

Solo Vibraphone Playing with Diatonic Pathways

BY JOHN MARK PIPER

One of the most difficult aspects of learning to play solo vibraphone begins with knowing what to do and how to accompany oneself in a typical song such as a jazz standard, bossa, or ballad. This means having ideas and hearing a corresponding accompaniment part or counterpoint that goes along with the melody. One of the best ways I've found for coming up with accompaniment ideas for solo vibraphone playing is to focus on the song's harmony and to improve one's ears in terms of hearing melodies based upon the tonal center of the song.

Dividing a song into horizontal and vertical relationships and learning to recognize the melodic tendencies or "expressions" is a powerful tool for getting to the essence of the harmony and melody. In order to illustrate this technique, I'll use the song "Misty," a classic standard by pianist Erroll Garner in the key of C.

VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL RELATIONSHIPS

An important step toward harmonic freedom and having accompaniment ideas within a song is to hear each melody note as an individual component related to the harmony and, most importantly, the primary key of the song. This type of relationship focuses on the vertical or harmonic character of the music. Focusing one's attention on the harmony will add more depth and understanding to the linear relationship as well.

A *vertical relationship* is one that compares and contrasts individual melodic and harmonic components to the key and harmony. For instance, the first note of "Misty" begins on G (the fifth of the key, which is called *sol* in solfege). Even when isolated from the rest of the melody, this note's relationship to the key and harmony has functionality and expressiveness.

The premise of this article utilizes the system of solfege, which uses syllables for every note in the chromatic scale. Using solfege syllables and the resultant "diatonic pathways" (diatonic scale movement of each melody note up or down to the tonic of the song's tonal center) of every melody note will reinforce the melody in the player's ear in terms of the tonal center of the song's melody.

In working with and learning solfege, the reader is encouraged to develop the ability to sing any standard song with the solfege syllables. Many books are available that deal with solfege. As a preparation for those unfamiliar with solfege, the following syllables are used in the solfege system.

SOLFEGE SYLLABLES

Diatonic major scale: do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do.

Ascending chromatic scale: do, di, re, ri, mi, fa, fi, sol, si, la, li, ti, do

Descending chromatic scale: do, ti, te, la, le, sol, se, fa, mi, me, re, ra, do

EXERCISE

The following exercise is designed to help strengthen the vertical

realization in conjunction with the linear relationship of the song's melody to the harmony.

Instructions: Sing and play each melody note in free time (rubato) using the solfege syllables along with its accompanying chord. Hold the note long enough to play the following mental exercise: As you play the note, the first natural inclination is an expectation for that note to move on to the next melody note. However, instead of doing that, "step sing" your way through the song by singing each melody note back to *do* of the key using the shortest diatonic pathway. Work your way through the song in the following way:

1. Play and sing the first melody note, hold it, then, instead of continuing with the melody of "Misty," play (and sing) the pathway from that note back to *do*.
2. Start over at the top of the song, play (and sing) to the second note of "Misty," hold that note, then play and sing its pathway back to *do*.
3. Start over at the top of the song, play to the third note, hold that note, and then play and sing its pathway back to *do*.
4. Start over at the top and play to the fourth note, hold that note, and then follow its pathway back to *do*. Continue this process through to the end of the song.

Below are the first eight melody notes and pathways of "Misty." The large notes are melody notes in "Misty" and the small notes are the diatonic pathways back to *do*.

The image shows four staves of musical notation in 4/4 time, illustrating the first eight melody notes of "Misty" and their diatonic pathways back to do. The notes are: 1. G (sol), 2. A (la), 3. B (ti), 4. C (do), 5. D (re), 6. E (mi), 7. F (fa), 8. G (sol). The pathways are shown as smaller notes connected by lines to the tonic (do).

sol la ti do mi re do

ti do sol la ti do

la ti do te ti do

la ti do sol la ti do

MAJOR SCALE PATHWAYS

Play and sing each melody note back to *do* via the shortest diatonic pathway. If the melody note is *re*, *mi*, or *fa*, sing it down to *do*. If it's *sol*, *la* or *ti*, sing it up to *do*.

Diatonic Pathways:

- do
- re: do
- mi: re do
- fa: mi re do
- sol: la ti do
- la: ti do
- ti: do

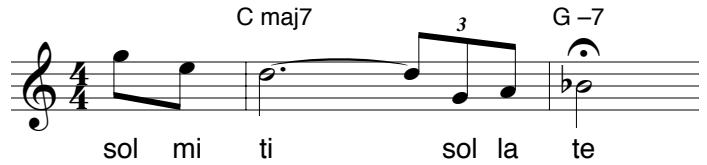
Non-Diatonic Notes: Notes that are not part of the primary key, such as the sixth melody note in "Misty" (B-flat), should be treated using the following steps to help establish a strong vertical relationship:

1. Sing and play the non-diatonic note to the nearest chord tone of Imaj7.
2. Sing and play that note to *do* using the shortest diatonic pathway.

