

Four-Note Groupings, Part One

by Ed Saindon

Four-Note Grouping is an improvisation technique that uses major and minor triads along with specific passing notes as a means of generating lines. The concept of Four-Note Groupings allows the lines to be more “out” and stretch the possibility of available notes over a chord due to the structural integrity of the triad-based line. Another benefit of this concept is that the improviser can work on the concept and specific sound of Four-Note Groupings without falling into the trap of playing licks and repetitive phrases. The fact that this is a broad concept and there are many possible four-note grouping choices creates a “deep well” from which an improviser can draw.

In this focused study we will limit ourselves to the following four-note groupings:

Major triad: 1, 2, 3, 5

Minor triad: 1, 2, flat-3, 5; or 1, flat-3, 4, 5

For the purpose of studying and identifying four-note groupings, the groupings will be labeled according to how the root of the triad is related to the scale of the underlying chord. A minor chord will be indicated with a minus sign (-). Here is an example that lists all of the four-note groupings that are available over a C Maj 7 chord using a Lydian scale:

C Maj 7 chord (Lydian scale): 1, 2, 3-, 5, 6-, 7-

FOUR-NOTE GROUPINGS CHART

A few considerations regarding the following chart:

- Dom 7 sus 4 chords include four-note groupings that may include the third degree of the scale
- Certain triads listed under the Min 7 chord category include four-note groupings that may include the sixth degree of the scale
- Be careful when choosing whether to use the 1 2 flat-3 5 or 1 flat-3 4 5 pattern for a minor triad since an incorrect selection may sound an “avoid” note over the underlying chord.

Major 7

Ionian: 1, 3-, 5, 6-

Lydian: 1, 2, 3-, 5, 6-, 7-

Major 7 #5

Lydian Augmented: 3, 7-

Lydian Augmented, Add Natural 5, Omit 6: 1, 3, 3-, 7-

Bebop: 1

Minor 7

Dorian: 1-, 2-, flat-3, 4, 5-, flat-7

Aeolian: 1-, flat-3, 5-, flat-7

Phrygian: 1-, flat-3

Minor 6

Melodic Minor: 1-, 2-, 4, 5

Minor-Major 7

Melodic Minor: 1-, 2-, 4, 5

Dominant 7

Mixolydian: 1, 5-, 6-

Lydian flat-7: 1, 2, 5-, 6-

Altered Natural 4 & Natural 5: flat-2-, flat-6

Altered: flat-2-, flat-3-, flat-5, flat-6

Dominant 7 Sus 4

Mixolydian: 1, 2-, 4, 5-, 6-, flat-7

Mixolydian flat-2, sharp-2: 1-, flat-3, 4, flat-7-

Mixolydian flat-6: 1, 4-, 5-, flat-7

Altered Natural 4 & Natural 5: 1-, flat-2, flat-2-, flat-3, 4-, flat-6, flat-7-

CONSIDERATIONS WITH FOUR-NOTE GROUPINGS

Four-Note Groupings in the Key of C

Here is a listing of all four-note grouping possibilities in the key of C according to each chord type and corresponding chord scale as listed in the Four-Note Groupings Chart.

C Major 7

Ionian

Lydian

C Major 7 #5
Lydian Augmented

Lydian Augmented, Add Natural 5, Omit 6

Bebop

C Minor 7
Dorian

Aeolian

Phrygian

C Minor 6
Melodic Minor

C Minor-Major 7
Melodic Minor

C Dominant 7
Mixolydian

Two staves of music. The first staff shows the scale starting on C, with a flat on the 7th degree (Bb). The second staff shows the scale starting on G, with flats on the 2nd (Ab) and 7th (F) degrees. Chord symbols C, G-, and A- are placed above the notes.

Lydian flat-7

Two staves of music. The first staff shows the scale starting on C, with a sharp on the 4th degree (F#) and a flat on the 7th degree (Bb). The second staff shows the scale starting on G, with flats on the 2nd (Ab) and 7th (F) degrees. Chord symbols C, D, G-, and A- are placed above the notes.

Altered Natural 4 & Natural 5

Two staves of music. The first staff shows the scale starting on C, with flats on the 2nd (Bb) and 3rd (Eb) degrees, and a sharp on the 4th degree (F#). The second staff shows the scale starting on G, with flats on the 2nd (Ab) and 3rd (Eb) degrees, and a sharp on the 4th degree (F#). Chord symbols Db- and Ab are placed above the notes.

Altered

Two staves of music. The first staff shows the scale starting on C, with flats on the 2nd (Bb) and 3rd (Eb) degrees, and a sharp on the 4th degree (F#). The second staff shows the scale starting on G, with flats on the 2nd (Ab) and 3rd (Eb) degrees, and a sharp on the 4th degree (F#). Chord symbols Db-, Eb-, Gb, and Ab are placed above the notes.

C Dominant 7 Sus4
Mixolydian

Two staves of music. The first staff shows the scale starting on C, with a flat on the 7th degree (Bb). The second staff shows the scale starting on G, with a flat on the 7th degree (F). Chord symbols C and G- are placed above the notes.

