

Rootless Voicings for Jazz

Bob Keller
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Source

- I learned most of this (except for minor ii-V) from Chris Fitzgerald at the Jamey Aebersold Jazz Workshops. I am grateful to Chris for having worked out a simplified approach.
- They are similar to voicings written out in more detail in the book by Phil de Greg.
- Any mistakes are my own.

What is a "Voicing"?

- Voicing means the way in which the notes of a chord are arranged "vertically" in playing.
- Typically one does not use only the "root position" voicings (1-3-5-7-...), for various reasons:
 - Only using root position means a lot of "parallel" fifths, which sound droning; also, root position, if used exclusively sounds kind of boring.
 - The hand has to move a lot, because the roots of chords often move by 5ths rather than linearly.
 - Only root position chords do not "voice lead" well. Voice leading means the lines that are formed by harmony notes: with good voice leading, they progress smoothly.

What are the types of voicings?

- Rooted voicings: these contain the root, usually as the lowest note.
 - In order to position these low enough and still sound good, one typically drops out notes, such as the 5th and maybe even the 3rd, leaving just the root and 7th.
- Rootless voicings: the main topic here; the root is not included:
 - Tertian voicings: using thirds as the predominant interval; these are discussed in this document.
 - Quartal voicings: using fourths as the predominant interval; these have a more "modern" sound. They are not discussed here however.

Review of Chord Families

- The chords **within** in each line are *somewhat* interchangeable with each other:
 - Major 7, M9, M69, possibly M13#11
 - 7 (dominant), 9, 13, 13#11
 - m7, m9, m11, m13
 - minor with Major 7, minor 69
 - dominant with alterations, tri-tone substitutions
 - diminished, dominant b9 minor 3rd lower
 - m7b5, half-diminished (no equivalent)
 - dominant sus4(= m7 with root 4), e.g. Dm7/G for G7sus4

Rootless Voicings

- Chord voicings that don't include the root.
- Actually physically **easier** than rooted voicings.
- Preferred when playing with a bass player, useable even without one.
- Can be played alone as well, although require some acclimation to the sound.
- To hear the effect if you don't have a bass player, play the bass note with the right hand crossed over, or play the voicing in the right hand and the bass note in the left.

Range (“rules of thumb”)

- Keep the left pinky (lowest note) no lower than D **below** middle C.
- Keep the left thumb (highest note) no higher than A **above** middle C.
- This gives a 1.5 octave range in which to play the rootless voicings.
- Below this the voicings may sound “muddy”, and above “tinny”.

Two-Voicing System

- Each chord will be presented in two voicings, Type A and Type B, depending on which scale degree is lower. These names are arbitrarily chosen to differentiate the two types.
- The choice of which type to use will be governed by range considerations for the progression containing the chords.
- Eventually this all becomes **automatic** and you don't have to think about types, etc.

Note

- If a voicing is too harsh, or sounds muddy, on your piano, even if in recommended range, or is too hard to play, try *leaving out* some notes in this order:
 - 5 (or 6 for dominant)
 - 9
- Try to keep the 3 and 7 (or 6 if a 69 chord) in the voicing as much as possible. These give the chord most of its character.

Replication

- We give the voicings in just one key.
- Ultimately you will want to learn them in **all 12 keys** for maximum proficiency.
- But you can **start** just by learning the ones needed for the tunes that you want to play.

Learning

- The **finger movement patterns** are the same regardless of key.
- You need to learn these patterns more **on the keyboard** than on paper.
- It is not advisable to try to construct the voicings while performing; they need to be **learned** in advance.
- You will need most of your mental capacity for your **soloing** right hand.

Notation

- I am writing the voicings in the treble clef, even though they are played in the left hand when soloing. They may need to be played down an octave to be in the proper range.
- When comping another player, the voicings may be split between the hands and/or opened up more. The current document does not cover two-handed voicings, nor does it cover quartal voicings (voicings based on fourths rather than thirds).

Rootless Voicings for Major

FMaj9 FMaj9

Type A: 3-5-7-9 Type B: 7-9-3-5

Rootless Voicings for Minor

Fm9 Fm9

Type A: b3-5-b7-9 Type B: b7-9-b3-5

Rootless Voicings for Dominant

We substitute the 6 (i.e. 13) for the 5 for a jazzier sound.

F9 (or F13) F9 (or F13)

Type A: 3-6-b7-9 Type B: b7-9-3-6

Things to Notice

- When played in the left hand, the combination pinky & first finger is always either 3-7 or 7-3; the thumb will be 9, 5, or 6.
- Type A voicings have the more "open" sound for major and minor. Type B voicings have the more "open" sound for dominant.

(advanced topic)

Bonus: Voicings for Altered Dominant

Every dominant voicing is also the voicing for an altered dominant having a different root, one a tritone away.

F9 = B7 alt. F9 = B7 alt.

