

Ralph Abelein • Jyrki Tenni

Keyboard Accompaniment and Improvisation

A Handbook of Practical Piano Skills

- accompany songs proficiently
 - harmonize melodies appropriately
 - improvise creatively over chord changes

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Arrangements: Ralph Abelein; Jyrki Tenni

Performers: Ralph Abelein, Pessi Levanto, Jyrki Tenni, Jasse Varpama (piano/keyboards); Henrik Mumm,

Hannu Rantanen (bass); Jartsa Karvonen, Herbert Wachter (drums/percussion)

Recording, mixing, and mastering: Jasse Varpama, Kouvola; Jürgen Treyz, artes Musikproduktion, Esslingen

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Contents

Preface	4	22. Accompaniment Styles in 12/8 Time	64
How to Use This Book	5	23. Disco	66
About Practical Piano Skills	6	24. Waltz	68
I Getting Started	7	25. Country	69
1. A Few Musical Experiments	8	26. Preliminary Exercises for Bossa Nova	70
2. Exercises for Rhythm and Independence	13	27. Bossa Nova	72
II Preliminary Exercises	15	28. Samba	74
3. My First Accompaniments	16	VII Harmonizing a Melody	75
4. Chord Inversions	19	29. Basic Harmonic Functions	76
III Chords and Chord Progressions	21	30. Basic Chord Substitutions	78
5. Chord Types and Chord Symbols	22	31. Secondary Dominant Chords	80
6. Scale Degrees and Chord Types in Major Keys	24	32. More Ideas for Harmonization	84
7. More Chords	26	33. Harmonization Exercises	86
8. Cadences and Chord Progressions	28	VIII Combining Melody, Chords, and Bass	89
IV Accompaniment Patterns	37	34. Combining Melody and Bass	90
9. Accompaniment Patterns for Pop and Rock Grooves	38	35. Adding Chord Tones to the Melody and Bass	93
10. Alternate Bass	41	36. Playing a Rhythmic Accompaniment with Melody and Bass	98
11. Various Alternate Bass Accompaniments	43	IX Blues	103
12. The Tonal Circle of Fifths in Minor Keys	46	37. The Blues Scale and Blues Form	104
V Improvisation	49	38. Different Blues Accompaniments	106
13. Ideas for Improvising	50	39. Walking Bass and Boogie-Woogie	108
14. Melodic Variations	51	40. More Blues Accompaniments	110
15. Improvising over a Chord Progression I	52	X Appendix	111
16. Improvising over a Chord Progression II	53	Tips for Improvising	112
VI More Accompaniment Styles	55	Intervals	113
17. Tango	56	Scales	114
18. Cha-Cha-Cha	58	Keys and the Circle of Fifths	115
19. More Latin Styles	60	The Harmonic Series	116
20. Swing Feel	61	Chord Symbols	117
21. Beats and Off-Beats in Swing Feel	62	Variations in Notation	122
		Augmented and Diminished Chords	123
		Overview of Accompaniment Patterns	124
		Glossary	133
		Answer Key	136

Preface

Dear Reader,

Have you been taking piano lessons? Can you play without sheet music or from chord symbols? Can you accompany songs by ear?

If you feel that you would like to develop more practical piano skills, this textbook is for you. It's the ultimate collection of ideas for keyboard accompaniment and improvisation, patterns and practical applications, as well as chord progressions. There are exercises for rhythmic development, hand independence, understanding rules of harmonization, creating variations, along with a lot of practical tips and songs to apply your new skills. At the end of the book you'll find a unique step-by-step guide on how to play melody, chord tones, and bass together.

This textbook has been designed to enable you to

- gain freedom from written piano arrangements;
- learn how to play from chord symbols;
- accompany songs in different styles;
- discover how to improvise and how to practice improvising;
- understand and apply the basic principles of harmonization.

Our book is designed to guide you on your adventure of musical discovery. Enjoy your journey and playing!

Ralph and Jyoti

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1. A Few Musical Experiments

- ◆ Listen to the audio tracks.
- ◆ Try to feel the rhythmic pulse precisely. Play a few strong notes at a time and make sure that you have a clear and firm touch.
- ◆ Follow the instructions as described below.
- ◆ Play without the right pedal (sustain pedal).

