

Rootless Voicings for Jazz

Bob Keller

September 2004

Source

- I originally learned most of this 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:
 - Using only 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.
 - Using only root position chords does 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. They are most often used for "open" 2-handed voicings.
- **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 fourth 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, Major9, Major69, possibly Major13#11
 - 7 (dominant), 9, 13, 13#11
 - minor7, minor9, minor11, minor13

Rootless Voicings

- Chord voicings that don't include the root.
- 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 3 and Type 7, depending on which scale degree (3rd or 7th) is lowest in the voicing.
- The choice of which type to use will be governed by range considerations for the progression containing the chords and by voice leading.
- 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 13 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.
- It is more important to learn these patterns **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).

Notes

- In studying voicings you will want to make up **mnemonic patterns** to help you remember how to construct the voicings.
- Example: Use the intervals between selected notes.
-

Rootless Voicings for Major

The diagram illustrates two rootless voicings for the F Major 9th chord (FMaj9) on a treble clef staff. The notes are represented by circles on the staff lines.

FMaj9

9
M7
5
3

Type 3:
3-5-7-9

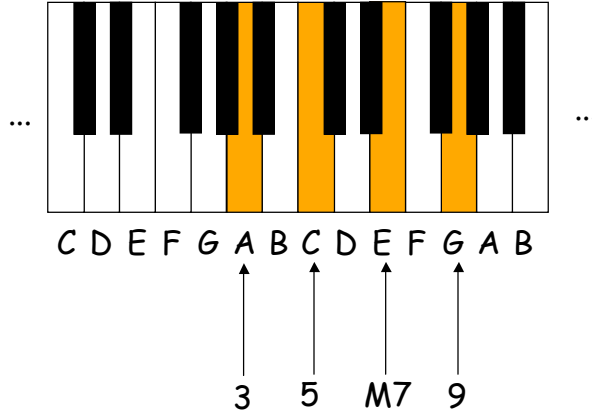
FMaj9

5
3
9
M7

Type 7:
7-9-3-5

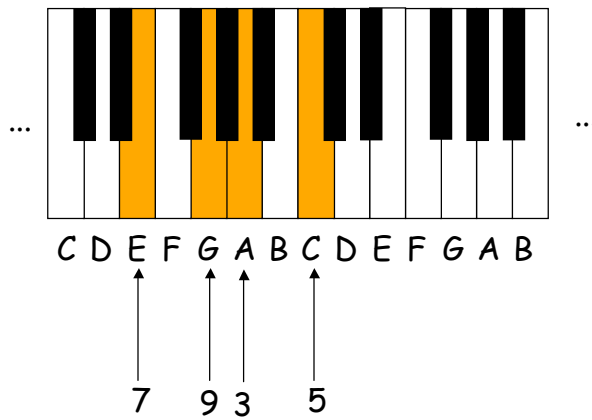
FM9 voicing, Type 3

C# D# F# G# A# C# D# F# G# A#



FM9 voicing, Type 7

C# D# F# G# A# C# D# F# G# A#



Rootless Voicings for Minor

Fm9 Fm9

Type 3:
 b3-5-b7-9

Type 7:
 b7-9-b3-5

Fm9 voicing, Type 3

C# D# F# G# A# C# D# F# G# A#

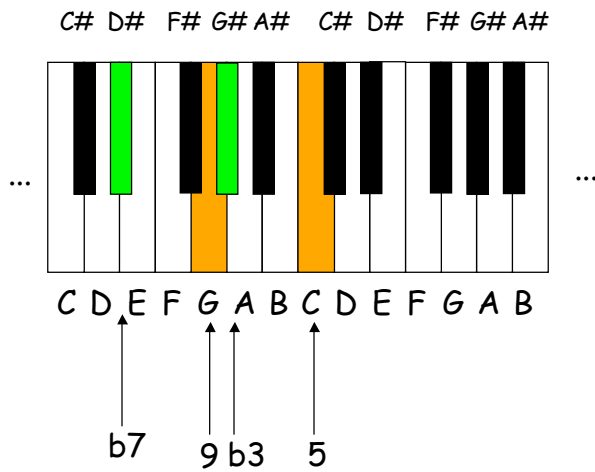
... ...

