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# Melodic Treatment: Non-functional Chord Substitution in Commercial Music

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**Abstract.** This paper presents one of the chapters from the applicant's book 'Harmonic Explorations' which explores advanced techniques for chord substitutions in jazz harmony. It will focus on one of the chapters that uses a technique called 'Melodic Treatment'. This technique results in harmonization that feature chords that are essentially non-functional, but which create a modern jazz sound. The technique essentially treats each note as if it existed outside of the context of the song's key. In other words, any given note can be harmonized in any key that contains that note. Imagine that a song is in the key of C and the melody note is a E harmonized by an F maj7 chord (the IV chord in the key) you could substitute an F#min 7 chord - which still harmonizes the melody note beautifully but is now non-functional. Often some sort of organizing principle guides the choice of non-functional chords. For example, you could harmonize every melody note longer than a quarter-note in a given passage with the same sonority (e.g. minor 11th chords), or create an interesting bass line.

**Keywords.** Jazz Harmony, Non-functional Harmony, Tonal Destabilization, Tonicization, Tritone substitution, Jazz Harmonic Structures.

#### 1 Introduction

The chord substitution technique that I call Melodic Treatment (MT) opens up many interesting harmonization possibilities. The essential nature of the MT technique is to find harmonies that support the melody but are <u>not</u> associated with the prevailing key center. To get a better sense of what this means it is a good idea to review how harmonization usually works and then examine how we might open up other possibilities.

In most tonal and modal musical styles the melody is the primary element. It is considered to be in the foreground and all other musical considerations refer to and support the melody. It is also true generally that the melody and harmony are both usually made from notes determined by the key center. For a song in the key of C major the notes comprising the melody are primarily drawn from the seven notes of the C

major scale. Likewise, the harmonies must also use those same seven notes.<sup>1</sup> The effect of this is to limit the possibilities in the harmony. For example, the note E in the melody could be harmonized by any chord that can be created from notes in the C major scale - C maj7, D min9, E min7, F maj7, G13, A min7, and B min7b5(11). This list of seven chords is a small fraction of <u>all</u> possible chords that contain the note E.

In the MT technique we temporarily suspend the rule that the harmony needs to be from the same *key* as the melody. In an abstract sense any specific note could be found in numerous possible keys — e.g. the note E is in the major keys of F, C, G, D, A, E, and B and the natural minor keys Dm, Am, Em, Bm, F#m, C#m, and G#m.<sup>2</sup> The MT technique allows us to borrow chords from <u>any</u> of those keys as long as the borrowed chord contains the note E. Each melodic note then becomes a unique and independent element in this form of reharmonization. Another way to say this is that the melody note becomes connected for a short time to a new key signature according to a degree we arbitrarily assign to it. When this is done the resulting harmonies can become difficult to explain 'functionally' (i.e. using Roman numerals) and are sometimes referred to as non-functional harmonies.

Before we look at a few examples here are a few observations that might be useful. This technique is more effective when applied to long notes. Be careful when using MT substitutions. They are a form of harmonic embellishment which can create some beautiful effects but they also tend to destabilize the tonal center.

In Fig. 6.1 the melody comprises the notes A, B, and C. Functionally these are scale degrees 6, 7 and 8 of the key of C. The original harmony uses chords from the key of C – D min7, G7 and C maj6. For the MT harmony let's consider some other chords that harmonize the note A but are <u>not</u> in the key of C. For example, the melody note A could be the 9<sup>th</sup> of a G min9 or it could be the #11 of an Eb maj7 (#11) chord – there are <u>many</u> possibilities.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Chromatic notes, i.e. notes that are not in the key, are not entirely avoided but they must he handled with care.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> This is considering only relative minor keys. If we include other minor modes like Dorian, Melodic Minor, etc then there are many more possibilities.



Fig. 1. Melodic Treatment Harmonization.

In Fig. 1 I chose to think of the melody note A as the major 7th of a Bb maj7 chord. The next melody note (B) will also have many possible chords that harmonize it that are not in the key of C. I chose to think of the note B as the 5th of an E9 chord (I put the G# in the bass to provide a nice descending whole-step motion in the bass line that moves in contrary motion with the melody). For the final melody note (C) I used the chord F# maj7(#11) — the C (enharmonic B#) being the #11 of the chord. The effect of these MT substitutions is still harmonious with the original melody but does not support any specific tonal center. In fact, you could spend a whole day trying to find a Roman numeral analysis for these chords and not find anything sensible.

