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Tips for Keyboardists

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Focusing On The Negative

by Kevin Young

I once had a teacher tear a chart away from me in the middle of an improv class. To be fair I wasn't really using it that effectively anyway. I'd known the song would be part of the class for just under a week, had plenty of time to run through it and get the changes in my hands, but hadn't bothered. In fact, the first time I'd looked at it was when I put it in front of me and started to play. I don't remember the song, but I do remember that although it included a fair number of altered chords, it wasn't terribly harmonically complex.



Long story short: After relieving me of the chart, the teacher spat a couple of chords and a scale source at me and told me to stop thinking about what I was doing and just play. Needless to say, once I stopped obsessing over what I didn't know, things went far more smoothly.

It wasn't that the chart was hard. It wasn't that it was beyond my understanding or capabilities to follow it. It was that I got so caught up on hitting every change, playing the head and adding in some fiddly bits here and there that I'd stopped listening to

anyone else. I still have a tendency to overplay at times, but I've become much better at whittling parts down to size.

The empty spaces you choose to leave open are equally important to what notes you choose to play. When stripping your parts down, try to pay attention to the space between the notes. When you do, two things happen: first, you start to listen to other players more effectively and lock into the overall feel. Secondly, you begin to have a clearer idea of what you can add, how you can glue it to other players' parts, and give yourself somewhere to go should you want to ramp up the intensity somewhere in the song, or take over as the main rhythmic component in a break down.

In addition to allowing more room overall this tends to help un-clutter the mid range. This doesn't necessarily mean your parts have to be completely gutted – just take some time to listen to what you're doing from an external perspective. Sometimes we get so into what we're playing, we forget to take a breath and listen critically to ourselves to see what the arrangement actually needs, instead of what we naturally like to add. Doing so can force us out of our comfort zone, open up new possibilities, and lead to some fresh technique and licks.

It can also allow you more room to play around with the actual parameters of the sound, to manipulate it using effects, EQ, and on-board controllers, leading to your creating unique signature sounds and expanding your technique on whatever device you're using.

Bear in mind that the intent of the part might be right, there just might be too much of it – making it overbearing as opposed to complimentary and supportive. There are a number of ways to strip your part down without losing the essence of what you're trying to do...

1. Use time dependant effects or play with the sound's envelope, or other parameters to create movement that supports the overall groove or intent of the song.

2. If the tune is particularly dense harmonically, and you're playing big stacks of chords, then back off a bit. Try different voicings that reinforce the melody. Or add an extension that works across multiple chords in the progression, or across an entire section of the song.

3. If you're playing something rhythmically complex that's interfering with a signature line, an essential part of the groove, or the melody, retool it to lock into one of those elements by altering your note choices, voicing, or notes that clutter the mid and low range. Drop the left hand, or change the register, or go to a sound that's not as thick. If you're trying to lock in with a particularly intricate rhythm, ditch the clutter and focus on what you need to play to stay locked. Simplify what you're playing so that the rhythmic, harmonic, or melodic movement is implied, rather than grabbing every key within reach.

Remember too, that you can simplify without playing less. Paying attention to space can also mean playing more notes...

A long, held pad, or nailing the changes with series of pads and an overbearing sound can make the arrangement sound like it's sinking in muck. Opt for a less dense sound, without a terribly strong attack and play a repeating pattern over the changes can add a similar degree of tension without bogging the whole arrangement down.

That said, sometimes what a piece needs is a big texture – something that, like a well crafted B3 part, fits well in the mix, disappearing and then reappearing as naturally as breathing, or a piano part that chugs along with the low end, adding depth and texture. Depending on the style and the instrumentation, sometimes the best strategy is to stay out of the way by getting right in the thick of things.

Kevin Young is a Toronto-based keyboardist, known for his playing with David Usher and Moist, among others.

Speaking Out From Deep In The Mix

By Kevin Young

So dark, so cold, so very lonely... There's nothing less satisfying than writing what you think is a tasty string arrangement or a kick ass lead and having it end up under a heap of guitars, deep in the mix, so drenched in effects you can't tell what instrument it is anymore.

Even when keys are playing a major role in a song, they still act as support for other instruments. Naturally, no one likes ending up on the bottom of the pile in the mix, but when you're layering a mess of pads, sequences and orchestral instruments, you are, by definition, the background. As strange as it sounds, your job is to almost disappear, to propel the song along by adding texture as the form progresses, but still to stay out of the way. That said it's still possible to do quite a bit of damage from back there, in terms of coming up with something that's integral to the song. In order to make a meaningful contribution from the depths, though, you have to be just as discerning about sounds and orchestration as if you were right out front.

Just because it's easier than ever to generate complex, stage-ready orchestrations in minutes, that doesn't always mean you should. Capturing the fresh, just-written feel of a new tune, on record, starts with serving the song...

If you have an arrangement that already works live, start from there. How much you can add in keyboard world should depend on the level of production and the amount of orchestration the track really needs. Stick with lean lines and key instruments until you get a good skeleton recorded. Even if your parts are less refined than you'd like, they may be contributing something that the mix would be much poorer without.

As opposed to always looking for a hook that stands out, look for elements that support the vocal line and other instrumental hooks – or for a secondary hook that's compelling, but understated. Simpler parts sometimes sing out more effectively. Listen carefully to how your parts fit against others – not just in terms of timing and melodic support, but whether the overall sound is appropriate.

There's nothing wrong with trying to beat other parts, or up the bar for the

track with a really stand out arrangement or lead hook, but beware of stepping all over signature lines already covered by other instruments. When you're trying to make your point from the back of the mix, it's better to choose relatively few sounds than to obliterate any chance you have of being heard with dense orchestral parts. Huge pads and orchestral instruments can make a track unnecessarily gooey.

When multiple layers are needed, choose carefully, with an eye to making the track sound as immediate as it did when you first heard it. Sometimes the sounds you used on a demo or in pre pro



grow on you in a way that makes them very difficult to replace. If you lose the plot and find yourself chasing a demo, break your part down and lose the fat. Use only what you need to make your point – deep layers are great live to imply the weight of a dense track, but to get the same effect on record, less is often more.

Sometimes the sounds most true to the original acoustic, or electro-acoustic instruments aren't the best choice. The piano patch you use live may not sound as rich as the real thing, but it may sit in the mix more satisfyingly than a true 9' grand. The same goes for big pads, bossy percussive sounds, and

heavily effected "ensemble" patches that work live, but might benefit from being stripped of unnecessary effects, then recorded individually to create the same effect.

Although a project's sound is more likely to be defined by vocals or principal instruments, everything contributes to the overall sound. No matter how many parts you record, or how dense the orchestration, consistency is important. Stretching out to find or create sounds that are completely unique is important, but whether your sounds are unique or not, using a set of basic building blocks helps to create a signature sound and to maintain consistency over the course of a record. It also saves you time searching for sounds in the studio, and makes for fewer surprises for sound engineers when you do drag your record kicking and screaming onto the stage.

When you do you'll likely find it far easier to capture the feel you want live than it was to capture it in the studio. Of course there are no guarantees...

Sometimes what works in the studio just doesn't fly in a more volatile live environment. In some cases it's impossible to avoid running track, but in others, maintaining the freedom to play and/or trigger individual elements can make for a more entertaining show for both you and the audience. Remember that the temporary life a song has on stage allows you and your band to step out, and stand out, as players. It's one thing to create something in the studio, over a period of days, but quite another to show you can make something equally compelling of it on the fly. Besides, if everything starts going to hell on stage, it doesn't help to be dragged into the abyss by an out-of-synch backing track or a time-dependant sample.

Either way, if you opt to run track, add players, or juggle a mess of keyboards to pull off tricky orchestrations, remember that serving the song is as important live as it is on record. Whether you're taking an arrangement into the studio, or laying it out live for the first time, giving some serious thought as to how to do so seamlessly will save you time and frustration.

Kevin Young is a Toronto-based keyboardist, known for his playing with David Usher and Moist, among others.

Scales Sources And Chord Stacks For Fluency

by Kevin Young

A teacher once told me that technique – scales, arpeggios and the like – were the building blocks of music, the “meat and potatoes.” To me they seemed more like stumbling blocks, the lima beans, creamed turnip, and squash of music. You may learn them to forget them, but going back to old exercises is a great way to warm up before performing and grow your chops. Revisiting technique should be far less painful than when you first started playing.

Every parameter of an exercise should have a purpose, not just for increasing physical fluency, but reinforcing understanding of theory and training your ear.

You can do the following two exercises at any point in your practice regimen, but I find them to be a good place to start a practice session – right after warming up with a few scales, or a favourite drill to loosen up.

Start simply – major scales and diatonic 7th chords.

Ex. 1 – Chromatic Chords

The idea of this exercise is to get a variety of chord shapes in both your hands and ears.

