

Playing Leadsheets

by Mark Hayes

What is a leadsheet? It's simply a kind of musical "shorthand", consisting of the melody, chord symbols and the lyrics. Leadsheets are becoming more common today in praise and worship music. They are perfect for guitarists, but not so great for pianists, unless you know how to play them! The absence of the left hand part or a piano accompaniment puts the burden on the keyboard player to know what the chord symbols mean and how to improvise from them. In this issue of Improv Notes we explore how to harmonize a simple, well-known melody. I have purposely chosen a hymn-like melody because the block chord format is a familiar style in which to play.

Ex. 1 shows the tune, OLD HUNDREDTH, also know as DOXOLOGY, with chord symbols.

Ex. 1

G D Em Bm Em D G D Em

Praise God from whom all bless - ings flow; Praise Him, all crea - tures

5 C G D Em D/F# G D G/B C F#°/A G D/F#

here be - low; Praise Him a - bove, ye heav'n - ly host; Praise

10 G Em D Am G/B G/C D G C G

Fa - ther, Son and Ho - ly Ghost. A - - - men.

Notice that there are only seven different chords in this melody, although they are used in different inversions. Ex. 2 shows each chord in root position. Do you know all of these chords? Can you play them in different inversions? This will be an important key to improvisation. Chords are rarely used in just their root positions.

Ex. 2

G D Em Bm C F#° Am

Use Ex. 3 & 4 as exercises to develop dexterity in playing chord inversions. Once you can play inversions of G and D chords securely, adapt this exercise to play the other five chords listed in Ex. 2.

Ex. 3

Ex. 4

Musical notation for Exercise 4. It features a D chord in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The bass line consists of a sequence of chords, each with a triplet of notes. The chords are: D (root position), D (first inversion), D (second inversion), D (root position), D (first inversion), D (second inversion), D (root position), and D (first inversion). The triplet notes are: G-A-B, A-B-C, B-C-D, G-A-B, A-B-C, B-C-D, G-A-B, and A-B-C.

Now go back to Ex. 1 and try to play the melody in the RH only, filling in the harmony based on the chord symbols. Remember that many of these chords will be an inversion of the root position. Let your fingers become comfortable with these chords in their inverted state and how they function as "neighboring" chords and passing chords. Where there is more than one letter and a slash mark above a note, play a chord based on the letter to the left of the slash. I'll teach you more about the letter to the right of the slash in the next exercise. If you need help figuring out the voicing of these chords, refer to Ex. 5.

Ex. 5

Musical notation for Exercise 5. It shows a melody line in the right hand with chord symbols above and lyrics below. The chord symbols are: G, D, Em, Bm, Em, D, G, D, Em, C, F#°/A, G, D/F#. The lyrics are: Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here be - low; Praise Him a - bove, ye heav'n - ly host; Praise Fa - ther, Son and Ho - - - ly Ghost. A - - - men.

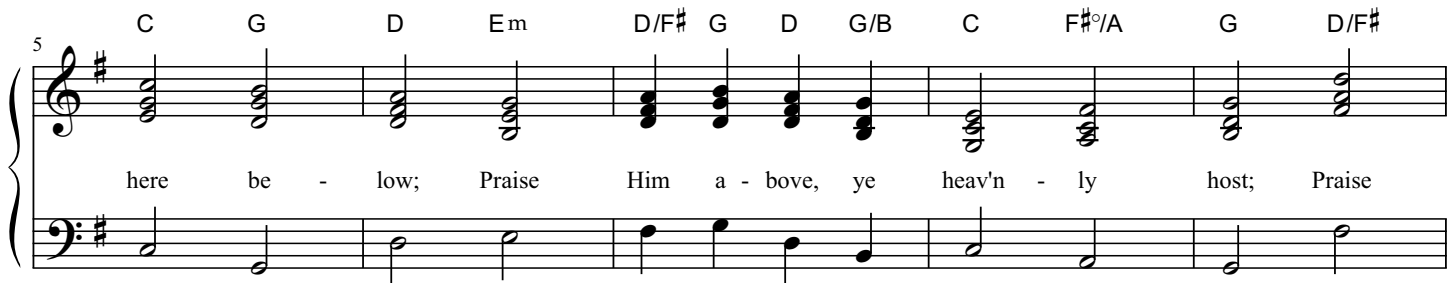
Once you can play the melody with chords in your right hand, you're ready to add the left hand. Let's keep it simple and add a single note bass line based on the chord symbols. In measure 7, there is a chord symbol with 2 letters and a slash. This is how we indicate an inversion in chord symbol language. The first or left letter is the chord you play with your right hand. The second or right letter is a single note that you play with your left hand. If you see D/F#, you would play a D triad in your right hand with an F# bass note in your left hand.

