Chapter XII

CONSTRUCTING A MELODY

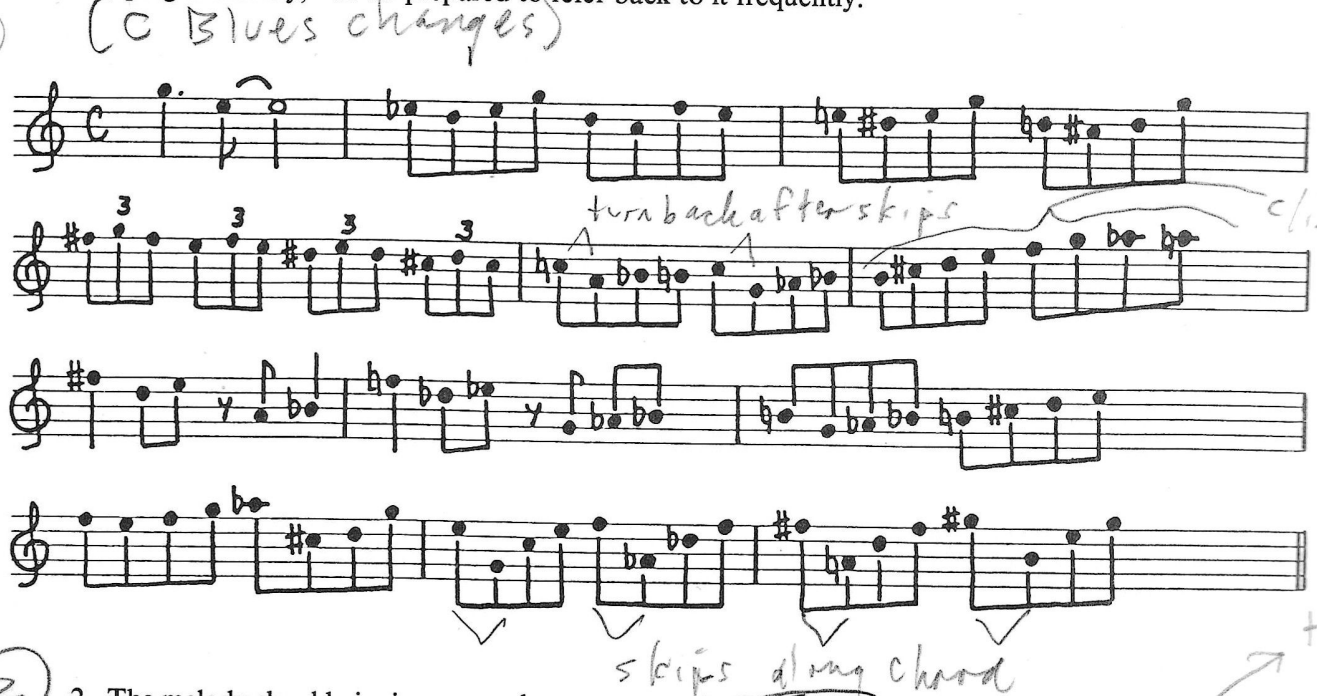
All jazz players must at some point in their careers (preferably early) come to grips with the construction of melodies. The term construction or composition is not used here in the formal sense of writing something down, but rather in a sense consistent with the notion that all improvisation is composition or recomposition.

The tenets of good melody vary with the circumstances, but traditionally there are certain ones we can list:

1. First there must be a proper balance of diatonic movement and skips. Stepwise motion is the general rule in melodic construction. To this we add skips for variety. There is considerable deviation from this rule in the playing of many members of the avant garde, among them Don Cherry, Don Ellis, and Eric Dolphy, to list just a few.

Generally, leaps, except along the outline of the chord, turn back in the direction of the skip. However, if the second note of a skip is the final note of a phrase or is followed by a prolonged rest, the melody may continue in the same direction.

The following is a fairly well-balanced melody. Notice the skips along the chord in measures eleven and twelve; also note that in measures seven and eight the return is in the direction of the skip. Various aspects of this melody will serve to exemplify points of discussion in both this chapter and chapter XIII: "Techniques to be Used in Developing a Melody," so be prepared to refer back to it frequently.



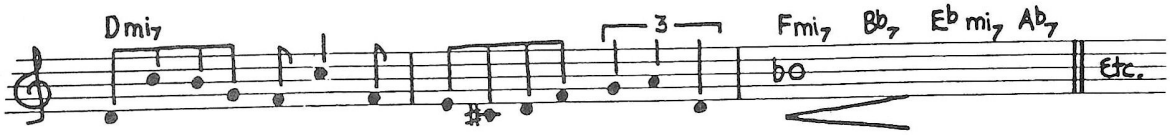
2. The melody should aim in a general manner toward a climax point. All melodies usually have a single climax point or area. This point might be at the highest pitch or in an area in which the general tessitura is high. The main thrust of a good melody is to approach and leave this point or series of points in an effective manner. This might mean, as far as the jazz player is concerned, a gradual buildup over a number of choruses aiming toward a peak. This gradual buildup might be accomplished by means of a series of plateaus distributed over a part of the solo until the peak is reached. Once the climax is achieved, the soloist will usually descend gradually to a point of less intensity. More often than not the lessening of tension and return to normal is much more rapid than the buildup or ascent. In the sample melody the climax is in measure six, halfway through, and the descent is about half the tune.

