

TEACHING SONGWRITING

BASIC ACCOMPANYING AT THE PIANO

To create and perform songs, a person needs to have some basic chording skills at a piano or a guitar. Voice or piano students can learn the fundamentals of accompanying in the early stages of lessons, even before they learn to read notes.

Basic Accompanying Position

The right hand plays chords near the middle of the piano. The left hand plays the root in the bass. (A fifth or octave might be added above this single bass tone.) The right hand can omit the root of the chord. These are the six basic triads in the key of C.

Musical notation showing six basic triads in the key of C: C, F, G, Am, Dm, and Em. Each chord is shown in a grand staff with the right hand playing the chord and the left hand playing the root note.

Inverting Chords, Adding Melodies

Chords are most resonant and clear when played around middle C, so we often need to *invert* a chord. Here are the four chords used in *Let It Be*. Vary the way you play the chords by playing them in different rhythmic patterns or by breaking them up.

Musical notation showing four chords in the key of C: C, G, Am, and F. Each chord is shown in a grand staff with the right hand playing the chord and the left hand playing the root note.

Some Broken Chord Patterns

Musical notation showing broken chord patterns for the C chord. The right hand plays a sequence of notes (C-E-G-E-G-E) over a steady bass line of C notes.

Slash Chords

Musical notation showing slash chords C/E and C/F. Each chord is shown in a grand staff with the right hand playing the chord and the left hand playing the root note.

Beyond Triads: Adding Chords To Chords

Once the student is comfortable playing simple triads in Basic Accompanying Position, they can move toward more complex chords. The basic idea is to “trade in” the root of the right-hand chord for a neighboring note that adds color to the chord. To add a second, move UP A WHOLE STEP from the root. Seconds enrich the characteristic flavor of a chord. To add a 7th, move DOWN A WHOLE STEP from the root. This turns a major triad into a dominant 7th chord, or a minor triad into a minor 7 chord. Move DOWN A HALF STEP from the root of a major chord to make a major seventh chord, written Cmaj7.

Musical notation showing complex chords: C, C(add2), Dm, Dm(add2), C, C7, Dm, Dm7, C, and Cmaj7. Each chord is shown in a grand staff with the right hand playing the chord and the left hand playing the root note.

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BEGINNING TO CREATE (Playing Duets with Students)

- Play a simple chord progression (two or four chords such as C G Dm C) in Accompaniment Position over and over, and have your student sing (or play) improvised melodies. Ask the student to improvise with just chord tones first, then neighbor tones, then any tone in the key. Do this with many different progressions and Patterns until melodies flow easily. Perhaps add words suggested by the music.
- Use accompaniments from the *Pattern Play* series such as *Reflecting*. “Play on white keys” or sing.

Pattern

Vacation

- Most students can improvise melodies (and sometimes lyrics) above the 12-Bar Blues Progression, which consists of three 4-bar phrases: A statement (four bars on the I chord), that statement repeated (four bars beginning on the IV chord), then a different statement (four bars beginning on the V chord).

C⁷ 4x F⁷ 2x C⁷ 2x G⁷ F⁷ C⁷ G⁷

“CHANGE JUST ONE” TECHNIQUE

First, have the student learn to sing and accompany a song that uses just a few chords. *Happy Birthday* (C, F, and G) and *Let It Be* (C, F, G, and Am) are good for this. Then ask the student to:

- Change the **lyrics** while keeping the same melody and chords. The student realizes *I can create lyrics*.
- Change the **melody** while keeping the lyrics and chords the same. Prepare students by first having them sing melodies with just chord tones, then bring in neighboring tones (non-chord tones) such as upper neighbors, lower neighbors, and passing tones. This develops in the student the belief that *I can create melodies*.
- Change the **chord progression**. Play the same chords but in a different order. Then sing new melodies with this progression, without lyrics. This develops the belief that *I can create chord progressions*.

“LYRICS FIRST” APPROACH

- Getting ideas for lyrics: Journals. Keeping a digital recorder handy. Elbow technique. Teacher asks questions of students (what’s on your mind?, favorite songs?, etc.).
- Setting lyrics to music: • Set a pulse and meter. • Principles of scansion. • Different phrasings.
- Some people prefer to create the melody then the harmony, while others prefer the opposite way.

PHRASING AND FORMS

- Shape lyrics into various verse and chorus forms. We have students create melodies and songs using standard four-bar and eight-bar progressions at first. Here’s a time-honored song form: VCVBCB. Verses (V) tell the story, Choruses (C) convey the repeating message, while the Bridge (B) is like a verse on steroids, setting up the grand return to the Chorus.

NOTATION AND RECORDING

Lyric sheet vs. lead sheet vs. standard notation. Programs and apps. Digital recording and editing.