

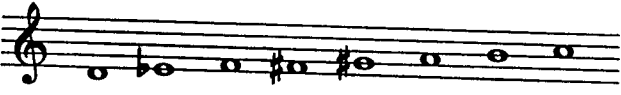
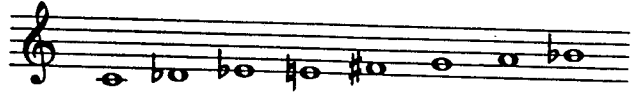


Chopin, diminished scales and jazz

Ted Rosenthal

This is the second in a two-part series.

The diminished scale — a symmetrical scale alternating half and whole steps — is of prime importance for jazz pianists in improvisations and voicings.



There are only three different diminished scales. Each scale applies to four roots. The four roots are a minor third apart. The diminished scale on C, Eb, Gb (F#) and A all use the same series of notes. C#, E, G and Bb (A#) use a second series. D, F, Ab (G#) and B use the third.

Back in 1830 Chopin was using diminished runs for dazzling effects in his first *Ballade*. (See example below.) This symmetrical run will work over Bb7b9, Db7b9, E7b9 and G7b9. You can start the run on any of the roots — Bb, Db, E, G. If you transpose it up a half-step and then down a half-step, you will have learned the pattern in all twelve keys!

You can change the rhythm

In the B minor *Sonata*, Chopin uses another diminished run. This is in descending groups of sextuplets. This run will work over the following chords: B7b9, D7b9, F7b9 and Ab7b9. It will also work with Adim, Cdim, Ebdim and Gbdim.

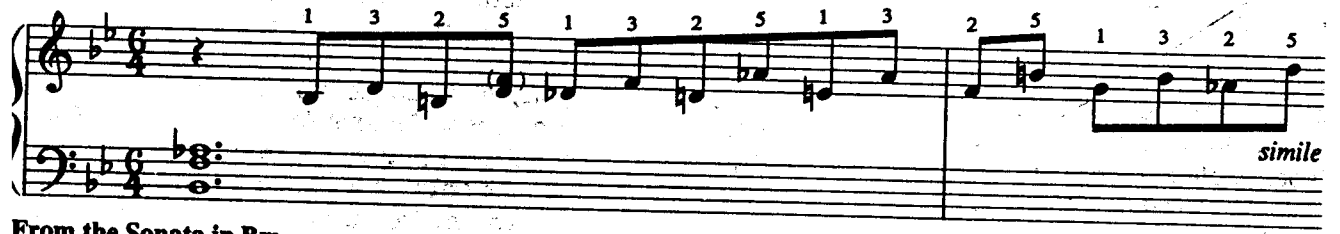
The run can be played as eighth-note triplets in a moderate tempo, or as regular eighth notes in a faster tempo. In the latter, the accents become displaced because it is a six-note pattern being played eight-to-the-bar.



simile

From the Ballade I

Bb7b9



simile

From the Sonata in Bm

B7b9



As Chopin wrote it . . .

A musical score for Chopin's Etude Op. 25 No. 11. The top staff shows a complex diminished scale run with various fingerings (e.g., 6 2 4 1 5 4, 5 3 8 5 4, 4 5 4) and dynamics like 'p' and 'cresc.'. The bottom staff shows a bass line with notes like 'Re' and 'Re tenuto'.

Notice that Chopin is not totally strict and changes a note here and there in his pattern.

In the *Etude* Op. 25 No. 11, there are also some interesting diminished runs. For example,

A musical score showing a diminished scale run. The top staff has chord symbols $E13^{+9}$ and $G13^{+11}$ and fingerings like 4 2 3 1 5 2 4 1, 5 2 4 1, 5 2 4 1. The bottom staff shows a bass line.

This run works over $E7$, $G7$, $B\flat 7$ and $D\flat 7$. Also over $Ddim$, $Fdim$, $A\flat dim$ and $Bdim$. One run from this *Etude* — one that we explored in the first installment (February-March *PS*) — works well as a diminished run by transposing each repetition of the pattern upwards by a major sixth.

A musical score showing a transposed diminished scale run. The top staff has chord symbol $G13$ and fingerings like 5 2 4 1, 5 2 4 1. The bottom staff shows a bass line.

becomes.

A musical score showing a transposed diminished scale run. The top staff has chord symbol $G13^{+11}$ and an $8va$ marking. The bottom staff shows a bass line.

Remember — if a pattern is repeated too many times, it will sound like an embellishment (or worse yet, an exercise). By adding a “tail” to the previous example, I avoid this problem and make a more musical phrase. In the boxed examples below, I’ve written tails for two of the diminished runs shown earlier.

Other music of Chopin, Liszt, Rachmaninoff and more contain some spectacular runs based on the diminished scale. It’s up to you, the creative pianist, to devise endings and interpolations for these runs. I’ve found that adapting patterns from classical piano is an exciting process with many possibilities. •

Chopin runs with Rosenthal tails

A musical score showing two examples of Chopin runs with Rosenthal tails. The top example has chord symbols $B\flat 9$ and $E\flat Ma$. The bottom example has chord symbols $D7\flat 9$ and $G Ma$. Both examples include fingerings and a “tail” marking.