

Chopin — make him part of your jazz style

Ted Rosenthal

The writer will be featured on an upcoming CTI release with guitarist Jim Hall and alto saxophonist Grover Washington, Jr. Plans are afoot to follow that CD with another led by Rosenthal. Congratulations, Ted!

Frederick Chopin composed some of the great masterpieces of the piano repertoire. From the beautifully lyrical Nocturnes to the technically dazzling Etudes, Chopin made thorough use of the resources of the piano.

The jazz pianist can also make good use of Chopin's idiomatic passagework. Since many of the runs are very pianistic — in other words, fit the hand — they can be adapted into jazz runs by minor melodic or rhythmic alteration. The runs transpose easily and can also be used over different harmonies than were originally intended, creating more chromatic harmony and polychords.

The following excerpts (and other passages you may discover) can be used in two general ways:

- 1) as runs for embellishment (filigree)
- 2) as patterns that form the basis for improvised lines.

Add a note to a triad

In his Etude op.10, no. 8, Chopin based many runs on a triad with one added note. In the following examples, I show an alternate harmony that fits the same run in parentheses.

1

F₇Ma (or E₇Ma7+11)
8va

2

F₇Ma
8va

3

D₇Ma (or G₇13)
8va

4

The last example above is from the F minor Ballade. In the F minor Fantasy, Chopin decorates all three notes of the triad.

5

A similar pattern occurs in the F minor Ballade, this time descending.

6

Etude op. 26, no. 11, also uses runs based on a triad with an added note — in this case an F triad with a sixth (D) — but with a different pattern. I have suggested some alternate (more chromatic) harmonies to go with the following examples.

7

F₆ (or B₇13 or A₁₃13)
8va

8

E (or C₇Ma7+5)
8va

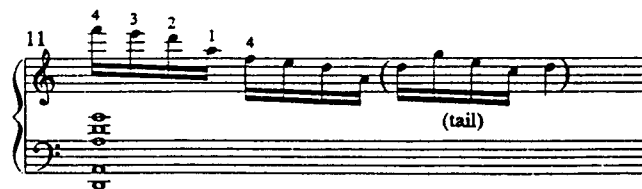


Once you play a pattern more than twice, it will have the effect of an embellishing run or filigree. To adapt these runs for improvisation, I interpolate passing tones, put in connective notes, and/or displace the rhythm. The runs will then sound less "pattern-like." Compare the following to the first two examples.



The listener often remembers phrase endings most of all. By adding a convincing tail (resolution), these passages become even

more useful for improvisation. The next example is based on the Dorian mode. Compare it with the third example above.



This example — a II-V-I in minor — has a more developed tail.



While I can only scratch the surface of Chopin's music in this article, I hope it whets your appetite to look further into the classical repertoire as another way of broadening jazz skills. Next time, we'll look at the diminished scale (yes, way back in the 1830's!) and applications for jazz pianists. ●

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