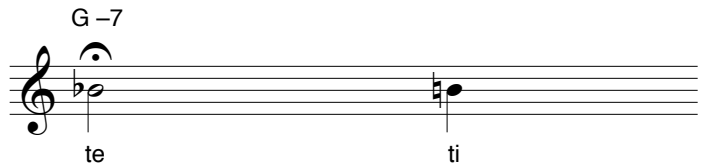
Non-diatonic chords: Unless the key change is long enough to support a new and permanent-sounding *do*, the pathways should remain diatonic to the primary key even when the harmony is not. In the second measure of "Misty," the chord is G-7 which contains a B-flat. The pathway should ignore the hint of a temporary key change and head for *do* via the shortest diatonic pathway in the key of C. This helps strengthen your understanding of the relationship between the temporary key and the song's primary key.

Examples of "vertical relationship building" for non-diatonic melody notes and their diatonic pathways:

1. Play and sing the melody up to the note you are working on.

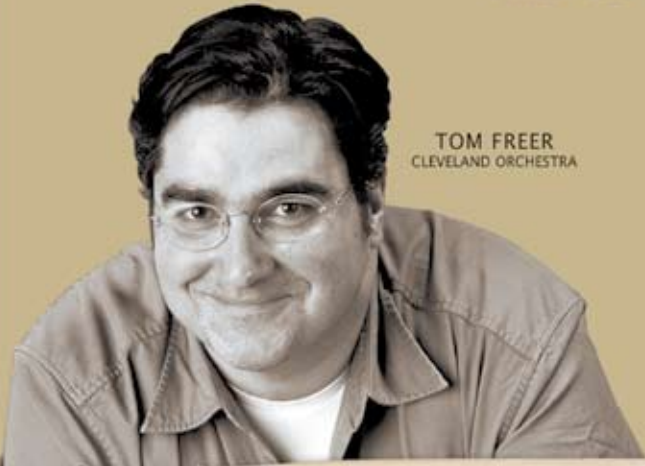


2. Add solfeggio, sing and play to the nearest chord tone of Imaj7.

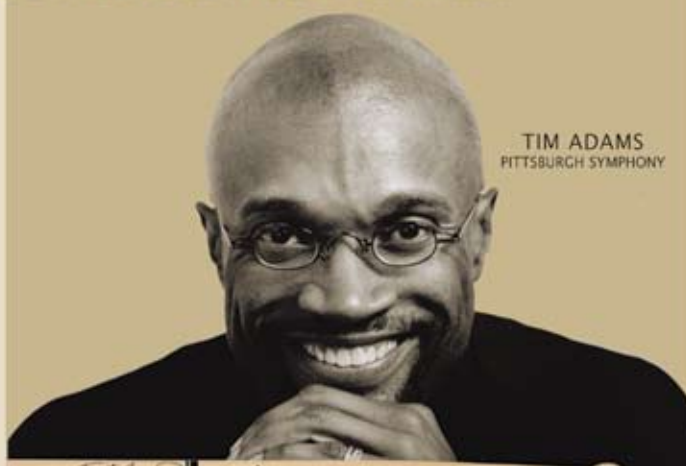


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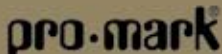
TXOLBGW Large Bead General Orchestral

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3. Sing and play the shortest diatonic pathway back to *do*.

Examples of building vertical relationships on diatonic notes during non-diatonic chords:

1. Play/sing up to the note you are currently working on and hold.

2. Add solfeggio and sing/play to *do*.

Even though there is non-diatonic harmony present in the chord (B-flat), the pathway should ignore the hint of a temporary key change and head for *do* via the shortest diatonic pathway in the key of C.

Continue this process to the end of the song using diatonic pathways. The following is a sample of vertical strengthening at the bridge.

1. Sing and play from the beginning of the song, up to the note you are working on. (This example is focusing on the note B-flat in the first bar of the bridge). Hold the note until it settles in your ear.

m.17: Bridge

2. Sing/play it to the nearest chord tone of IMaj7 and then sing/play the diatonic pathway back to the primary key's *do*.

Note: you may also find it helpful to sing the major scale after each exercise to strengthen the original tonic key in your ear.

Vibists are encouraged to work with this concept on other songs in the standard repertoire. Pick tunes that have melodies and chords that are primarily diatonic to one primary key. A few suggestions for songs that would be appropriate to begin with are "Take the A Train," "My Romance," and "Days of Wine and Roses."

John Mark Piper is a solo vibraphonist teaching in the Dallas, Texas area. His current focus is providing lessons, solo vibraphone arrangements, and recordings at www.JohnMarkPiper.com. **PN**

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