Opera Minora

brief notes on selected musical topics

In the notes of this series the focus will be on bridging the gap between musical theory and practice. The target audience is the jazz performer who reads music and has a good understanding of chord progressions and traditional harmony.

Using Side-Slipping in Improvisation, No. 1

Motivation

One of the techniques available for raising musical tension is to momentarily shift the current melodic phrase, chord, or key up or down a half step. This device is sometimes called *side-slipping*[1] and may be used as an integral part of a composition or as an unexpected departure from the underlying chord progression.

There are many examples in the literature where a phrase from some melody is repeated a half-step higher and then again in the original key. This is especially common in an ending tag for a song. Such changes usually involve a complete tonal shift for the entire ensemble. Our focus will be on extending the technique to include shifts in a single voice only and in applying side-slipping in less traditional contexts.

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[1]The terminology is not universally used but can be found, for example, in: Frank Feldman,"Jazz Riffs for Piano," ©1996, *Cherry Lane Music Co.*

Development Strategy

As in other notes of this series, the discussion will begin by examining an actual recorded phrase which illustrates some aspect of the technique. An analysis of the phrase will suggest general rules for applying the technique to other situations or creating new extensions.

The following phrase appeared in a recorded improvisation over the first four bars of a standard blues in F.

Example 1: Side-Slipping Over Blues Changes[2]

For convenience, I have placed the basic blues changes above the staff and the associated side-slipping changes below.

Analysis

The side-slipping occurs in the second measure where the melodic line shifts up a half-step from the tonic F to the key of G♭. In the third measure it returns to the tonic. This key shift has the effect of raising tension and then relaxing it again, much as a progression from tonic to dominant and back does.

A similar effect occurs when the key shifts downward and back. Examples of this are less common but will also be illustrated by examples.

Several points are worth mentioning. First, side-slipping requires some linear space to execute. Sections with sustained tonic harmony are particularly suitable candidates for a side-slipping embellishment. Very short chord or key shifts may be better interpreted as simple neighbor chords, but in later examples it will be shown that the color provided by side-slipping can still be applied even to single chords.

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[2]I have been unable to provide a citation for the recording from which this is taken.

Second, alternative explanations for upward key shifts in terms of tritone substitutions for the dominant are possible, but no similar explanation is readily available for downward key shifts.

Examples

Here is a phrase arranged for piano which uses both upward and downward side-slipping. This example is also to be applied to a 12 bar blues in F.
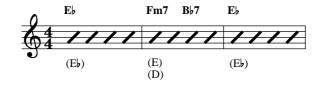

Example 2: Side-Slipping Piano Passage

The second bar uses an upward shift as before, but now there is a downward shift to E in the fourth bar. For continuity of thought, we might interpret the (B7) chord following the (E7) as a tritone substitution for the expected F7.

Although the written harmony clearly supports the key shift notion suggested by the melody line, this agreement among voices is not strictly necessary. A conventional walking bass or other accompaniment following the original harmony could be used instead. The improvised line in Example 1 is a case in point as the side-slipping only occurs in the melodic line. This is a good illustration of the power of linear organization which allows two voices to depart from a common harmonic base briefly and then return to it.[3]
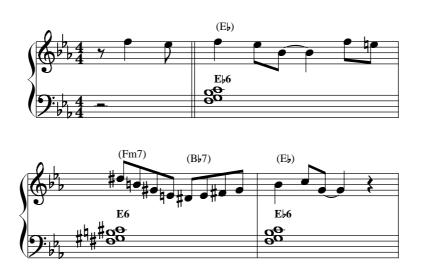
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[3]In these notes I will frequently observe that *linear trumps vertical* in special cases.

It is also possible to employ side-slipping over a conventional **ii-V-I** progression as shown below.

Example 3: Side-Slipping Changes over **ii-V-I**
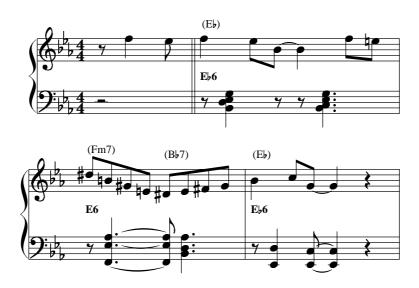(Original changes above, side-slipping changes below)

These changes might, for example, represent the first three bars of "But Not For Me", by George and Ira Gershwin. Note that the second bar might slip upward or downward a half step. A piano passage illustrating the upward substitution for the tonic follows.

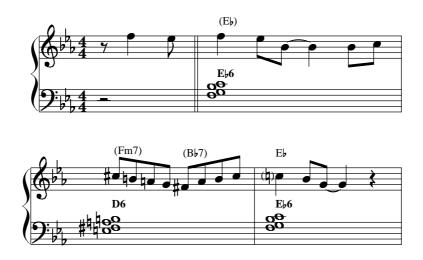Example 4: Upward Side-Slipping Piano Passage Over **ii-V-I**

Bear in mind that we are *not* side-slipping the original changes in the second bar, but instead are replacing them with an upward key shift from the preceding tonic.

In support of the claim that the accompanying harmony may stick with the original changes, the above melodic line has been rewritten below with the original changes in the left hand.
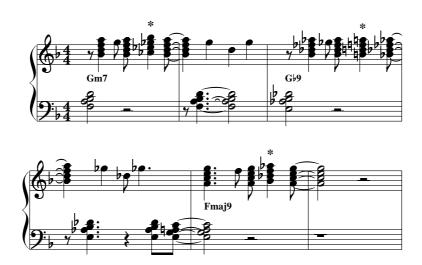

Example 5: Side-Slipping in Upper Voice Only

A shift downward using the same changes is illustrated in the next example.

Example 6: Downward Side-Slipping Piano Passage Over *ii-V-I*

5

It was mentioned earlier that side-slipping can be applied to single chords, and the next fragment demonstrates such an application. Clearly, these substitutions could be interpreted in terms of neighbor chords, but it is extremely unlikely that anyone would harmonize the B♭ in the melody of bar 1 with a neighbor chord. The treatment here is logical, colorful and satisfying.

Example 7: Chord Harmonization Using Side-Slipping
(Marked by Asterisks)

Conclusion

Beginning with an example from a recorded performance we have examined the concept of *side-slipping* and have provided a basic theoretic foundation for its use. Several examples illustrating and extended the idea have also been presented.

The key features of side-slipping are:

- It can be used to raise tension, particularly in sections with extended tonic harmony,

- Single voice side-slipping can be remarkably effective,

- Side-slipping can provide an alternate resource in harmonizing chord sequences.

Comments

Side-slipping provides a colorful alternative to conventional *ii-V-I* or funky blues treatments of jazz chord progressions.

As previously indicated, some examples of side-slipping can be interpreted using other concepts in music theory. Nevertheless, the technique is so simple and its use can provide such unique color that it merits its own respected place in the creative musician's tool box.