Pick a chord shape and a starting point. For our purposes we'll use Cmaj7.

A) Play the chord shape, in both hands, in block chords through two complete octaves, ascending chromatically...

Cmaj7 – C#maj7 – Dmaj7... and so on.

Then descending...

Cmaj7 – Bmaj7 – Bbmaj7... back to the Cmaj7 starting point.

B) Repeat the same sequence again, in both hands, but with arpeggiated chords.

Ascending...

C – E – G – B, C# – F – G# – B#, D – F# – A – C#...

And descending...

B – G – E – C, A# – F# – F# – B, A – F – D – Bb ...

Repeat the entire sequence, alternating

between A) solid, and B) arpeggiated five to 10 times before moving on.

C) The object is to make movement between chords fluent and effortless. If moving some chords in the chromatic scale is more difficult than others on the first pass, isolate those places next time through.

For example, if you're tentative between Emaj7 and F#maj7 run over the problem area before moving on, like so...

||: Emaj7 – Fmaj7 :|| – ||: Fmaj7 – F#maj7 :|| – ||: F#maj7 – Fmaj7 – Emaj7 :||

Continue up the scale chromatically when the problem area is fluid. When four-part major chords are fluent continue on to other chord shapes built from the root – Minor 7^{ths}, dominant 7^{ths}, half-diminished chords, 6 chords, sus 9s, 6/9 and so on.

Ex. 2 – Diatonic Chords

The idea of this exercise is to increase fluency in moving between various chord shapes within a given key.

Again, start simply, major scales, their modes, and diatonic chords. For this exercise begin in the key of G^b major and move through the cycle of fifths...

G^b, D^b, A^b, E^b, B^b, F, C, G, D, A, E, B, F#

A) Begin by playing the G^b major scale, then each mode in G^b major, in two or more octaves, ascending and descending.

B) Play the diatonic chords in the scale, in sequence, in two or more octaves, ascending and then descending...

G^bmaj7 – A^bmin7 – B^bmin7 – C^bmaj7 – D^b7 – E^bmin7 – Fmin7 (b5) – G^bmaj7

As in Ex. 1, alternate between solid and arpeggiated chords, playing each two or more octave sequence five to 10 times.

C) Again, the object is to make movement between chords fluent and effortless. If moving between some chords is more difficult than others on the first pass, isolate those places in the next time through and run back and forth over the problem area



until movement is fluent, as in Ex. 1 (C).

Start all exercises at a tempo that's comfortable to you and allows you to play evenly, without pausing, or jumping on some notes more than others. As an alternate pattern of movement for Ex. 2 (B) instead of simply moving up and down the scale substitute the Cycle of fourths. For example, in C major...

C maj7 – F maj7 – B min7 (b5) – E min7 – A min7 – D min7 – G7 – C maj7

When chord stacks built on roots become fluid move on to the first, second, and third inversions of the diatonic chords.

If the scales and chord shapes in these drills are already familiar, replace them with scales and shapes that aren't – minor harmonic and melodic scales, Pentatonics, altered, or composite scale sources. Your starting point depends on your level of playing.

Wherever you start this is a good way to cement chord movement and harmonic relationships in both hands and your head.

This exercise should be ongoing. Its natural progression will eventually lead you to ever more altered chords, and hybrid scale sources. Take your time.

Kevin Young is a Toronto-based keyboardist and freelance writer, known for his playing with David Usher and Moist, among others.

Locking Down Parts On The Fly

by Kevin Young

Some gigs call for you to lock down a defined part quickly – particularly if you’re just stepping in for a one-off, or working on a live project where the principal is trying to step away from what they’ve recorded already. Sometimes this is due to the recording being too complex to pull off with the players available, or because they want to try completely different arrangements or instrumentation. Either way, the challenge is picking an appropriate part out of thin air that meets or beats what the composer/songwriter hears in his/her head.

Bear in mind that I’m not talking about simply comping along in the style, but developing signature parts and synth textures that are unique, yet don’t get in the way. Your job is to make it look easy, sound great, and be the player that gets the call back next time out.

While there are no hard rules, here are a few tips to consider if you’re under the gun for time, and not terribly familiar with a project...



1. Don’t get married to your own brilliance – throwing the kitchen sink at a song rarely works when you have limited rehearsal time. Regardless of whether you’re rehearsing live or run-

ning over recorded material, be critical and listen to your part from the perspective of another player, as if you had to play along with it.

2. Start small with simple hooks and lean textures – if a melody or sound isn’t working covering it up with more stuff isn’t likely to help. Don’t cover crap with crap and hope you’ll eventually strike gold.

3. Give some thought to your role – are you filling in for orchestral elements? Running samples? Adding piano comps? Your role as a sideman depends heavily on what the musical director or songwriter needs, but if you go in with clear ideas and a defined concept you can easily communicate to the rest of the band you’re farther ahead.

4. With many potential sound sources available it’s easy to get into the weeds. If you’re uncertain where to start in terms of sounds go for something complimentary rather than a radical departure – if there are pre-recorded keys already on record choose something similar and step out from there. If not, go with an instrument that would be immediately at home in the arrangement. Better yet, ask for direction. At the least you’ll get a sense for the way the bandleader likes to work.

5. Have more “out there” solutions close at hand – a ready library of your own unique sounds to dig into, in addition to a mix of pads, leads, vintage keys, and orchestral sounds. The more quickly and fluidly you can move through ideas and sonic treatments, the more you look like just the right variety of mad scientist for the gig.

6. Still, serve the track – don’t immediately go for the wackiest sound you have. Favour sounds that fit into the style and parts that support the principal melody rhythmically, melodically, or harmonically.

7. Support the vocal and don’t fill space for the sake of doing so – it’s not always about blazing fills and big chord stacks. Sometimes a simple line, an octave shot, or drilling a single piano note is more

than enough. Focus on locking rhythmically to the track’s fundamental groove and melodically to repeating riffs or vocal hooks.

8. When you’re using big synth sounds or heavily effected electro-acoustic patches remember that sounds that pulse along with the song are often more welcome than unnecessary swirl, and overbearing parts and pads. Subtle, defined, time-dependent effects are most impressive when they’re not drenched in chorus and reverb.

9. Be flexible. Have a few different treatments at the ready. In the situation described at the beginning of this column chances are the other players are also experimenting and improvising. If you are inadvertently stepping on another player’s toes, step off. Being the guy who digs in and refuses to budge is a sure way to kill a collaborative vibe and lose the gig.

10. One note solo – cheap, fast and dirty. Not to mention ideal for fitting in a meaningful part into a particularly dense orchestration, or when others are overplaying. A single synth note, or interval, common or complimentary to the chord movement, held across a progression and manipulated by turning effects on and off, adjusting the filter or amp envelope. Simple. Steady. Occasionally it’s this kind of treatment that steals the show for a song.

11. Finally, don’t be afraid to step out – diplomatically and while showing respect to other players. Doing what’s expected of you isn’t always enough, step up and let your potential show. If nothing else, the reaction you get may give you a sense of whether this is a gig you’d want to do long term, or will have had enough of at the end of your first show.

Kevin Young is a Toronto, ON-based keyboardist and freelance writer.

Where Are The Keys?

A Primer On Making Your Keyboards Cut Through The Mix

Part I

by Andrew Craig

It seems like a common complaint among keyboardists: we're never quite loud enough in the live mix. I can't count the number of times that I've gone to see bands perform, bands that feature some of the country's brightest keyboard players, and wished I could actually hear what the keyboardists were doing. Then of course, there are the occasions when I was the keyboard player on the bandstand, and I'd spot a colleague of mine cupping his hand behind his ear while looking pointedly at me - signaling that once again, my work wasn't being represented in the mix.

So why has it become common that keyboard players are left out in the cold? To me, it comes down to a few factors:

- stage amplification
- programming skills
- relationships with front-of-house (FOH) engineers
- orchestrational thinking

Let me talk about each of these for a bit.

My Stack Don't Say Marshall

On stage, drummers, guitar players, and bass players tend to have the advantage. Acoustic drums tend to cut through no matter what, and manufacturers have spent years developing guitar and bass amps that can match the power of acoustic drums while giving players a range of tone choices. Only recently have manufacturers really applied themselves to making decent keyboard amps. I encourage you to invest in a good-quality amp, so you don't have to rely on monitors for your sound. Be discerning! Try amps out in the store by listening to the sounds with high-fidelity headphones first, then through the amp, and listen for the differences. In some situations, having your own stage sound is the difference between being heard some or not at all.



FOH Engineer: Give Props To The Man

The FOH engineer is the performer's last buffer before the sound hits the audience, whether we like it or not. It's amazing to me how few musicians understand this simple fact. Typically, FOH engineers have a natural bias towards guitars, basses, and drums. Keyboards, for many engineers I've encountered, are kind of an annoyance. I take it upon myself to make my sound as easy as possible for the FOH engineer to integrate into the mix.