Type B: b7-#9-3-#5 Type A: 3-#5-b7-#9

(advanced topic)

Uses of Altered Dominants

- The altered dominant is used as the V in a minor ii-V-i progression.
- Consequently, it is often seen used as a secondary dominant setting, such as in the I - VI⁷alt - ii - V progression (VI⁷alt = V of ii)

Major ii-V Progression A-B

b7 resolves to 3. Only one finger moves, the one on the 7th. The type changes from A to B.

Type A: b3-5-b7-9 Type B: b7-9-3-6

Major ii-V Progression B-A

b7 resolves to 3. Only one finger moves, the one on the 7th. The type changes from B to A.

Type B: b7-9-b3-6 Type A: b3-5-b7-9

Major V-I Progression, A-B

b7 resolves to 3. Three fingers move. The type changes.

Type B: 3-6-b7-9 Type B: 7-9-3-6

Major V-I Progression, B-A

b7 resolves to 3. Three fingers move. The type changes.

Type B: b7-9-3-6 Type A: 3-5-7-9

Major ii-V-I Progressions

- These simply combine ii-V and V-I with a common middle chord. So they will be type A-B-A or B-A-B.
- For many keys, only one of the two stays within range, so you only have to learn one voicing sequence for the progression.
- The table on the next page tells you which voicings work for which keys. If more than one works, the first one listed is preferred.

Major ii-V-I Progression A-B-A

composite

Type A: b3-5-b7-9 Type B: b7-9-3-6 Type A: 3-5-7-9

Major ii-V-I Progression B-A-B

composite

Fm9 Bb13 EbM9

Type B: Type A: Type B:

b7-9-b3-6 b3-5-b7-9 7-9-3-6

Major ii-V-I Progressions

Key	Progression		Workable voicings	
C	Dm	G7	C	A-B-A or B-A-B
Db	Ebm	Ab7	Db	A-B-A
D	Em	A7	D	A-B-A
Eb	Fm	Bb7	Eb	A-B-A or B-A-B
E	F#m	B7	E	B-A-B or A-B-A
F	Gm	C7	F	B-A-B or A-B-A
Gb	Abm	Db7	Gb	B-A-B
G	Am	D7	G	B-A-B
Ab	Bbm	Eb7	Ab	B-A-B
A	Bm	E7	A	B-A-B
Bb	Cm	F7	Bb	B-A-B or A-B-A
B	C#m	F#7	B	B-A-B or A-B-A

Other Progressions

- If the root steps a 4th or 5th, as in the preceding two progressions, the type of the chord changes.
- Otherwise the type can stay the same.
- For steps of a third, it is the player's discretion whether to change.

(advanced topic)

ii Chord in Minor

- Here we have a minor-7 flat-5 or "half-diminished" chord \emptyset (b3-b5-b7).
- The 9 is problematic, since it is minor in the scale and doesn't always sound good.
- A natural, rather than flat, 9 can sometimes be used.
- We avoid the problem here by using 1 instead of 9 (so technically, this one voicing is not rootless).
- There are other approaches, such as using a 4 instead of a 3, which makes the voicing the same as an altered dominant.

(advanced topic)

V Chord in Minor

- Usually we use a V7b9 or V7alt (= V7#5#9; note that #9 = b3)
- With the V7b9 it is only necessary to move one finger from the ii chord.
- This therefore parallels the ii-V in major.
- There are other possibilities not discussed here.

Minor ii-V Progression A-B

b7 resolves to 3. Only one finger moves, the one on 7. The type changes.

F \emptyset Bb7 b9

Type A: Type B:

b3-b5-b7-1 b7-b9-3-5

Minor ii-V Progression B-A

b7 resolves to 3. Only one finger moves, the one on b7. The type changes.

Type B: b7-1-b3-b5
 Type A: 3-5-b7-b9

Minor V-i

- For i in minor, would typically use one of
 - i minor 6 9, or
 - i minor, Major 7
- minor 69 has the stronger sound
- minor 69 has **same voicings** as a V⁷, but different root, one a 5th below, and with the type switched.
 - example: Fm69 type A voiced the same as Bb7 type B

Minor V-i Progression B-A

b7 resolves to b3. Three fingers move. The type changes.

Type B: b7-b9-3-5
 Type A: b3-5-6-9

Minor V-i Progression A-B

b7 resolves to b3. Three fingers move. The type changes.

Type A: 3-5-b7-b9
 Type B: 6-9-b3-5

Minor ii-V-i Progression A-B-A

composite

Type A: b3-b5-b7-1
 Type B: b7-b9-3-5
 Type A: b3-5-6-9

Reference

- Chris Fitzgerald, *Basic Piano Voicings*, Unpublished handout from Jamey Aebersold Jazz Workshop, July 2000.
- Phil DeGreg, *Jazz Keyboard Harmony*, Jamey Aebersold Jazz, Inc.
- Mark Levine, *The Jazz Theory Book*, Sher Music, Inc.