Black Keys

Using just the black keys on the piano, close your eyes and play along freely to the audio track.



Try and develop little phrases like this:



White Keys

Now improvise with white keys over the play-along track. Play short, rhythmic phrases without using the pedal. Develop shorter and longer phrases.



Tip

Sing what you play. This will make your phrases sound much livelier!

◆ Exercise

- Feel completely free to play any notes you like. You can think up a story or imagine a picture. Express the story or the situation on the piano!
- Repeat the exercise, this time using the audio track.
- Play together with a partner and react to what he or she is playing. Come up with your partner's idea by repeating or varying it, or just play something of your own.



Close your eyes while playing or, if you prefer, close your eyes!

The image shows a musical score with several staves. The first staff has a treble clef, a 6/4 time signature, and a tempo marking of 598. It includes dynamics like *ff* and *smf*, and markings like *leggiero* and *nat.*. The second staff has a treble clef and includes *sfz*, *mf*, and *nat.*. The third staff has a treble clef and includes *sfz*, *senza sord.*, and *leggiero*. The fourth staff has a bass clef and includes *mf* and *solo*. The score is overlaid with a large 'SAMPLE' watermark and the website 'www.helbling.com'.

You can find more tips for improvising on page 112. If you want to delve more deeply into improvisation, please go to chapter V (page 49 and onwards) which is devoted exclusively to this topic.

My First Piece

Now play your first song.

- a) First practice the piano accompaniment. In section B the chords in the right hand are broken up into an eighth-note pattern. In addition, a new inversion has been used in the last two bars.

See page 19 for more on inversions.



A

B

- b) Think up a melody to go with this chord sequence pattern and sing it while playing.

Accompany *Rivers of Babylon*, *Auld Lang Syne*, *Blowin' in the Wind*, and *Leaving on a Jet Plane* in this workbook for other songs which contain only the chords used here.

Exercises on Cadences

- a) Complete the cadence starting with the given inversions (see page 29 for more on this).
Play the progressions on the piano.

root position

F B \flat C7 F

I IV V7 I

first inversion

F B \flat C7 F

IV V I

second inversion

F B \flat C7

I IV V7 I

Play each progression slowly and many times over so that you learn how each chord both feels and sounds.

- b) Transpose the examples above into different keys. Do this directly on the piano without writing out the cadences for yourself.
- c) Play the cadence several times together with the play-along, using different chord inversions. Begin like the play-along.

audio 16



B \flat C7 F

15. Improvising over a Chord Progression I

The starting point for an improvisation could be a particular harmonic progression. Maybe you need a separate part to accompany a melody to be played, for instance, by violin, or trumpet. Use the chords and the melody line of the theme below to make up different accompanying parts. The examples here may also give you ideas.

Theme

Musical notation for the Theme in 4/4 time. The melody consists of quarter notes: C4, F4, C4, G4, F4, E4, D4. Chords above are C, F, C, Am7, Dm7.

Supporting Voice

Musical notation for the Supporting Voice in 4/4 time. The accompaniment consists of half notes: C4, F4, C4, G4, F4, E4, D4. Chords above are C, F, C, Am7, Dm7, G7, C.

A high violin part could be used with long note durations and sixth, octave, and tenth intervals over the melody of the theme.

Embellished Theme

Musical notation for the Embellished Theme in 4/4 time. The melody consists of eighth-note patterns: C4-F4-C4-G4, F4-E4-D4, G4-F4-E4-D4, C4. Chords above are C, F, Am7, Dm7, G7, C.

A flute could weave around the melody using arpeggiated chords, eighth-note patterns, and passing notes as an embellishing accompaniment.

Counter-Melody

Musical notation for the Counter-Melody in 4/4 time. The counter-melody consists of quarter notes: C4, F4, C4, G4, F4, E4, D4. Chords above are C, Am7, Dm7, G7, C.

One idea for a trumpet part would be a rhythmically independent counter-melody that complements the theme.

Tip

Imagine different instruments playing and let this inspire your improvising.

18. Cha-Cha-Cha



The cha-cha-cha is a Latin American dance from the 1950s. The piano plays accented staccato chords in the right hand and contrasting legato bass phrases in the left. The rhythm in a band will use a cowbell throughout to emphasize the very clear quarter-note pulse.

Play accented staccato eighth notes in the right hand.