First and foremost, talk to the engineer! Introduce yourself (if it's not someone you work with regularly), and explain what role you play in creating the overall band sound. Is your job to cut through with stabbing, jarring patches? Do you create a wash with ethereal pads? Do you run a lot of arpeggiators? Or maybe you trigger drum loops? Whatever you do, you have a much better chance of being heard if you give the engineer an idea of what to expect. Be nice - you don't have to kiss ass, but in this business, relation-

ships are everything. The engineer will remember that you took the time to talk to him/her.

Think Like A Composer

Perhaps most importantly, listen to a lot of music, and get a good sense of orchestration. Listen to everything: symphonies by Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky; big band arrangements by Gil Evans, Sammy Nestico and Billy Strayhorn; synth work by Wendy Carlos, Herbie Hancock, Kraftwerk, Depeche Mode, Brian Eno, Nine Inch Nails, Daniel Lanois - anything that will give you a sense of how different sounds combine to make new textures without fighting each other. And keep refining your synth chops - there's nothing quite as satisfying as having the bandmates wonder how you keep coming up with those perfect patches.

Andrew Craig has been a professional keyboardist for over 20 years, in addition to his work as a composer, arranger, producer, director and broadcaster. He's performed with artists such as Ashley MacIsaac, Molly Johnson, and Wynton Marsalis. He's based in Toronto.

Where Are The Keys?

A Primer On Making Your Keyboards Cut Through The Mix Part II

by Andrew Craig

Tips For Tweaks

Listen to your patches, and make judgements about their frequency content. Unless it's a synth bass patch, does that sound need to have all that bottom end? If not, use a high-pass filter. Remember, bass not only takes up large amounts of sonic real estate, it makes the PA work harder to reproduce it. If the engineer feels like you're pushing the PA, he'll just yank you back in the mix. Does that other special effect patch need all that searing high-end stuff? If not, run it through a low-pass filter. If the sound annoys the engineer or too dramatically upsets her/his aesthetic sense, he or she'll just drop you down, where you might get forgotten. Is that cool patch you use in the second set fighting with the guitars? Then edit accordingly. The engineer will likely feel he/she is getting that vibe from the guitar, and doesn't need it from you. Learn to think orchestrationally – your sounds have to fit into the sonic tapestry, and the engineer will place you wherever he/she feels you fit best. That might be way down in the mix, if you don't do your homework.

You know all that reverb, delay, and other effect stuff manufacturers put on factory patches to make keyboards sound sexy? It drives FOH engineers crazy. Effects, unless applied sparingly, simply make a live mix muddy. Turn all the effects off, unless they are absolutely essential to the nature of the patch, or you need them to inspire your playing. I even use outboard hardware for reverb that I send to my own personal mix, so I can hear reverb without creating extra problems for the FOH engineer. Besides, if a patch doesn't sound full without all the effects, it's probably not well-programmed.

Another issue is that keyboard players often fail to level their patches. This also drives FOH engineers crazy. If, during the sound check, the engineer asks you to play, and you play him your softest patch, and then in the show, you blast him with "Horn Patch From Hell," he's going to turn you waaaaay down, and leave you there – trust me.

Before you go to the gig, run your keyboards through a mixer with good meters (level and peak metering, preferably), and play through passages with each patch. Adjust the patch levels until they are all roughly equal (obviously you don't want your "Angels Pads" as loud as your "Horn



Patch From Hell," but try to minimize the differences to keep the surprises to a minimum). At the sound check, take the time to play through a cross-section of your patches for the engineer. Remember, you're trying to encourage her/him to listen out for you, not ignore you. If you have a lot of sounds and keyboards that you submix into a small mixer (you should submix!), you might even consider putting an outboard limiter on your stereo send to the FOH console to take care of the peaks.

And the number one thing not to do at the gig: don't grab your master volume and jam it towards the sky. Nothing guarantees you being deleted from the mix like making a drastic level increase during the show. If an engineer's taken the time to properly gain-stage your strips on the mixer, and, during your big solo, you make his console look like it's Christmas time, he's going to pull you out of the mix with no guilt whatsoever. If you don't feel you're being heard enough in the house, you might have to suck it up until the set break, when you can have a level-headed (and I mean level-headed) discussion. If it comes to that, the support of your bandmates (and manager, if you have one) goes a long way. Try not to make it personal – remember, the show's not over yet!

Andrew Craig has been a professional keyboardist for over 20 years, in addition to his work as a composer, arranger, producer, director, and broadcaster. He's performed with artists such as Ashley MacIsaac, Molly Johnson, and Wynton Marsalis. He's based in Toronto.

On Set At *Canadian Idol*

by Mark Lalama

Arrangements

It's a pretty specific process. Here's how it works; each week there is a pre-determined theme, i.e. Standards, Rock, British Invasion, etc. The contestants are given a lengthy list of songs from which to choose. The next step in the process is the workshop. In the workshop the contestants get to run through their song choices to determine key, tempo, and arrangement/edit. Most of the time each contestant brings in two or three choices because they want to sing through them all before making a final decision. The performance workshop is where I get involved. Vocal Coach Debra Byrd and I spend about an hour on each contestant – workshoping the song and performance. The music department provides me with the published sheet music for each title. If no sheet music exists, I'll write my own, by hand. If it's a straight-ahead pop tune, I'll just do a chord chart over a lyric sheet. If it's more specific, i.e. something orchestral or riff-driven, I'll notate it on manuscript. I guess the tricky thing about this process is that I usually don't get the charts and song picks until the night before the workshop. In the case of Week #1, we do 22 live performances on two back-to-back show days (11 per show). Each singer is allowed to bring three choices to the workshop, so I have to be ready to accommodate up to 66 songs in the first two workshop days. Basically, what I do on a weekly basis is first, I make charts for anything that the music department couldn't find. Then I scan all other charts for accuracy. Then I go to bed.

Workshop & Rehearsals

It is in the workshop where we help the singers come up with their arrangements. Notice I said "their" arrangements. Byrd and I are not "allowed" to just write the singer an arrangement. They must OK each aspect of their performance. We are not allowed to tell them which song they should sing even when it's painfully obvious to us. The other major determining factor in arrangement is the stopwatch. Each week we have a new "magic number" that represents the song length. This is pretty much immovable – advertisers weigh a lot.



Once this is done and each singer has his/her edit, we record a piano and piano/vocal version for him or her to practice with. Their edited version is sent to a copyist/arranger who writes charts for the band. The next time the singer rehearses, it's with the *Canadian Idol* Band. Orin Isaacs is the *Canadian Idol* Music Producer and bandleader and is in charge of keeping the music machine greased and running smoothly. At the rehearsals, we run through each song with the singer and put on the final touches. Usually the singer will have input regarding dynamics/instrumentation/feel/cues – the usual stuff any band would cover. Again, all final decisions are made by the contestant.

Patching & Programming

Because I am wearing two hats on this gig – workshoping and playing in the house band – I make sure to have the same keyboard at both locations. This way, I can make patch notes during the workshop, and spend little or no time during rehearsals to program.

Time Constraints

In a normal week I do two show days – Monday and Tuesday on CTV! I'll have one and a half days of private workshops with each singer. A half-day of band rehearsals. One day of camera rehearsals. Somewhere in there, Byrd and I will ar-

range a group song or group medley for the results show. Then we're back to the show days – each show day also consists of a dress rehearsal. So it's pretty much six days a week for me.

Advice

#1. Don't cut corners, make sure your quality of work is as high as possible.
#2. Get over yourself. This is a big television production involving a long chain of command. I think this is the first thing any musician working on the show should realize. There is a major network, a television production company, a music production company, a record company, artist management, sound, lighting, publicist, hair and make-up, catering, backline, security, legal, and so on and so on... So though it may appear to be a singing show, and obviously the music is important, you have to be aware and respectful of all the other aspects of this huge machine.

Mark Lalama has appeared with or on works by countless artists including Kalan Porter, Amy Sky, Susan Aglukark, Marc Jordan, Alan Frew, John McDermott, Jesse Cook, and Frank Mills. Among many other credentials, he has composed music for TV shows across the programming spectrum, with his work featured on CBC Newsworld, Stars on Ice, CFMT, Discovery Channel US, and of course, Canadian Idol, where he has played piano and arranged music on the show for the past two seasons.

Making Room

by Kevin Young

Sometimes the simplest solutions are the most powerful. We have so many options at our fingertips as keyboard players – it's easy to lose a simple song in a morass of effects and layers. More than that, stripping a song down to a very basic form often encourages a more thoughtful dialogue between players.



This is an exercise intended to increase the depth and familiarity of that dialogue – the kind of thing that can be applied while in rehearsal and recording, alone or with other players.