C D E F G A B C D E F G A B

↑ ↑ ↑ ↑

b3 5 m7 9

Fm9 voicing, Type 7



Rootless Voicings for Dominant

We substitute the 13 (i.e. 6) for the 5 for a *jazzier* sound. The 5 is dispensable.

F13 F13

9
b7
13

13

3
9
b7

Type 3:
3-13-b7-9

Type 7:
b7-9-3-13

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 13.
- Type 3 voicings have the more "open" sound for major and minor.
- Type 7 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.

F13 = B7 alt.

F13 = B7 alt.

The diagram shows two altered dominant voicings on a treble clef staff. The first voicing, labeled 'Type 7', has a key signature of one flat (Bb) and notes on the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th lines, labeled #5, 3, #9, and b7. The second voicing, labeled 'Type 3', has a key signature of two flats (Bbb) and notes on the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 4th lines, labeled #9, b7, #5, and 3.

Type 7:

b7-#9-3-#5

Type 3:

3-#5-b7-#9

Another Bonus

- The voicings for a dominant are also those for a **minor 69** chord (discussed later).
- So every one of the dominant voicings can be used 3 different ways, with 3 different roots.

(advanced topic)

Uses of Altered Dominants

- The altered dominant is used as the V in a minor $\text{IIIm-V}^7\text{-i}$ progression.
- Consequently, it is often seen used as a *secondary* dominant setting, such as in the $\text{I - VI}^7\text{alt - IIIm - V}^7$ progression ($\text{VI}^7\text{alt} = \text{V of IIIm}$)

Major IIm-V Progression 3-7

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

Fm9 Bb13

9 13

b7 3

5 9

b3 b7

Type 3: Type 7:

b3-5-b7-9 b7-9-3-13

Major IIm-V Progression 7-3

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

Fm9 Bb13

5 9

b3 b7

9 13

b7 3

Type 7: Type 3:

b7-9-b3-5 b3-13-b7-9

Major II-V-I Progressions

- These simply combine II-V and V-I with a common middle chord. So they will be type 3-7-3 or 7-3-7.
- 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 3-7-3

The diagram shows a treble clef with a key signature of one flat (B-flat major). It illustrates a Major II-V-I progression in 3-7-3 voicing:

- Chord 1: Fm9** (Type 3: b3-5-b7-9). Fingerings: 9 (top), b7 (middle), 5 (bottom), b3 (bottom).
- Chord 2: Bb13** (Type 7: b7-9-3-13). Fingerings: 13 (top), 3 (middle), 9 (bottom), b7 (bottom).
- Chord 3: EbM9** (Type 3: 3-5-7-9). Fingerings: 9 (top), M7 (middle), 5 (bottom), 3 (bottom).

Red arrows indicate the voice leading between the chords:

- From Fm9 to Bb13: 9 to 13, b7 to 3, 5 to 9, b3 to b7.
- From Bb13 to EbM9: 13 to 9, 3 to M7, 9 to 5, b7 to 3.

Major II-V-I Progression 7-3-7

composite

Fm9 Bb13 EbM9

Type 7: Type 3: Type 7:

b7-9-b3-5 b3-13-b7-9 7-9-3-5

Major ii-V-I Progressions

Key	Progression			Workable voicings
C	Dm	G7	C	3-7-3 or 7-3-7
Db	Ebm	Ab7	Db	3-7-3
D	Em	A7	D	3-7-3
Eb	Fm	Bb7	Eb	3-7-3 or 7-3-7
E	F#m	B7	E	7-3-7 or 3-7-3
F	Gm	C7	F	7-3-7 or 3-7-3
Gb	Abm	Db7	Gb	7-3-7
G	Am	D7	G	7-3-7
Ab	Bbm	Eb7	Ab	7-3-7
A	Bm	E7	A	7-3-7
Bb	Cm	F7	Bb	7-3-7 or 3-7-3
B	C#m	F#7	B	7-3-7 or 3-7-3

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.

Reference

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