Now go back to Ex. 1 and try playing both hands together, with harmony in your right hand and a single bass line in your left hand. If you need help, refer to Ex. 6.

Ex. 6

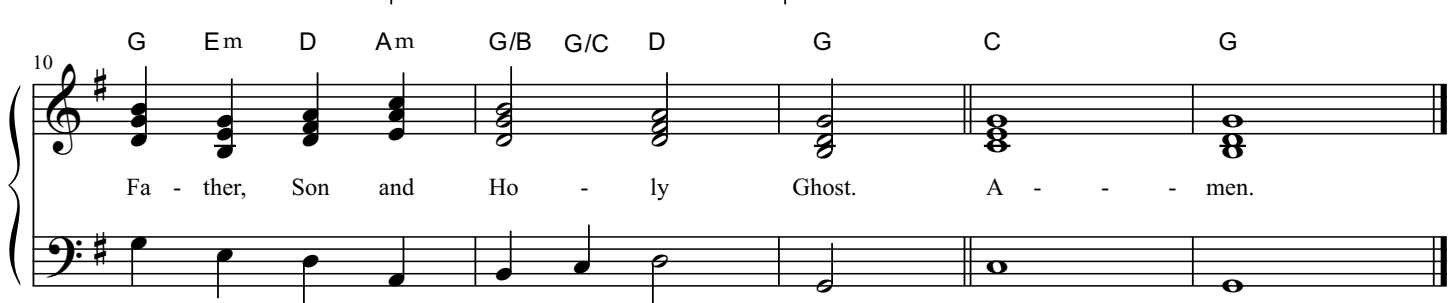
Musical notation for Exercise 6. It shows a melody line in the right hand with chord symbols above and a bass line in the left hand. The chord symbols are: G, D, Em, Bm, Em, D, G, D, Em, C, F#°/A, G, D/F#. The lyrics are: Praise God from whom all blessings flow; Praise Him, all creatures here be - low; Praise Him a - bove, ye heav'n - ly host; Praise Fa - ther, Son and Ho - - - ly Ghost. A - - - men.

5 C G D Em D/F# G D G/B C F#^o/A G D/F#



here be - low; Praise Him a - bove, ye heav'n - ly host; Praise

10 G Em D Am G/B G/C D G C G



Fa - ther, Son and Ho - ly Ghost. A - - - men.

To augment this melody, try playing the bass line in octaves while playing the right hand chords up in a higher inversion. If you have small hands, this might be a bit taxing, but you can play some three note chords in your RH occasionally to give your hand a rest. Ex. 7 demonstrates this type of augmentation. Notice how the C chord in m.13 is spelled out with the intervals of fifths and sixths to keep rhythmic movement throughout the measure. This is just one of many ways you can "fill in" this measure.

Ex. 7 G D Em Bm Em D G D Em



Praise God from whom all bless - ings flow; Praise Him, all crea - tures

5 C G D Em D/F# G D G/B C F#^o/A G D/F#



here be - low; Praise Him a - bove, ye heav'n - ly host; Praise

10 G Em D Am G/B G/C D G C G



Fa - ther, Son and Ho - ly Ghost. A - - - men.

In our future issues of Improv Notes, we will learn how to play a leadsheet of a more contemporary melody.