First, choose a progression or a piece of music from, say, a jazz standard or pop tune of some description. Start playing through the changes as they are using a very basic, familiar sound – a piano or electric piano. Whether you're playing to track or with other players, run through the progression a few times this way – just enough that the feel sinks in.

Now start stripping the song or progression down. There's no strict method to doing this – just various things to try to simplify various aspects of the arrangement...

Simplify movement by playing fewer chords overall. If you're playing a progression – with chords changing every two beats – cut the number of chords in half. For example a progression like... A E F#min E D D E E becomes... A A/G# F#min F#min/E D D E E (see example A.)

Or, alternately, pad an A chord over a descending line, then replace the D triad with an A sus4, and the E triad with an E7, voicing the E in the left hand, and the 3rd, 7, and root in ascending order.

They're basic re-harmonizations, but they simplify the chord movement and retain the feel of the original. Another option is to identify common notes shared by chords within the progression and mine them to create an even more static progression, one that, at times, only implies descending movement. You might also try expanding or compressing your voicings to create more space rhythmically while increasing the harmonic complexity. Or try compressing your voicing, creating a denser, more dissonant texture by changing as few notes as possible, chord to chord, and dropping some notes to create a more open tonality and build voicings in intervals of a fourth.

By combining these techniques your final progression might end up looking more like Example B.

The idea here is to simplify by backing off, using voicings and harmonic choices to create drama instead of playing a lot.

Example A.

A E F# min E D D E E

Becomes ...

A A/G# F# min F# min/E D D E E

Example B.

RH ...

C# C# C# C# C# C# C# C#

A A A A A A

G# F# F# F# F# G# G# G#

E E E E D D E E

LH ...

A A F# E D D E E

If the result is too static, try adding minimal embellishment – but only between melodic phrases played by the primary voice in the arrangement. And, when you do add embellishment, experiment with slight alterations in the feel, instead of adding countermelodies. For example: adding the odd anticipation, or alternating between a straight feel, and applying just a hint of swing.

By simplifying some elements you'll deepen the complexity of others and create a more opaque, less obvious, tonality with extensions and hybrid chords. Essentially, doing more, with less. By trying some of these options you'll also leave room for other instruments, and help to create and maintain a dialogue that will only make your band and your arrangements and recordings tighter.

Writing And Arranging For The Piano Trio

by Michael Kaeshammer

I usually choose to play in a classic piano trio setting with a bassist and a drummer because it gives me great harmonic freedom that bigger ensembles don't offer (it is also a very affordable way to go on the road!). The trio setting gives endless arranging possibilities – you just have to be open to leaving some of the “standard” rules behind.

First of all, do a lot of listening, and analyze the different ways the great pianists of our time have led their trios. Some of the outstanding and groundbreaking piano trios you should check out are the hard-swinging and dynamic Oscar Peterson and Ahmad Jamal Trios, the classic bebop trios of Sonny Clarke and Hampton Hawes, and the interactive sophisticated trio sounds of any of the Bill Evans ensembles.

Second, you should really analyze and study the different trios' musical approaches by doing some conscious listening. A mistake often made is the fact that people study certain players/bands and eras thoroughly, but instead of using these studies as influences for their own music, they treat them as formulas and rules that are being followed. It is a necessity to learn the music that has come before us, but why would you want to copy someone else's style, or even phrasing, when it comes to music that you have written?



Now that we have established these two points, we can move on to the actual topic of this column: writing and arranging for the jazz piano trio.

Writing

Like everything else you do in life, the more you do it the better you get at it. It's almost pointless to sit down and tell yourself "I'm going to write a great tune now!" When an idea

or an event inspires you to write a song just let it flow out, don't edit anything while you create it. After you feel that you have put down what needed to come out of your system, then you can start editing. Edit your creative ideas, but don't feel like you ever have to stick to any particular form, such as A-A-B-A. Let the song dictate where it needs to go. Also, don't shy away from combining ideas that come from two totally different writing sessions. I have a notation book with all kinds of ideas and melodies in it that have come to me over the past days, weeks, months, even years. Once in a while an idea from a few months ago will make a great bridge in the song I'm writing today. It might need to be transposed or shaped a bit, but it becomes part of the new idea. I believe that "writer's block" is often the brain's subconscious judgment and criticism of what you write while you do it. Just shut your brain off and write, don't worry about thinking if it's good or bad. Be creative!

Arranging

When it comes to arranging, I don't differentiate between my own compositions and standards or covers. I am always aware of using dynamics and registers that the instruments you arrange for sound strong in. Try out things that seem outrageous or out of context to the tune. These outrageous things often come together magically when you rehearse it with the band. Some very effective tools to use in the trio setting are (1) unison-lines played by the piano and the bass, (2) having the bass and the drums play an underlying melody or shots rather than time on a section, and (3) re-harmonizing the chord progression (re-harmonizing doesn't mean complicating it; a lot of times simplifying progressions bring out the melody a lot stronger). If you have a regular band, have the individual players and their styles in mind when you arrange. Write and arrange your music to the strength of your band. A great example of this in the past is the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Duke was a master at featuring a musician's strength. A modern day equivalent in approach is the Harry Connick Jr. Big Band.

In the end, I can't stress enough that you need to portray your own personality, your own emotions, your own ups and downs of your present life. It's the only way to be honest to yourself, to your music, and to creating art.

Michael Kaeshammer's latest release, Days Like These, is available on Alert Records. Check out www.kaeshammer.com. He plays Yamaha pianos.

Keepers Of The Flame

by Gary Gratz

Iborrow my title from the title of a great song by Mark Levine which was recorded by Latin Jazz great Pancho Sanchez (*Bien Sabroso!*, Picante CJP-239). Check it out! It has a great sense of harmony, is really fun to improvise over, and has a ton of rhythmic energy. I must admit that I just love songs that have a strong harmonic structure as a core element. The harmony can be very simple diatonically-derived chords, if it is musically logical. All music is valid but harmony rules! When I hear a song with a well-thought-out-chord progression, it immediately convinces me that the songwriter/composer knew what he or she was doing. It is in the use of harmony that keyboard players are Keepers of the Flame. In any musical situation, the audience, vocalists, and others in the band look to us hold together this important area. Oh sure, many guitar players have a great harmonic sense, and it is, of course, required of orchestral and big band composers/arrangers (most of whom are proficient keyboard players), but harmony is our domain and we need to be masters of it.

I probably don't have to convince you of the importance of the role of the keyboard player in music. I will make the bold statement that I don't think that it takes any special talent to be a proficient keyboard player, just a willingness to practice. One also needs to be constantly refining how we go about practicing. Sure, you hear about special individuals who can remember and perform, without mistakes, an entire Bach piece from listening to it once. You also hear about people with peak motor skills that can sight play virtually any collection of dots that you put in front of them at tempo. But after having taught hundreds of people, I feel confident in saying that most people are remarkably equal in talent when it comes to playing the keyboard – and if one has the drive to play, it doesn't matter what the savants can do. By virtue of the fact that I teach at a music college, everyone takes piano class regardless of what their main instrument is. We made this a requirement because we know that success in music theory, ear training, arranging, songwriting, and composition is contingent on some keyboard ability. When you add the element of MIDI sequencing, this is even truer.

I will relate a story to illustrate my point. A number of years ago, I played guitar in a rock band. We played in clubs in the five state area (Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, and North



and South Dakota), danceable tunes primarily: Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, Free, Little Feat, Traffic, and, of course, Steely Dan. So when Steely Dan's *Pretzel Logic* came out, we just had to learn the title song. Both the guitarist and the bass player (who also played organ at church) had really good ears but could not figure out the bridge. I remember hearing the E in the bass and thinking it sounded like two chords stacked on top of each other. This kind of thing is possible on guitar (well, maybe if you are Allan Holdsworth) but it requires a large stretch. I went upstairs to the family piano and played an E minor chord with my left hand and fiddled around until I realized that the upper chord was a D major triad. I proceeded to work out the rest of the chords and within a few minutes could play the bridge (and even had a pretty good idea what the

individual vocal parts were). The others in the band drifted upstairs when they heard the music in somewhat of a state of amazement (I wasn't considered the golden ears guy in this group). As those of us who have played this tune know, the chords are: D/Em, E/A, C/Dm and D/G (spelled in a tertial analysis: Emi9, Ama9, Dmi9 and Gma9). Now I must add this wasn't any kind of major miracle – I would attribute it to the visual nature of the keyboard. I had taken a year of piano lessons, so I could work out vocal parts at the piano. For me it was a moment of revelation – I actually went out that evening and bought a Wurlitzer electric piano and signed up for lessons in jazz and classical piano a few days later. I was completely hooked on harmony. Then I bought a Mini-Moog, Arp Omni, Yamaha Electric Grand ... I'm sure you guys know the story. For me, my shift onto the keyboard bench has enabled me to be gainfully employed in music my whole life. Keep the Flame and keep practicing.

