

A Powerful Solo Mallet Performance

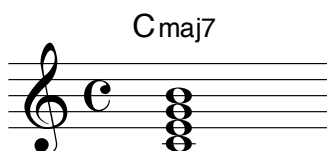
by Jerry Tachoir

Imagine a piano player that is only permitted to use 4 fingers at a time and only 3 octaves from F - F. Sounds a little frustrating and extremely limited. This is the standard range of most vibraphones today. I have been on a personal campaign for several years to expand the instrument to 4 octaves or at least 3.5 down to a C with no obvious luck.

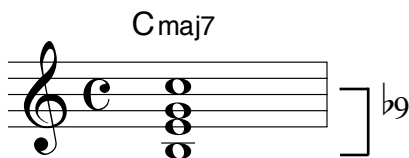
Taking what we have and working with it is our only choice at present and we need to make the best of it. So, in the contemporary world of rich piano and synthesizer voicings, powerful guitar chords with lots of effects, how can we make the vibraphone compete?

1. Developing an independent strong 4 mallet technique is most important and is expected in today's music. Without going into detail about all the dampening and pedaling techniques, which can be obtained in my "Contemporary Mallet Method - An Approach to the Vibraphone and Marimba" - (Riohcat Music); let me say that very few players have really mastered these concepts. Listening to a 4 mallet player that hasn't developed these dampening techniques can be a very aural awakening experience. The vibraphone contains a lot of harmonics and transient frequencies that can saturate recording tape while the VU meters report everything as OK. These frequencies when not properly dampened and allowed to leak into adjacent chords or melodies can produce an awful sound.

2. A strong harmonic awareness and quick analytical mind can work wonders on enhancing one's sense of appropriate choice of chordal notes and tensions and proper use of dissonance - resolution. A beginner will play chord voicings in close root position (smaller than an octave). A Cmaj7 chord will be voiced with C in the root and the notes E, G, and B above it in that order.

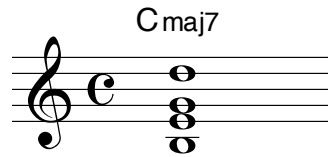


When a chord is in this position and contained within an octave, it is a very weak uneventful pastel sounding chord. This is acceptable if it is the desired sound for the tune but if you need a power chord for an aggressive moment in the music, this bland chord won't cut it. A quick fix to chords in close position is to exchange position of the outside two voices. Put the bottom root C on top and the previous top note B on the bottom.



This voicing allows the chord to expand bigger than an octave, hence producing a bigger sound. If you will notice however, the outside two notes now form a $\flat 9$ interval which tends to sound very dissonant. Although this $\flat 9$ is not a problem on instruments such as the vibes, piano, guitar, where all the notes of the chord are produced on the same instrument. However, if you voiced

this chord for 4 trumpets, the problem would arise when the bottom B note player would want to go sharp and the top C note player would tend to want to go flat creating some instability in tuning. A quick fix for this $\flat 9$ situation would be to substitute tension 9 (note D on Cmaj7 chord) for the root which is now on the top. This again produces a bigger chord hence a bigger vibe sound.



Harmonically, this is only a small example of the tools and tricks in executing harmonies on the vibraphone. In order to obtain a strong identity to the original harmonic context, guide tones should be included in every chord, preferably as low on the keyboard as possible to establish a full sound. The Guide tones are generally the 3rd and 7th of chords and when played alone, give the strongest identity to the original harmonic intent. Once the guide tones are established, then fill in the remainder of the chord with chord tones or tensions depending on the situation. By all means avoid conflict with the melody note such as half steps, seconds, or unallowable $\flat 9$ intervals. The decision to utilize a chord tone or tension depends on several factors such as; quality of the chord, intended dissonance or consonance, style of music, range of melody or soloist, etc. There are a great deal of immediate factors to consider and the more you play and encounter different situations, the better you get. Comping - *harmonically accompanying a melody or soloist*, is a very personal thing and one of the hardest things to teach since it's basically a matter of taste and harmonic awareness. Listening to recordings of great players and studying their comping skills will help build your vocabulary and hopefully give the guidelines necessary to develop your own special style.

3. Use of rhythm and arpeggios to develop a sense of motion. As a solo vibes player, it is often difficult to maintain a sense of time and rhythm while at the same time playing the melody or soloing and harmonizing on the fly. Here is where a true 4 mallet independence is important. By playing the chord notes independently either in an arpeggio fashion or with a sort of root-fifth bass motion, this creates an extra rhythmic support to fill in the holes but more so to allow momentum by incorporating a time base. A good example of this is in the tune "Circle Blue" by Marlene Tachoir and published in the "Solo Vibraphone Collection" - (Riohcat Music) and recorded on the "Jerry Tachoir Vibraphone Video" (Master Study Series).

A special touch is also necessary to maintain a dynamic separation between the melody or solo line versus the accompaniment figure. In other works the lead lines need to come out and avoid getting too caught up in the support. One never leaves a concert singing the harmony yet a lot of players really go overboard with their support harmonization and background figures.

4. Dynamics can be invaluable to add emphasis to music. There is a saying, “When you want attention – whisper”. This is very true and can be very dramatic when an entire band can be sensitive enough to follow a soloist and bring it down to a whisper. The same is true in solo vibraphone playing. Exaggerated dynamics and as stated in the previous paragraph, a dynamic separation between lead line and support harmonization is important.

Another strong way to bring out the lead line is by playing it in octaves or another appropriate interval. By playing octaves in your right hand, this leaves your left hand alone to add support which in this case would be predominantly the guide tones either as a chord or independently to create motion.

These suggestions are only a few to follow on that seemingly endless road of full sounding solo vibraphone playing. Other than the dampening section, these suggestions apply to the marimba and all other polyphonic instruments. It may seem like an overwhelming task to take on let alone master, however if the desire and effort are there, by listening, practicing, playing, and analyzing what works, you can be moving toward creating powerful solo vibraphone performances which will help develop your writing and overall musicianship skills as well.