In ii–V progressions, the seventh resolves into the third, which is most clearly emphasized in the upper part. The resulting motion can continue on the i chord, if it's played as an m7–m6 progression.

Cha-Cha-Cha

Cha-cha-cha is often based on ii–V progressions. In the following example, these first appear in a minor key, and then move in the next measure to a major key (here C minor and E-flat major).

audio 33



Accompany songs like *Sway* or *Oye Como Va* using this style.

24. Waltz

Slow Waltz

On the audio track you can hear the following pattern played in swing eighth notes but you can also play it in even eighth notes. You can use this pattern to accompany *The Last Waltz* (swing eighth notes) or *Moon River* (even eighth notes).



Chords: Fmaj7, Em7, Dm7, F/G, Cmaj7, C6

Jazz Waltz

You can use this pattern to accompany *Mr. Bojangles* (Sammy Davis Jr.) or jazz standards in 3/4 time such as *Somebody's My Prince Will Come*. Make up your own variations with the play-along.



Chords: Dm9, G7, Cmaj9, Am9

Viennese Waltz

Viennese waltzes are very fast and each bar is perceived as a beat (a dotted half note is approximately 60 bpm). You can accompany *Wiener Blut* (Viennese Blood), *The Blue Danube*, and other waltzes in this way.



Chords: D, A7, F°7, A7

26. Preliminary Exercises for Bossa Nova

Bossa nova originated through the blending of Brazilian samba with jazz. A strongly syncopated rhythm is combined with the colorful harmonies typical of jazz.

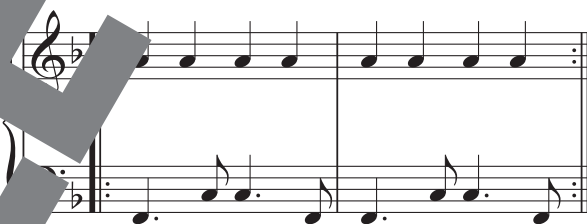
Beat/Off-Beat Pattern with Latin Bass

One characteristic feature of bossa nova is a bass pattern consisting of the second and fifth in a dotted rhythm. This rhythm has to be maintained steadily when patterns of beats and off-beats are added in the right hand.

- a) Begin with the left hand. Notice that the eighth notes anticipate beats 1 and 3.



- b) Add quarter notes in the right hand.



- c) Now begin the series of quarter notes an eighth note earlier in order to create syncopation. Make sure you play very evenly: play all of the notes in the same tempo and without accents, as if you would play the quarter notes.



audio 54



The audio track illustrates these exercises. Play along with it!

- Play these exercises rhythmically on your knees!
- Start with half notes in your left hand!
- The length of the note is not affected by whether it occurs on the beat or is syncopated.

Practice switching beats and off-beats in your right hand. Tap quarter notes on the beat for two bars, followed by two bars with quarter notes on the off-beat. Make sure you can switch fluently from one to the other. The left hand should tap the dotted bass pattern along to it.

31. Secondary Dominant Chords

You can also use non-diatonic chords (i.e., chords not related to the key) to harmonize a melody. By using secondary dominant chords, you can emphasize the resolution to a new chord.

! You can find a secondary dominant chord by constructing a dominant seventh chord a perfect fifth above the target chord (i.e., the following chord).

For example, you can play a C7 chord (the dominant of F) before an F chord, no matter what key the tune is written in.

Musical notation in 4/4 time showing a chord progression: C (I), F (IV), C (I), C7 (I), F (IV), C (I). The C7 chord is highlighted with a grey oval. Roman numerals are written below the notes.

The most frequently encountered secondary dominant chord is the dominant of the dominant. For example, if you're in the key of C major, you can insert the D7 before the dominant chord G7.

Musical notation in 4/4 time showing a chord progression: C (I), V7 (V7), C (I), D7 (V7/V), G (V), G7 (V7), C (I). The D7 chord is highlighted with a grey oval. Roman numerals are written below the notes.

You can also use secondary dominants to switch back and forth between relative keys (major and minor) with the same key signature.

From major to minor ... from minor to major

Musical notation in 4/4 time showing a chord progression: E7 (V7), Am (vi), Am (vi), G7 (V7), C (I). The G7 chord is highlighted with a grey oval. Roman numerals are written below the notes.