Gary Gratz is the Chair of Music Studies and the Head of the Keyboard Department at McNally Smith College of Music in St. Paul, MN. He has been a professional musician for 30+ years, working throughout the industry as a performer, composer, arranger, and programmer. He studied with Lorna Michelson, Herb Wigley, Manfredo Fest, and Jill Dawe. Gary has performed with Tony Sandler, Marilyn McCoo, Othello Molineaux, Tim Ries, Brian Duncan, and the Minnesota Vikings Band. He continues to perform regularly. As a composer/synthesist with Herb Pilhofer Music, Gary composed music and designed sounds for numerous national TV ads including spots for Coca Cola, Discover Card, Target, and Porsche. He also performed on the soundtrack for the movie Beautiful Girls and coached the lead actor, Timothy Hutton, in piano technique.

Warmed Up And Ready To Rock!

by Gary Gratz

In our professional careers as keyboard players, (piano, organ, and synth) we are often required to sit down and play involved polyphonic music at the drop of a hat, so to speak.

I think we can break down the issue of being warmed up for peak performance into three areas.

First, there is the issue of preparation, how we practice leading up to the performance. Many classical players recommend practicing the pieces at a slow tempo, then medium, and finally fast – even on the day of the performance. It tells one a lot about how these folks achieve and maintain a high degree of accuracy on such complex musical material. They say never play a piece at a tempo that you can't maintain with perfect accuracy of execution.

I highly recommend using a metronome at all times. I have had some debates about this with other teachers who feel constant use of the metronome promotes an overly robotic feel. I personally think rhythm is the single most important musical element and using a metronome gives one a way to master at a slower tempo and do a very controlled increase to the performance tempo. On very difficult pieces, I recommend never increasing the speed more than two metronome clicks at a time as one goes through the process of learning.

Secondly, there is the issue of warming up our muscles, bones, and tendons at the time of performance. This is of particular importance for those of us in the upper part of the northern hemisphere where it is cold for three quarters of the year. If you can't actually sit down at a keyboard, Herb Wigley (one of my teachers) recommended the following: on a table (or a dashboard if need be) spread your thumb and your first finger as wide as feels comfortable, tuck your first finger under and open up the spread between it and your middle finger. Repeat this between the remaining fingers. Be careful not to push too hard, particularly as you get on the outside of your hand (towards your little finger). The idea is that you are gradually loosening up the muscles and tendons between your fingers so that opening and closing the hand to achieve any interval is effortless.

Herb also showed me the two warm-up exercises shown below. Example 1 uses alternating pairs of fingers on all four triadic shapes. Do it slowly, lifting up the fingers not currently



engaged in depressing keys as high as is comfortable. You can repeat each measure two or more times. Herb recommended moving the triads chromatically but any interval will do. If you do it chromatically, you tend to get a feel for all the different chord shapes. Again, be careful the first few times you do this. One can easily strain a muscle and if you do it right before you have to perform, it could be a real problem. Example 2 uses a similar concept applied to diminished seventh chords. Herb attributed this one to classical pianist Vladimir Horowitz. I have no way of documenting that this is the case, but this is my favourite warm-up. When you depress fingers one and three in your right hand (five and three left hand) be sure to lift the remaining fingers as high as possible without straining them. Do the same when you use fingers two and four and so on. I often use this one even at a club by just turning down the volume of my digital piano.

Thirdly, there is the often-overlooked idea of mental preparation or warming up your musical spirit. Some musicians meditate or just try to find a quiet place to clear their minds. I like to use visualization. I try to, in my mind's eye (and ear), place myself in the area where I will perform and hear it going perfectly. It doesn't always turn out that way, but it helps me centre myself rather than walking onstage with an overly active mind. I hope you find some of these tips and observations helpful. Rock on!

Example 1

Transpose pattern chromatically with all four chord types D \flat , D, E \flat and up.

Continue with same fingering...

Example 2

Transpose pattern chromatically

Continue with same fingering...

Gary Gratz is the Chair of Music Studies and the Head of the Keyboard Department at McNally Smith College of Music in St. Paul, MN. He has been a professional musician for 30+ years, working throughout the industry as a performer, composer, arranger, and programmer. As a composer/synthesist with Herb Pilhofer Music, Gary composed music and designed sounds for numerous national TV ads including spots for Coca-Cola, Discover Card, Target, and Porsche. He also performed on the soundtrack for the movie Beautiful Girls and coached the lead actor, Timothy Hutton, in piano technique. Contact: ggratz@mcnallysmith.edu.

Amplifying Keyboards For Live Performance

by Gary Gratz

There are a number of different alternatives for amplifying electronic keyboards for live performance. Back in the day, we used to just plug our Rhodes and Moog synthesizer into a 100-watt Fender guitar amp and turn it up. It certainly wasn't a high-fidelity arrangement, but believe me, it was loud and very bright. Even earlier, rock organists like Jon Lord (Deep Purple) would modify the output of their Hammond organs so that they could plug them into a Marshall stack. This may sound like a bit of overkill, but sound reinforcement for larger venues was still in a developmental stage and Lord liked the distortion it added to his sound (listen to "Woman from Tokyo").

These days, an increasing number of venues that I play at have high-quality sound reinforcement built in, sophisticated monitoring systems, and competent sound men or women. This offers us the possibility of running our keyboards directly into the snake (via a DI box), relying on the sound person to send us a mix that highlights the keyboards along with the other instruments that we find integral to grooving and making good music. There are a number of positives to this approach: there's less equipment to drag to the gig; if the sound person is really a good mixer, it creates a lower stage volume that might otherwise detract from his/her ability to create a great house mix; and less clutter on the stage (it looks cool!). This approach requires that the other band members don't just crank their own amps and not pay any attention to the monitor mix. As we all know, stage volume is often in direct proportion to the guitar player's need to drive his/her amp into the pleasing distortion zone and the drummer's need to hit the tubs hard enough to release the angst that he has built up since the last gig. We wouldn't want him going out in the audience and starting a fight to accomplish this venting. The negatives of this approach are: not as much personal control over EQ; overplaying (from a physical standpoint) because we can't hear as well as we would like to; and we can generally feel more vulnerable to the volume level of others playing with us. I will often bring along a little 12-channel mixer so I can add some EQ when I use this approach. The keyboard



manufacturers definitely do a great job of providing us with software tools within the instrument's programmable parameters to accomplish some of this. This being said, with sample playback keyboards I always tend to roll off a little of the low end and boost the highs a tad just so everything shimmers by the time it gets to the main speakers.

There are times when, for one reason or another, one just doesn't feel comfortable performing with no personal monitoring system. This would leave us with the option of using a powered speaker with the above-mentioned mixer sending one side to the house and the other to the powered speaker itself. I would recommend at least a 12" speaker and at least 150 watts. A lot of them are bi-amped these days and will offer 200 to 300 watts for the woofer and another 100 for the tweeter. You know what they say: when a clean sound is the ultimate goal, the more watts the merrier. Some of these will also offer a bass roll-off toggle switch. Also, one can of course use a self-contained keyboard amp. This is essentially a mixer with power and speakers built into a single unit. They come with usually two to four channels (with individual volume control) and a master section (usually with some EQ). Again, I would recommend at least a 12" speaker and at least 150 watts. All of them these days would have a line out to send to the house, and some even have a built in DI. This not a huge concern because soundmen/women at all of the places that I play at usually keep DIs for multiple

instruments. A built-in DI can be handy because it is one less chord flapping around as you try to maneuver around on stage. One benefit of this approach is the ability to control your monitoring directly rather than having to ask the soundperson to turn you up in your monitor feed. Although not actually the best for the overall mix, you are not without resources if you do get into a situation where others insist on playing loudly on stage – much to the chagrin of the soundperson. Unfortunately, it does happen – even with experienced players. This approach would also cover you for a smaller gig where there is no soundperson. I find there usually is some kind of public address required for almost any job and I will, even in this case, send a feed from the line out just to get some dispersion across the room. I personally don't like wearing protective earplugs, so I got in the habit many years ago of keeping my personal volume down and letting the PA cover the room. Hopefully you find some of this useful advice. Rock on!

Gary Gratz is the Chair of Music Studies and the Head of the Keyboard Department at McNally Smith College of Music in St. Paul, MN. He has been a professional musician for 30+ years, working throughout the industry as a performer, composer, arranger, and programmer. As a composer/synthesist with Herb Pilhofer Music, Gary composed music and designed sounds for numerous national TV ads, including spots for Coca-Cola, Discover Card, Target, and Porsche. He also performed on the soundtrack for the movie Beautiful Girls and coached the lead actor, Timothy Hutton, in piano technique. (ggratz@mcnallysmith.edu).

