.

Musical notation for the fifth example. The right hand melody: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (half), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter). The left hand plays a C major chord in root position (C4, E3, G3) as a whole note in every measure.

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER 5

We can add further complexity to the sequence of chords by lengthening them which also allows a wider range of I-IV-V chord combinations. In the examples below, we have extended the number of measures in each line from four measures to eight measures. (NOTE: Musical ideas are typically composed in increments of four measures meaning songs with complete measures will always be divisible by four i.e. a song with 8 measures, 12 measures, 24 measures, 32 measures, 64 measures etc.)

Play the below examples:

Example 1: A piano score in 4/4 time. The bass line contains eight measures of chords labeled I, IV, V, IV, V, I, IV, and I. The treble line is empty.

Example 2: A piano score in 4/4 time. The bass line contains eight measures of chords labeled IV, I, IV, I, V, IV, V, and I. The treble line is empty.

Example 3: A piano score in 4/4 time. The bass line contains eight measures of chords labeled V, IV, I, IV, V, I, V, and I. The treble line is empty.

Example 4: A piano score in 4/4 time. The bass line contains eight measures of chords labeled I, V, IV, V, I, IV, V, and I. The treble line is empty.