Two staves of music. The first staff shows the scale starting on C, with a flat on the 7th degree (Bb). The second staff shows the scale starting on G, with flats on the 2nd (Ab) and 7th (F) degrees. Chord symbols C, D-, F, G-, A-, and Bb are placed above the notes.

Mixolydian flat-2, sharp-2

Two staves of music. The first staff shows the scale starting on C, with a flat on the 2nd degree (Bb) and a sharp on the 2nd degree (D#). The second staff shows the scale starting on G, with flats on the 2nd (Ab) and 7th (F) degrees, and a sharp on the 2nd degree (D#). Chord symbols C-, Eb, F, and Bb- are placed above the notes.

Mixolydian flat-6

Two staves of music. The first staff shows the scale starting on C, with a flat on the 6th degree (Fb). The second staff shows the scale starting on G, with flats on the 2nd (Ab) and 6th (Cb) degrees. Chord symbols C, F-, G-, and Bb are placed above the notes.

Altered Natural 4 & Natural 5

Two staves of music. The first staff shows the scale starting on C, with flats on the 2nd (Bb) and 3rd (Eb) degrees, and a sharp on the 4th degree (F#). The second staff shows the scale starting on G, with flats on the 2nd (Ab) and 3rd (Eb) degrees, and a sharp on the 4th degree (F#). Chord symbols C-, Db, Db-, Eb, F-, Ab, and Bb- are placed above the notes.

CHORD ALTERATION

The structural strength of a four-note grouping allows the improviser the freedom to alter the original chord while still maintaining clarity and direction in the melodic line.

A Dom 7 chord and Dom 7 sus chord can be interchanged. In many situations, a Dom 7 sus chord will sound more interesting and open than a Dom 7 chord. A Dom 7 sus chord with a four-note grouping that sounds the chord's altered tensions can create a unique sound and mood. Note: the chords in parentheses are the altered chords.

C7 (C7 sus 4)

F- B^b- F-

A Maj 7 chord can be altered to a Maj 7 #5 chord. Notice the resolution of the #5 of the chord back to the natural fifth. This may or may not be necessary depending upon the musical situation.

C Maj 7 (C Maj 7 #5)

E E-

The next example continues with the same concept of chord alteration. The Min 7 in the first measure is altered to a Min Maj 7, the Min 7 in the second measure is altered to a Min 7 flat-5, and the Dom 7 in the third measure is interchanged with a Dom 7 sus chord.

F Min 7 (F Min Maj 7) B^b Min 7 (B^b Min 7 b5)

C A^b D^b- A^b

E^b7 (E^b7 sus) A^b Maj 7

D^b-

HARMONIC ACTIVITY

Four-note groupings not only bring to the melodic line a sense of direction, they can also create a sense of active harmony over a static chord change. The following example illustrates this concept via the use of two alternating minor triads over a Dom 7 sus.

C7 sus4

F- B^b- F- B^b-

F- B^b- F-

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ANGULARITY

Not only can four-note groupings create lines that are based on small intervals, they can also create lines that are very angular. The next example illustrates the use of small intervals.

The following example shows the use of more angular lines.

MOTIVES

The use of the triad along with the passing note is a motive in itself. However, the improviser should be able to create and develop clear motives throughout a solo in order to make for strong compositional-type lines.

TENSION BALANCE

The improviser should strive for balance in terms of varying degrees of tension. Try to contrast more “out” lines via rich triads with the resolution of more “in” triads in order to maintain a sense of balance with tension.

For the purpose of this study in Four-Note Groupings, we are exclusively focusing on the use of this specific technique. In actual practice, it would be more common and musical to use a variety of improvisational devices. With this in mind, it would be good idea to balance the tension

of four-note groupings with a technique that involves more stable notes, as in Chord Tone Soloing. This next example illustrates the use of four-note groupings along with Chord Tone Soloing.

CONNECTING FOUR-NOTE GROUPINGS

In order to create a sense of flow and continuity in the lines, it helps to connect four note groupings from measure to measure via stepwise motion and/or to lead a four note grouping into a chord tone of the following chord also via step wise motion.

INCOMPLETE FOUR-NOTE GROUPINGS

Lines may sometimes use incomplete four-note groupings while retaining a clear sense of flow and direction. This next example sounds an incomplete four-note grouping of the B-flat triad on the C-7 flat-5 chord and an incomplete four-note grouping of the F#- triad over the F Dom 7 chord.

EMPHASIZING TENSIONS AND GUIDE-TONE LINES

Emphasizing specific notes of a four-note grouping over the chord can make for strong lines from a vertical perspective. The improviser should be able to emphasize specific tensions as well as bring out important guide-tone lines from chord to chord.

Part Two of this article will continue with Four-Note Grouping Combinations on Dom 7 chords as well as two choruses of a solo that uses four-note groupings over the progression of a well-known standard.

Ed Saindon is a Professor at Berklee College of Music. Vic Firth recently released his Signature model mallet for vibraphone and marimba. The complete study on Four-Note Groupings as well as other studies on improvisational techniques are available from Ed on his Website at www.edsaindon.com. PN



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