Finding The Right Sound

by Michele Walter

The beauty of the keyboard is that you don't have to be experienced to be able to create songs – you can just have fun with it and be imaginative. Coming up with melodies and harmony is only half of the writing process. The real challenge comes with finding the right sounds to use. Most keyboards offer hundreds or thousands of patches and many different ways to use them. You can split your keys and play two patches at the same time, you can layer sounds, loop sections, trigger samples – anything you want.

A lot of keyboards have many of the same sounds, so when purchasing an instrument, it's really about personal preference and how you want to use it. If you're looking for something to use at home or in the studio with a variety of options, you'd probably want to look at a larger workstation with weighted keys (or at least with that option). Usually, the quality of sound is better and you can accomplish pretty much anything with it. I play a Roland Fantom XA as a main keyboard and I have a MicroKorg. I chose the Fantom at the time because it had an endless selection of sounds, lots of banks, and featured a built-in sampler. I can control the samples either through the keys or on an external pad, which I like because it allows me to do multiple things at once. I can either create my own samples on the keyboard using internal or external sounds, or I can import pre-made samples from my computer. Having multiple banks is another solid feature as it allows me to switch back and forth quickly between sounds, which is key for live performance. The Fantom is a

bit smaller with 61 keys, which is ideal for touring. We don't always get a lot of room onstage and it does everything I need it to do.

When it comes to choosing patches, I find it best just to go through a bunch of different sounds until I find one that fits. Usually, I already have an idea in my head of what I'm looking for, then I search for something that is close. A lot of the time, I'll come across a sound



I wasn't looking for or wouldn't have thought to try – this way it kind of forces you to hear every possibility.

I've always found it easier to come up with sounds for melodic pieces as opposed to heavier sections. I guess it seems more natural to me to put big,

soft, epic strings over a melodic chorus, rather than a breakdown. Strings can sound good almost anywhere, so you have to be careful not to overuse them. You might want every part to sound huge and full, but sometimes that can take away from the parts that are meant to be more built up. This is where trial and error is very helpful.

At first, I had a tendency to stick with the same sounds because they were familiar and it can be hard to picture the final product when you can't hear the other instruments that will be surrounding yours. When we're writing, I like working on keys after the rest of the song is already structured – that way I can hear everything together. A keyboard part could sound good with one or two instruments, but may change when you add another one that hadn't been considered. For example, I tend to work with the guitarists more when writing keyboard parts, but what we put together might not necessarily go with the bass line. Sometimes, I'll think a sound is too overbearing or just weird on its own, but when I combine it with everything else it works. It could bring out something in another instrument or accent parts I didn't notice before. There really are endless possibilities!

If there is one lesson I've learned, it's that you can't be afraid to try anything. A lot of the best songs or parts of songs happen by accident. Be open-minded with patches and you might stumble upon something great.

Michele Walter is the keyboardist in Farewell To Freeway on Victory Records. Check out myspace.com/farewelltofreeway.

TTDC

by Ron Davis

The C major scale. What could be more simple? White keys only. Plain vanilla. No pesky black keys. Up. Down. Easy. Really?

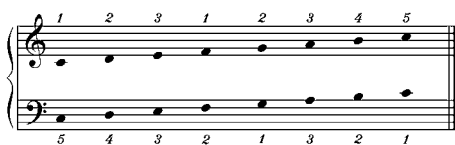
That simple C major scale holds plenty of challenges. Easy to learn, but hard to master, the C major scale is a sometimes ignored pathway to keyboard control. It also illustrates a truism in music, and the arts in general: to do the fancy stuff, you need to have the basics nailed down.

Before I go on, maybe you're thinking, "Scales? Naah. Waste of time." Maybe you're thinking they're for playing Rachmaninoff, not Wilson Pickett, and you'd only play Wilson Pickett. Wrong. Scales are for anyone who sits down at a keyboard to make music. Perfect them and you have a greater playing palette at your fingertips.

And by the way, scales make great fills. Next time you're playing a song in C major, try running a scale from F to F or G to G. You might like it.

Let's begin at the beginning. Play a simple C scale. One octave up, one octave down. First the right hand alone, then the left. Slowly, at first, then more quickly. Quietly, at first, then more loudly. Here's the fingering I recommend (see Example 1. Reminder: thumb = 1, index = 2, middle = 3, ring finger = 4, pinky = 5):

Example 1



It's important to watch for what I'll call TTDC:

- **Touch** – consider every finger independently, keeping your arms and hands in a position that gives you the most freedom and control.
- **Time** – give every step an equal time value, taking care not to rush some notes, and drag others. Just as soft playing can be harder than loud, slow can be harder than fast.
- **Dynamics** – retain perfect control over the volume of your scale. Keep that volume at an even level. Remember that playing softly can be harder than playing loudly.
- **Clarity** – let each note ring out so that the scale sounds more like a string of pearls than a wash of notes.

In that little C scale lies any number of questions about overall technique. Do you put your weight into your arms, or your shoulders? When do you curve your fingers? How do you negotiate those pesky thumb and the third finger transitions? How do you support and engage the typically weak fourth and fifth fingers?

These are all good, important questions. They go to the fundamentals of producing sound from a keyboard. I can't get into the answers fully here, but it will help to pay attention to each element of TTDC. They're all connected to each other. They should all balance out. Often, focus on one element ruins focus on another. You may play in time, but the dynamics go screwy. You may play with clarity, but use a touch that is awkward and injury-inducing.

Stay aware of TTDC, and the answers of technique will become apparent to you.

How was your C scale – clear and even? Was your slow, quiet C scale as solid as your fast and loud one? In each hand? If you answered "yes" to these questions (with honesty!), then congratulations. You show a control that will serve you well in making keyboard music.

Let's go deeper. Keyboards – except for those little two-octave units – are two-handed instruments. You may never play a song that needs two-handed technique. But if you have that technique available, the music you make, even with one finger, will be the better for it. I promise. So let's do some two-handed stuff.

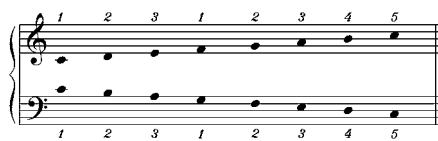
First, try the scale simply with both hands together, an octave apart (Example 1). Again, go up and down. Pay attention to TTDC. Start slowly and quietly. Then build the tempo and volume.

Your two hands should sound like one. A note in one hand shouldn't sound before its sibling note in the other. It shouldn't be louder. Once you get solid, steady two-handed scales, you should feel greater control over the keyboard.

Now, go up another notch. Having two truly independent hands expands your music-making capacity. It turns a two-wheel player to a four-wheeler. Starting with both thumbs on the same note, Middle C, head up and down in opposite directions (see Example 2):



Example 2



It's tricky, but if you take your time, and keep on repeating the exercise, you will soon execute it with ease. Your hand independence will emerge.

Now you're ready to move on and have some real fun (yes – this should be fun)! Have a go at playing the scale a 10th apart (Example 3). Then give it a try playing two notes with one hand for every single note in the other (Example 4).

Example 3



Example 4



You know the drill by now. Up, down. Slow, fast. Quiet, louder. TTDC.

So, that "simple" C scale isn't so simple after all. I hope you find, as I do, that it has a lot of value for the keyboard players looking to improve their musical and technical chops. "C" what I mean?

Ron Davis is a well-known pianist, composer, and recording artist. Find out more at www.rondavismusic.com. Ron welcomes comments, suggestions, and all feedback at ron@rondavismusic.com.

The Teaching Of Art & The Art Of Teaching

by Ron Davis

Some teachers get plaques to honour their efforts. Some get classrooms, or even concert halls named after them.

If ever a piano teacher – a music teacher – deserved commemoration, it is the late Darwyn Aitken. He has no plaque, no classroom, no hall. What Aitken has, though, is a memorial of sound and ideas, the bricks and mortar of which are the musicians whose gifts he nurtured.

Early on, Aitken showed his gifts as a piano prodigy. He was innately musical. His pitch was inhumanly perfect. Frank Falco, a student of his, and now a leading-light pianist and teacher himself, remembers Aitken would drop his keys on to the piano over and over, and then play the chord the keys' jangle rang out. Yikes.

Nothing bespeaks Aitken's gifts more than his two principal teachers: jazz god Oscar Peterson and David Saperton, a top classical name of his day. Jazz and classical. This was category-free education, reflecting Aitken's no-boundaries beliefs. Jazz, classical, Latin, pop, whatever – music was music. It's obvious now, but in the pre-iTunes '60s and '70s, musical desegregation was radical stuff.



Aitken loved teaching. The results show. Look around Canada's jazz piano soundscape today, and you'll find the bearers of his legacy everywhere: Nancy Walker, Joe Sealy, Aaron Davis, Gary Williamson, Tom Szczesniak, and many others.

