



In The Doghouse

By Chris Fitzgerald

Shell Voicings For Bass, Part 2: Voice Leading Principles

In the previous article, we defined the term “shell voicings” as double stops commonly used to outline chords in jazz chord progressions, and then identified the intervals of the 10th and the 7th as the most common types of shell voicings used in jazz, because they outline the root and one of the two most important guide tones (3rd and 7th) that can be used to represent a chord in the jazz language. We went on to show how to construct a major and minor variety of each double stop, and how to categorize each type of voicing by naming them after the lowest string that the voicings are built on: voicings in major or minor 10ths were called “Type IV” voicings, because they are built up from the 4th string, and voicings built in major or minor 7ths were called “Type III” voicings, because they are built up from the 3rd string (both voicing types include an upper note played on the 1st string).

The designation of voicing types into these two categories is

important, because it allows us to look globally at voice leading issues for any chord progression. For our purposes, we’ll define the term “voice leading” as “moving from one chord in a progression to the next with as little physical motion as possible.” Voice leading is important in just about every musical style and for every instrument, but it is especially important to double bassists, because the further we have to shift to play the next chord, the more difficult it will be to play it in tune; and as we know all too well, anything played on a bass that is not in tune stands little chance of sounding good, no matter how “correct” the note choices are.

The voice leading system that follows is designed to do one thing: to determine from simply looking at any chord progression what the closest next voicing in physical proximity on the bass would be, to designate that voicing with a shorthand symbol, and then to move on from that chord to the next in the same manner, until the end of the progression. In order to accomplish this, we need to be able to identify the intervallic distance from one chord root to the next, and then apply a simple set of rules to the result. When analyzing distances from one root to another, it is important that we always analyze an

interval as the *smaller* of two possible distances (i.e. *C up to A* is a major 6th, but *C down to A* is a minor 3rd; we will always try to think of this interval as a minor 3rd, because it is the smaller of the two possibilities). Taking this way of thinking into account, for practical purposes there are only three basic interval categories: 2nds, 3rds, and 4ths (all larger ways of looking at these intervals are actually inversions of these more compact intervals).

Once we choose a type of voicing for the first chord in a progression, the voice leading to the best position to play the next chord can be determined by a simple two-step process:

Step 1: Identify the distance between the chord root you are currently playing and the root of the next chord in the progression.

Step 2: Based on the distance between the two chord roots, apply the following guidelines to determine the best voice leading: **If the distance is any kind of 2nd, retain the same voicing type you are already using** and shift it to the next root (i.e. if you are playing a type IV voicing built on a *C* root and the next chord is built on a *D*, you should play a type IV voicing for the *D* chord as well)

If the distance is any kind of 3rd, you can either retain the same voicing type or switch to the opposite type, and either will likely be equally difficult (i.e. if you are playing a type IV voicing built on *C* and the next chord is built on *Eb*, you can either shift your type IV voicing up a minor 3rd or switch to a type III voicing on the next string; the difficulty of the shift is roughly equivalent either way)

If the distance is any kind of 4th, switch to the opposite voicing type (i.e. if you are playing a type IV voicing built on *C* and the next chord is built on *F*, you should switch to a type III voicing for the *F* chord)

One common scenario worth examining at this point is the instance of the most common progression in Jazz: the ii-V7-I progression. In this progression, the distance from one root to the next is always a 4th, so according to the rules stated above, the best voice leading from one chord to the next is always to switch voicing types from each chord to the next. Because of this, ii-V7-I progressions that start on one type of chord will end on the same type of chord, while the chord in the middle will be the opposite type. In the musical example below, the ii-V7-I that begins and ends on a “Type IV” voicing can be referred to as a “Type IV ii-V7-I progression,” and the ii-V7-I progression that begins and ends on a “Type III” voicing can be referred to as a “Type III ii-V7-I progression.”

At this point, we’re almost done defining our system of voice leading, since most scenarios of common chord types and root motions are covered by the rules we’ve described so far. But there is still one more element to consider: voicing *range*. Voicings that are too low on the bass tend to sound muddy, even as 10ths or 7ths, and voicings that are too high on the bass become difficult to play, because the body of the bass gets in the way. In addition, voice leading by the system we’ve described has one consequence that will become apparent over time: if you follow these guidelines long enough in almost any progression, the voicings will eventually always lead downward to a point where they either become physically unplayable (i.e. you can’t go lower than *E* on the 4th string or *A* on the 3rd), or they start to sound too muddy beyond a certain point. For this reason, it’s good to have a “range break point” built into the system to avoid this.

The range break point will be a personal choice for each player, but conceptually it’s just like the “carriage return” on an old manual typewriter (remember those?): when you are about to run out of room, a little bell goes off and you know that you will soon have to reach up and push the lever from left to right to reset yourself on a new line so you can continue typing. In terms of where to set your break point for your own playing, all you have to do is to figure out what is the lowest voicing you are comfortable playing easily on each string, and once you reach that point where the voice

leading rules would send you to a voicing in a range lower than that, automatically switch the voicing type at that point to a voicing that will be higher up the neck, sound less muddy, and be physically easier to play in tune. Personally, my normal range break points would be *G* for Type IV voicings, and *D* for Type III voicings, but each player should determine these break points for themselves. At the very end of this article, you will find a link to a musical example showing an entire chord progression using this voice leading method (and illustrating where the break points are), and also to a video that covers many of the physical and technical aspects of constructing and playing these types of voicings.

That about covers the overview of the concept, but keep in mind that it takes months and years of practice to get this system of voicings and voice leading to become automatic under the fingers. Until that happens, practice slowly, carefully, and consistently – and before you know it, you’ll have another useful tool in your musical toolbox.

To learn more about shell voicings, here is a link to an instructional video I recently uploaded to YouTube which discusses the mechanics of playing these voicings on a double bass:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xBxYBbw-llo>



FLY ME TO THE MOON

(SHELL VOICING EXAMPLE)

Am⁷ Dm⁷ G⁷ C[♭]Am⁷

VOICING TYPE: IV III IV IV

(VOICE LEADING BREAK)

F[♯]Ma⁷ B[∅] E⁷ Am⁷

5

III IV III IV

9 Dm⁷ G⁷ E[∅] A⁷

III IV III IV

13 Dm⁷ G⁷ C[♭]Am⁷ B[∅] E⁷

III IV IV IV III

(V. L. BREAK)

FLY ME TO THE MOON

(TRANSCRIPTION OF INTRODUCTION)

Am⁷ Dm⁷ G⁷ CM^A⁷

IV III IV III

FM^A⁷ B^ø⁷ F⁷ E⁷(b⁹) B^b⁷ Am⁷ Eb⁷

4

4II IV III IV

Dm⁷ Ab⁷ G⁷ Em⁷ A⁷

8

IV III IV

Dm⁷ G⁷ Db⁷ CM^A⁷ B^ø⁷ E⁷(b⁹)

12

III IV III

16

Am⁷ G^{#m}1⁷ Eb⁷ Dm⁷ Ab⁷ G⁷ CM^A7

IV III IV

20

FMA⁷ B^o7 E7(b9) Am⁷ Eb⁷

III IV III IV

24

Dm⁷ G⁷ D^{#m}7 Em⁷ A7(b9) Eb⁷

III IV III IV

28

Dm⁷ Ab⁷ G⁷ Db⁷ CM^A7 B^o7 E7(b9) Am⁷

III IV III IV