#### 2 More Examples of the MT Technique in Action

We will now consider some examples to demonstrate how the MT technique can result in some really beautiful reharmonizations. In each of the examples below we will use the opening few measures of the tune *A Foggy Day*. The original changes are shown in Fig. 2 in order to give some context. It can be seen that the melody note C is harmonized by an F maj7 chord, the Eb is harmonized by an Ab7 chord, the D is harmonized by a G min7 chord, and the A is harmonized by a C7 (13) chord. All of these chords can be thought of functionally in the key of F major — F maj7 = I, Ab7 = bV substitution for V7/ii, G min7 = ii, and C13 = V.



Fig. 2. Excerpt from A Foggy Day.

#### 3 The 9th

Fig. 3 shows a reharmonization where each marked note of the melody (the downbeats) is the ninth of a specific chord. In the first bar the melody note is C which would be the 9th of a Bb maj9, Bb min9, or Bb9. Both will sound good but will have a different affect. In the example I chose the Bb maj9 because it has the same chord type as the original F maj7. The Eb note in bar 2 would be the 9th of Db maj9, Db min9, or Db9 – I chose the Db9. For the 3rd measure the note D is the 9th of C maj9, C min9, or C9. Since the original chord is a minor 7th chord, I chose C min9. (Try both the C maj9 and C min9 and choose the one that you like better.) For the last chord the note A would be the 9th of some G chord. In this case we'll use the G min9.



each melody note is the 9th of its harmony

Fig. 3. Excerpt from A Foggy Day Reharmonized.

#### 4 The #11th

Fig. 4 reharmonizes the same musical excerpt. But this time each marked note will assume the condition of the #11 degree of a major 7th chord or a dominant 7th chord and from there we will build the chord having that note as a top voice of the chord. Since the #11 is not usually considered a good sound with a minor type chord we will not use any minor 7th type chords. In Fig. 6.4 the melody note C would be the #11 of a Gb maj7(#11) chord, the note Eb is the #11 of A maj7(#11), the note D is the #11 of Ab7(#11), and the note A is the #11 of Eb maj7(#11).



Fig. 4. Excerpt from A Foggy Day Reharmonized.

# 5 The Perfect 4th (11th)

In Fig. 5 we will treat each marked note of the melody as the 4th of a 7th sus chord. (We could use 11th chords instead). The note C is the 4th of G7 sus, Eb is the 4th of Bb7 sus, D is the 4th of A7 sus, and A is the 4th of E7 sus.



Fig. 5. Excerpt from A Foggy Day Reharmonized.

# 6 The 13<sup>th</sup>

In Fig. 6 below each marked note will be the 13th of a dominant 7th chord and from there we will build the chord having that note as a top voice of the chord.



Fig. 6. Excerpt from A Foggy Day Reharmonized.

# 7 The Major 7t

Finally, we will play each marked note of this melody as the seventh of a certain major 7th chord. In these chords it is also possible to include extensions beyond the 7th. For example, the MT in the second measure adds the #11.

Fig. 7. Excerpt from A Foggy Day Reharmonization.

This type of harmonization has an interesting effect and has been very common in jazz harmony for many years. It is important to observe that all of the reharmonizations we have done so far sound excellent but they are very different from each other. This technique opens up a really beautiful and varied palette of harmonies.

## 8 Melodic Treatment – Random Use

In the following examples we will see how this technique would be applied effectively to the song *It Could Happen to You*. Fig. 6.8 gives the original harmonization for the opening 8 measures.



Fig. 8. Excerpt from It Could Happen to You with Original Harmony.

In Fig. 9 the chords were chosen to create a bass line that rises by semitone from the Ab in measure 1 to the arrival of the Eb in measure 7. To accomplish this the melody note is not always in the same relationship to the chord as it was in the previous examples. The melody note is the 3rd of the chord for the Ab maj7 and Bb maj7 chords, the 7<sup>th</sup> for the C maj7, Db maj7(#11), and D min7(11) chords, and the #11 of the Eb maj7(#11) chord.



Fig. 9. It Could Happen to You with Ascending Bass Line.

#### In summary:

- if the original chord is a Maj7 or Min7 type chord avoid using a Dominant 7<sup>th</sup> type chord as the MT substitution;
- if the original chord is a dominant chord it is acceptable to use dominant 7, maj7, or min7 type chords as the MT substitution;
- the MT chord can be for a single chord or a series of substitutions;
- often it is effective to use chords that give an interesting bass line; e.g. by step or minor 3rd;
- using a series of chords that have the same chord type is also a good idea. See Figs. 6.5 and 6.7.

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This book presents a collection of selected papers that present the current variety of all aspect of music research, development and education, at a high level. The respective chapters address a diverse range of theoretical, empirical and practical aspects underpinning the music science and teaching and learning, as well as their pedagogical implications. The book meets the growing demand of practitioners, researchers, scientists, educators and students for a comprehensive introduction to key topics in these fields. The volume focuses on easy-to-understand examples and a guide to additional literature.

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