Producing high-end pianists was not Aitken's signal achievement. What put him octaves above the norm was the diversity of his graduates. No one sounds like the other. Each has his or her own aural silhouette. Individual. Personal. Hand-formed, not cookie-cut.

How did he do this? He said he couldn't "teach" music, only piano. He focused on the mechanics and let the music blossom. So, every student endured the heptathlon of Gershwin *Préludes*, Chopin *Études*, tapping poly-rhythms, fearsome scales from Joseffy's book (double sixths, two hands!), Aitken's own exercises, the harmonic labyrinths of Leopold Godowsky, and Gordon Delamont's theory.

Then you played your jazz for him. He would listen and discuss. Try this! How about that? Why did you play such and such here? What about riff X or substitution Y there? He showed, not told. He rarely dictated. There was no wrong. There was only what didn't work. What **did** work varied for each student, so the students varied amongst themselves.

At the core of Aitken's pedagogy lay his ability to see patterns and systems for controlling the keyboard, and then communicate them to the student. Take "The Hop," for example. Figure 1 shows how Aitken wrote it out for one student, Moxy Frúvous member Dave Matheson. "The Hop" was a way of moving up and down the keyboard with ease and speed, but without chopping up lines. In a D minor arpeggio, when

the right hand third finger hits the A, you prepare, and then hop off it, onto the second at D, and continue the arpeggio. There should be no disconnect in the sound.

What makes a great teacher? A loaded question, to be sure. I have no definitive answer, but if I did it would include these words: empathy, humility, trustworthiness, mastery of subject, communication skills, patience, discipline, focus, vision, and passion. Aitken had all of these, and passion

The image shows a page of handwritten musical notation for an exercise titled "The Hop". It consists of several staves of music. The notation includes circled numbers 1 through 7, indicating different parts of the exercise. There are handwritten notes in red and black ink, such as "Hop weight off H-Hop" and "Whole notes are not played but just show positions of bracketed fingers". There are also "Prep" markings with arrows pointing to specific notes. The notation is written on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The bottom right corner of the page has a small credit: "Courtesy of Dave Matheson".

above all. He was passionate about music, about piano, about recordings, and about teaching. He would talk about them like a hepped-up sports fan.

Actor-songwriter Lynne Derogan sums it up beautifully: "The biggest and most generous thing Darwyn Aitken gave to me was permission. Permission to seek. Permission to play from where I was, not to compare myself with anyone else. He was a great teacher." Amen.

Aitken died in 1986. His wife Peggy died this year. They had no children. But we live on, Darwyn, your students, as your memorial plaques and commemorative halls, honouring your work, and passing it on when we can. Thank you for everything.

Ron Davis is a well-known pianist, composer, and recording artist. Find out more at www.rondavismusic.com. Ron welcomes comments, suggestions, and feedback: ron@rondavismusic.com.

Rocking The Classics

by Lawrence Gowan

When musicians ask for advice about music (and I don't know if it's the same for other vocations in life) it needs to be so individually tailored that advice about any one thing has to be taken with the biggest lump of salt – because it may not pertain to you whatsoever. Having said that, there are a couple of great nuggets of advice that I've received over the years that proved to be true and I stand by them.



When I was trying to decide whether to play guitar or piano, it was right at the time when Elton John started emerging. I then saw Rick Wakeman with a big cape on and I thought, "Yeah, you can be really flamboyant as a keyboard player." I also noticed that the level of musicianship was so high in those two people that I thought pursuing the classical side of music was a smart thing to do as a teenager. I just knew that if I wasn't able to play up to that kind of level, or at least understand what it was they were doing, that I couldn't even play some of the stuff, and my vocabulary was going to be very limited.

I found that the more I studied classical music, the broader my whole musical palette became, so to speak. I didn't have to think about my playing because it was just there. It's probably like a hockey player that does all the basic drills and begins to know that once he's got them to a certain level of proficiency, he doesn't have to think about how to do things anymore. Having said that, some of the greatest musicians I have worked with have never done anything remotely like that – music isn't a fixed thing. It's something that's constantly on the move, and as I said in the beginning, what works for one does not necessarily work for another and rarely does.

So much of my vocabulary began to become enhanced by the classical training, by going through the conservatory system. When I really started getting serious about songwriting, I wasn't intimidated about using some kind of very dramatic themes that would fit into a classical context. I understood enough about Tchaikovsky that I could use some of that influence and allow that to come through in a rock context. It's not a lot different from what most of the progressive bands have done – Genesis, Yes, Pink Floyd to a degree, and Queen. I'm happy that I pursued that way of education, but I'm educating myself every day and often, as I said, with people who've never had any formal training at all but just have a natural gift.

Composers

Tchaikovsky's got a lot of emotional content that ties itself to rock in a way. I remember when Emerson, Lake & Palmer did *Pictures at an Exhibition*. Musorgsky and a lot of the Russian composers seem to have a lot of rock in them. Stravinsky is another one for sure. If I'm playing a Beethoven piece, I find, funnily enough, there is a lot in common ground. For example, I can play "The Pathétique" by Beethoven and I can segue that straight into "Moonlight Desires" because they're both in C minor and some of the movement is kind of similar. I can't say it's these specific bars, etc., but I'm jumping around vocally and yet there's a simple theme in the middle. I also love the piano bashers like Liszt and Bartok. Dig into it – there's much to be gained.

Formula Scales

When you go through the conservatory you learn formula scales – any piano player that's taken classical training knows what I'm talking about. I do them everyday. There are the formal scales, and then there are all the block chords that go up and down. You play them broken, and then you play them alternate style. I do chromatic formula scales in each key as well. A formula scale is basically when you play up, hands together, for two octaves up, then the hands split and the left hand goes down two octaves and, at the same time, the right hand goes up two octaves. Then your hands come back and meet in the middle, and then they both follow each other up two octaves, then back down two octaves, then they split again, come back to the middle, and go back down two octaves. It's the equivalent of stops and starts for a hockey player, or the equivalent of running laps for a runner.

I find that if I let that go even for a week and come back to it, my technique's horrible. Once I've done my formula scales fluidly, I know that I don't have to think about my playing. Really, music begins when you stop thinking about your playing – that's when the music enters the room, or enters your mind. So what might be the best advice I have is that technical proficiency is very important, but the moment you can stop thinking about it – music might arrive.

Lawrence Gowan has enjoyed huge success in Canada with three platinum and four gold hit records, numerous Juno Award nominations, and the Prestigious Achievement Award from the Canadian Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers. He is currently touring as the lead vocalist and keyboardist of Styx. Check out www.gowan.org.

Memo From The Bassist: Get Out Of My Way!

by Ron Davis

You're on stage. You're laying down a killer keyboard solo. Wow. Every note's got game.

Imagine your bass player starts playing exactly what you're playing. Note for note. Same thing. That's not right. You want to yell out: "Get out of my way!"

Now, reverse polarities. You're the bass player, laying down those heavy roots that anchor the song. C-F-C-F-G. But what's this? The pianist is playing every root with you in the left hand. You hit a C, and the pianist hits one in the bass chord. You play F... so does the piano, and so on. It's the bass player's turn to say, "Get out of the way!"

Get out of the way. It's a musically sound idea. **And** it's a good way of staying on good terms with the bassist. Don't play the root. Leave the bottom to the bass. Play around it.

To make sure we're all clear, here's a simple review: the root is the first note in a chord. In a C major chord, that would be C. (E is the third, G is the fifth.) What I'm saying is drop the root. Lose the C. Go **rootless**.

Rootless. Also called rootless **voicings**. They may seem scary at first. After all, we're taught to play C triads as C-E-G, and F triads F-A-C. Dropping the C or the F might feel like taking a wheel off the tricycle, then trying to ride it. The two remaining notes might hardly seem to make music alone.

Not at all. By leaving the bass to the bassist, you open up a host of possibilities. You can add notes. You can add textures. You can enrich harmonies. Don't think of it as losing something. After all, the root is always there, thanks to your now-content bassist. Think of it as a vacation for your pinkie.

If you have any doubt, just listen to jazz piano giants Bill Evans or Wynton Kelly. They're often credited with creating rootless voicings. Listen to succeeding generations, and you'll hear how rootless voicings have evolved: from Herbie Hancock to Nancy Walker and Robi Botos. All are practitioners of the rootless arts.

How to start playing rootless voicings? Take them in steps. Begin simply. Take a C major triad and an F major triad. Stick the root in the bass. Play the two remaining notes in the right hand.

In Example 1, you start with C in the bass, and E with G above (bars 1 – 2). The E can be above or below the G. You also have F in the bass, and A with C above, in either order (bars 3 – 4). Pay attention to how the pair of notes sounds in your right hand.

Example 1



Memorize that sound in your mind's ear. Play a few melody notes in the right hand. See how it sounds.

