

Thicker Sounds on Mallet Instruments

By
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The nature of mallet instruments, even when played with a contemporary four-mallet technique, is somewhat thin in sound compared to piano and guitar players. This lack of assertive powerful thick sounding chords, especially on a three-octave vibraphone, is something I really try to overcome. It wasn't until I took a course at Berklee College of Music taught by Herb Pomeroy that the world opened up to me. This course entitled, "Line Writing" is primarily a big band writing course and as a mallet player, I initially didn't think it would change my mallet playing style. "Line Writing" is one of those upper semester courses that requires a great deal of prerequisites, and students must qualify to take this course.

Teaching the entire "line writing" concept is beyond the scope of this article, however, a few concepts will change your view regarding chord voicings. Herb teaches a concept of associating dissonances within chords to create a thicker sound. The more dissonances within the chord, the thicker the overall sound. Herb also teaches that in a musical composition there should be a primary climactic moment and perhaps several secondary climactic moments. The object is to voice the chord at the primary climax of the composition with as much PD (prime dissonance) as possible and every voicing before and after this Primary climax should not exceed the number of PD (prime dissonance). Prime dissonances are: half-steps, major 7th's, and allowable flat 9 intervals. This climax analysis approach is for orchestrating an entire piece of music, yet the concepts of dissonance are the same for comping.

There are several pages of rules to follow and allowable situations and avoid notes that are necessary to know to fully utilize this writing technique and get the intended sound. That is why this is a semester course of high prerequisites.

In a nutshell, we are trying to get the intended chord sound (major, minor, diminished, etc.) and utilize available notes from the related mode of each chord and incorporate as many allowable PD (prime dissonance) as we feel necessary to enhance the thickness of the chord.

Here is an example of a D-7^b5 chord. The first voicing is a typical voicing played by most beginning mallet players. The second example utilizes a PD, half-step between the G and the A^b (the 11th and the ^b5th). This chord will then have 1PD. Listen to the sound of both voicings. You should be able to hear the dissonant rub between the PD of the second chord.

The image shows two musical staves, each with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). Above the first staff is the label "D-7^b5". The first staff contains a chord voicing with notes D^b (B-flat), F, G, and A^b (G-flat). Above the second staff is the label "D-7^b5". The second staff contains a chord voicing with notes D^b (B-flat), F, G, and A^b (G-flat), with a half-step dissonance between G and A^b.

Now, the more PD we add, the more aggressive the sound will become. As a four-mallet player, our only way of adding more notes is to reattack over a sustaining chord on the vibraphone. It is important to keep in mind the intended chord sound and this can be accomplished by maintaining the guide tones within your voicing. Guide tones are primarily the 3rd and 7th of chords and when played alone, these two notes can bring out the intended chord sound and progression. You will also note that the 3rd, one of the mentioned guide tones, is missing in the second example. This is one of those rules where an 11 is an excellent choice on minor chords and can be used in place of the 3rd.

I find that on the vibraphone, again because of its limited range, if I can keep the guide tones in my left hand on the lower part of the instrument where there is a bigger sound, the intended chord sound and progression will be audible, and my right hand is free to enhance the rest of the chord with the melody, a chord tone or tension or an allowable dissonance. Initially, this is a lot of thinking and analysis that becomes easier if not automatic after some practice. Finally, we can compete with pianists and their life-long quest for the perfect voicing.