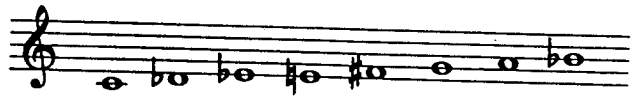
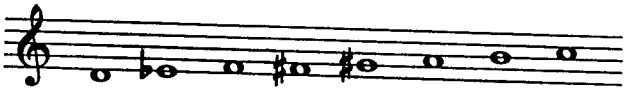
Chopin, diminished scales and jazz

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.





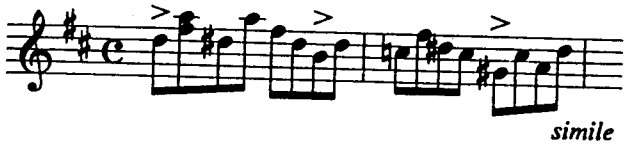
There are only three different diminished scales. Each scale applies to four roots. The four roots are a minor third apart. The diminished scale on C, E♭, G♭ (F#) and A all use the same series of notes. C#, E, G and B♭ (A#) use a second series. D, F, A♭ (G#) and B use the third.

Back in 1830 Chopin was using diminished runs for dazzling effects in his first *Ballade*. (See example below.) This symmetrical run will work over B♭7♭9, D♭7♭9, E7♭9 and G7♭9. You can start the run on any of the roots — B♭, D♭, 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!

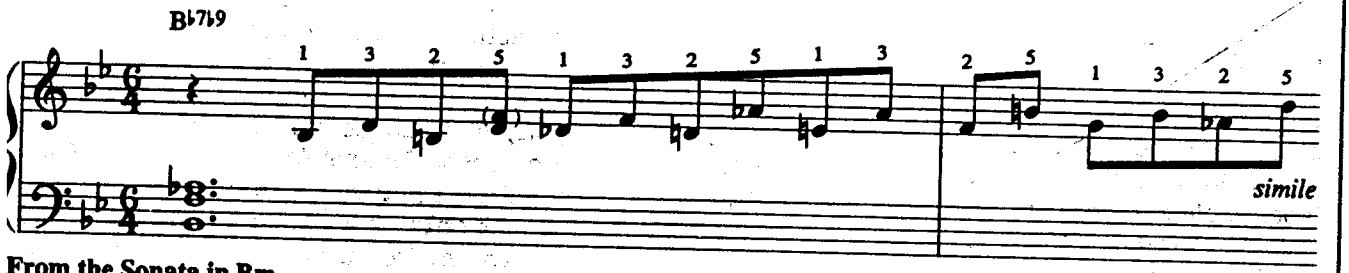
You can change the rhythm

In the B minor *Sonata*, Chopin uses another diminished run. This is in descending groups of sextuplets. This run will works over the following chords: B7♭9, D7♭9, F7♭9 and A♭7♭9. It will also work with Adim, Cdim, E♭dim and G♭dim.

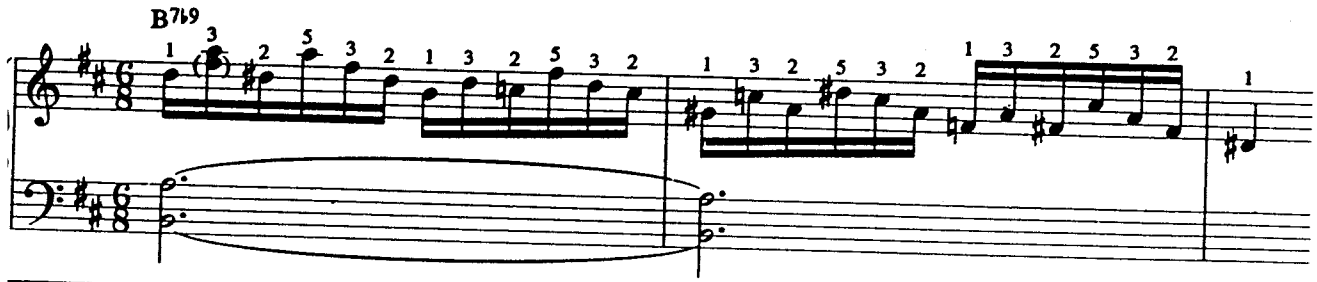
The run can be played as eighth-note triplets in a moderate tempo, or as regular eighth notes in a faster tempo. In the latter, the accents become displaced because it is a six-note pattern being played eight-to-the-bar.



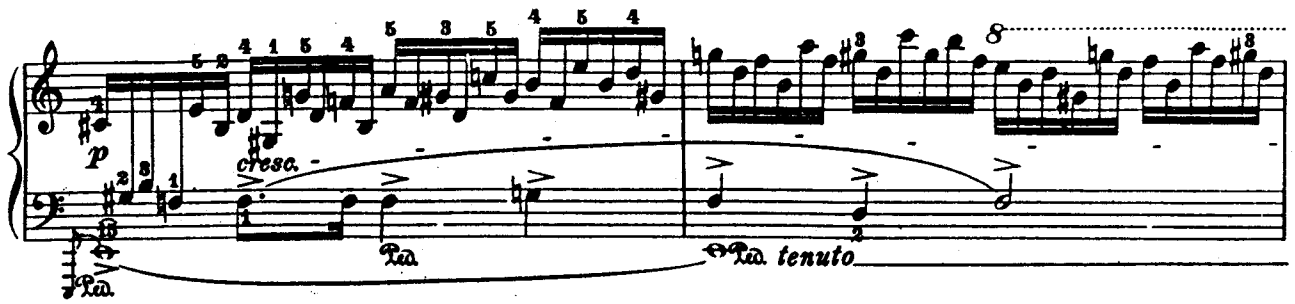
From the Ballade I



From the Sonata in Bm

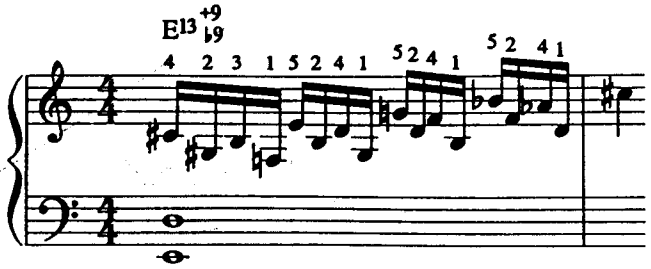


As Chopin wrote it . . .

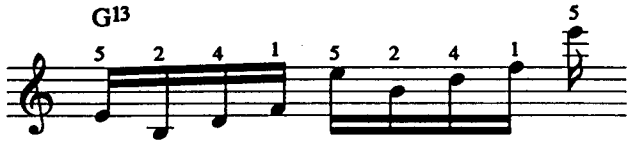


Notice that Chopin is not totally strict and changes a note here and there in his pattern.

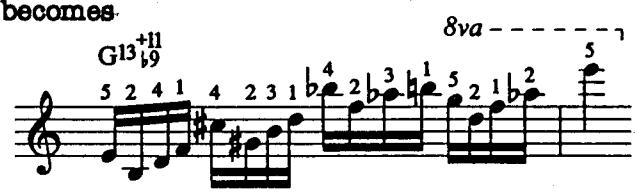
In the *Etude* Op. 25 No. 11, there are also some interesting diminished runs. For example,



This run works over E7, G7, B♭7 and D♭7. Also over **Ddim, Fdim, A♭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.



becomes



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