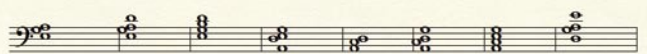
Once you've got these examples down, you can thicken the sonic soup.

In major keys, adding the 6th or the 7th (major or minor) or the 9th to a rootless voicing is almost always safe, and almost always interesting. In C major, this means adding D, A, B, or B \flat .



Example 2 shows the options. Play these 3- and 4-note chords. Focus on the added D, A, and B. What kind of sound do they make? How do they colour the simple C triad? Is the result soft (as bar 3 is to my ears), or crunchy (bar 4)? How can you use them in the tunes you play? How can you use these sounds musically?

Example 2



Play these examples over and over until you have some answers to these questions. Play them until they feel comfortable. Bring in the right hand. Add some simple melodies on top. Get used to holding down the rootless voicings in the left, while you weave melodies in the right.

Let's bring this all together in a blues. Example 3 is a simple jazz blues in C with rootless voicings. Once again, start with the left hand alone. Get used to their shape and feel. Then start laying down right hand lines. Start simple. Build. Then go back into the left hand and start switching some of those voicings around. Experiment with the permutations and combinations.

Example 3

You'll be happy with the expanded array of sounds rootless voicings open up to you. Plus, you and your bass player will love your newfound harmony.

Ron Davis is a well-known pianist, composer, and recording artist. Find out more at: www.rondavismusic.com. Ron welcomes comments, suggestions, and feedback: ron@rondavismusic.com.



by Ron Davis

The Worth Of A MUSICIAN

How much are you worth?

I ran into a pianist I know one Saturday evening not long ago – great player, stellar credits, plenty of mileage under his fingers. He was off to a private gig in a pricey part of town, in a million-dollar house, for a multi-million-dollar man.

Cool. Should be a decent gig, I said, with a decent paycheque. “\$200.” \$200? How long’s the gig? “Four hours.” Four hours? Four hours for \$200? But you’re (name omitted to protect the well-known innocent). You deserve five times that! “Yeah... but the whole idea is to play.”

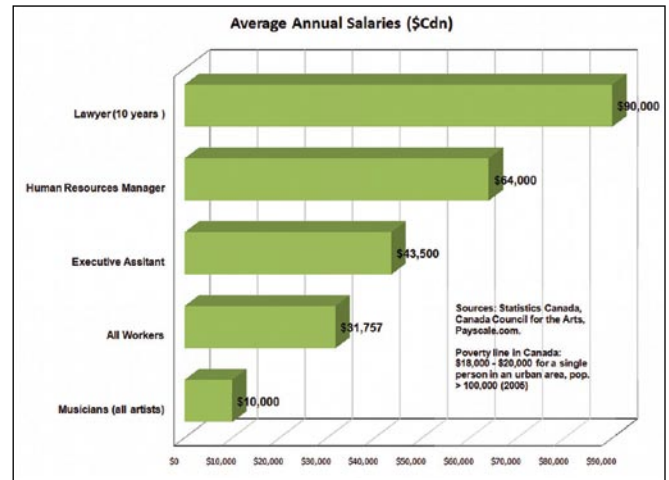
Really? Is that why we become professional musicians, only to play? I’m sorry, but the answer is no. Playing is only part of the idea, not the whole one.

Let’s begin at the beginning. We’ve gone into the music business. Two words: “music” and “business.” Fifty-fifty. Playing is 50 per cent, so what about the business 50 per cent? We can not afford, literally, to ignore it.

We musicians, if I may generalize, are a business-challenged lot. Society, in turn, doesn’t help. People routinely undervalue us unless we’ve become famous, usually abroad, and not always for the music. Then they overvalue us. The bottom line, to use a business expression, is this: How much are we worth? The answer is simple: more. We musicians need to believe this. We need to put confidence into our value.

Talk about value leads to talk about pricing. Value is the handmaid of pricing, but pricing is a fussy baby – a mystery child swaddled in an enigma. Set a price too high, it’s prohibitive. Result: lost sales. Set a price too low and there is excess demand, or consumers shun the product as cheap. Result: lost sales. Even skilled business folk shipwreck on these shoals. Imagine how difficult it is for the average musician to negotiate them. Still, difficult though it may be, we musicians have to make a run for it, and better price ourselves.

Many musicians, too many, feel they’re either not worthy, or not entitled to be paid real money for playing. Real money. The money you pay when you go to see a real professional. The \$200, \$300, \$800, or \$900 (I’m not making this up) you pay a lawyer for their hour, or an accountant for theirs. Yet we’re professionals. We’ve studied for many years. We’ve practiced, as much as any lawyer has practiced law. We’ve absorbed centuries of learning; we’ve perfected our skills. We work to improve, and serve our clients. Why, then, do we live on average on poverty wages?



Why do people nod sternly when quoted professional rates for others, but laugh when it’s for us? To stop the ha-ha-ha, we have to heave-ho the prevailing perception of a musician’s value. Start with higher pricing scales. Get people thinking, reflexively, that if they hire a musician, they’re going to pay professional rates. Plus, travel time, sound systems, special planning – these should all cost extra.

There are always exceptions. Clubs can pay less, because public performance has private benefits. If it’s Aunt Indira or Uncle Wally’s birthday potluck party in the basement, and they really want our music but can’t afford the full ticket, well of course we can come out for a few hundred bucks. But, if the disease of the month is having its annual gala, with 1,000 people paying \$1,000 a meal, with flowers and ice sculptures for all – sorry. No freebies here.

There are risks. The more we charge, the more we will encounter resistance, but we have to learn to live with “no,” secure in the knowledge that many a “yes” will follow. We might end up playing less in public, but we will play better. I subscribe to the view that if you’re not losing a gig a month because your price is too high, then your price is too low.

Make no mistake: this is not about money. It’s about value. And values. It’s about our value as musicians, and the cultural values of our society. Remember, culture has an \$84.6 billion annual impact on the economy, according to the Conference Board of Canada. That’s 7.4 per cent of the GDP. We’re contributing mightily to the economy. How about giving some of it back to us?

No one demands wealth as a right, but we are right to ask to live without privation, and raise families if we wish. Money is not the value of a musician, but the value of a musician is reflected by the money one pays for the music. Besides, we’re not exempt from paying rent, utilities, and grocery bills.

So to my friend who went out for \$200 that night, I wish you continued musical excellence, lots of playing, and paycheques that reflect your true value.

KEYBOARDIST READING SUGGESTIONS



30-DAY KEYBOARD WORKOUT BY TOM BRISLIN

This book includes daily warm-ups; two complete 30-day exercise routines; exercises for melodic and chordal playing.

<https://www.musicbooksplus.com/30-Day-Keyboard-Workout-p/ap228.htm>



ABSOLUTE BEGINNERS KEYBOARD - BOOK/CD/DVD BY JEFF HAMMER

Absolute Beginners has been designed to tell you everything you need to know from the very first time you play your keyboard.

<https://www.musicbooksplus.com/Absolute-Beginners-Keyboard-Book-CD-DVD-p/ms1188.htm>



ACCELERATE YOUR KEYBOARD PLAYING DVD BY DAVE LIMINA

The DVD offers easy-to-understand exercises and demonstrations that can be applied to all levels and styles.

<https://www.musicbooksplus.com/Accelerate-Your-Keyboard-Playing-DVD-p/hl4836.htm>



BASIC KEYBOARD WORKOUT BY JOHN DUTTON

Basic Keyboard Workout offers you a pocket-sized guide packed to capacity with everything the modern working Keyboardplayer needs to play and understand to get the best from their instrument.

<https://www.musicbooksplus.com/Basic-Keyboard-Workout-p/wb4096.htm>



EASY SOLOING: BLUES KEYBOARD BY NATIONAL GUITAR WORKSHOP

This is an excellent book for experienced musicians who are new to improvising, beginning players with a love for the blues, or busy people looking for a quick, low-stress introduction to soloing.

<https://www.musicbooksplus.com/Easy-Soloing-for-Blues-Keyboard-p/ap1305.htm>



HOUSE OF BLUES: LEARN TO PLAY BEGINNER KEYBOARDS DVD BY ALBERT MARGOLIS

This very easy, slow-moving keyboard DVD course will allow even players with no previous experience to be playing blues/rock chords, notes and rhythms with the full band backing tracks by the end of the 76-minute lesson program.

<https://www.musicbooksplus.com/House-of-Blues-Learn-to-Play-Beginner-Keyboa-p/ms1216.htm>



JAZZ PIANO HANDBOOK BY MICHELE WEIR

This book outlines an easy step-by-step process for learning basic jazz piano in just six months.

<https://www.musicbooksplus.com/Jazz-Piano-Handbook-p/ap1304.htm>



ULTIMATE BEGINNER SERIES: KEYBOARD COMPLETE

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