3. There must always be contrast and interplay between (1) density and lack of density, (2) tension and relaxation, and (3) intensity and lack of intensity. For example, a good soloist will not play in one tessitura for the entire solo or in double time the entire solo because there is not sufficient contrast. The following example shows how a good soloist might plan a solo of four choruses to achieve contrast and interplay:

CHORUS #1	CHORUS #2	CHORUS #3	CHORUS #4
single time	some double time	double time	single time to half time
medium range	medium range	high range	medium to low range
pp	mf	ff	mf
thin texture	more involved	dense	lessening of density

4. In most good melodies there is considerable evidence of repetition which, when combined with other things, acts as a unifying factor. However, the player is cautioned to avoid too much repetition of a curve, a note or a phrase except for special effect. Repetition in the melody can, however, be sufficiently disguised to allow a more extensive use. The changes which effect the disguise might include alteration of intervals, rhythm, dynamics, etc. In the sample melody measures 2, 3, 5, 11, and 12 are modifications of the same curve.

5. Another general rule to be observed: move when the harmonic rhythm is static and relax when there is plenty of motion in the harmonic rhythm. The extremely rhythmic player opens up more possibilities for the rhythm section to engage him in interplay, as in the following example:



6. Most melodies have some unique feature that distinguish them from other melodies of the same type. The melody might contain a sudden rhythmic shift, a note that sounds wrong, a particular interval that is used more than others or some other such device. In the sample melody the main unifying factor is the use of alternating half steps and whole steps (diminished scale order) and the implied major triads in measures 1, 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12.

7. The player must strive for proper balance between the new and the old (the novel and the familiar). Every melody must have enough recognizable elements to provide stability but enough of the novel to prevent the listener from anticipating every melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic occurence.

8. Melodic phrases are not all of the same length; length is by and large governed by the idea itself. Long phrases are usually broken into smaller units with implied cadence points. From a practical standpoint shorter melodies are more easily remembered when it is time to develop them. In the sample melody the first phrase is four measures long and dovetails into the second phrase, which consists of measures five and six. The third phrase is made up of measures seven through twelve.

The preceeding rules are not meant to imply that the improvisor is always left completely on his own to make melodies. In fact, most of the time he has the option of either using the melodic material from the tune he is playing or using other material as a starting point. (Refer to chapter XI.)

The ability to consistently conceive memorable, original melodies is truly a gift, but the methods for constructing fluent, workable lines can be learned.

SUGGESTED READING . . .

A Composer's World (Chapter 4) by Paul Hindemith
Serial Composition (Chapter 5) by Reginald Smith Brindle
Studies in Counterpoint (Introduction, Chapters I, II) by Ernst Krenek
The Rhythmic Structure of Music by Cooper & Meyer
Structure and Style (Section I) by Leon Stein

SUGGESTED RECORDINGS . . .

Listen to any recordings of performers you enjoy. Pay particular attention to the points raised in this chapter.

SUGGESTED ASSIGNMENTS . . .

1. Study some of your favorite composed melodies with regard to the rules listed in this chapter.
2. Transcribe and study improvised solos by your favorite players. See how they adhere or do not adhere to the tenets espoused in this chapter.
3. Practice improvising, concentrating on one of the rules at a time. As fluency increases, include other rules.

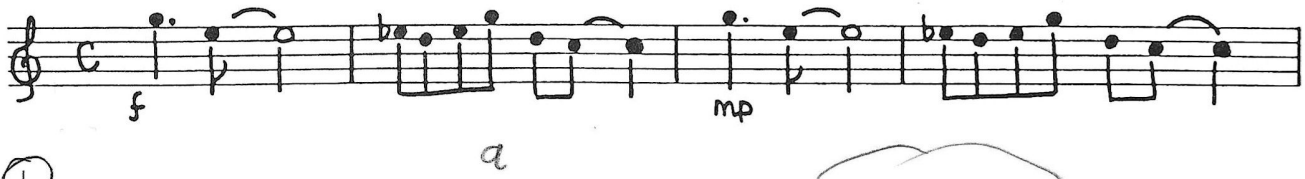
Chapter XIII

TECHNIQUES TO BE USED IN DEVELOPING A MELODY

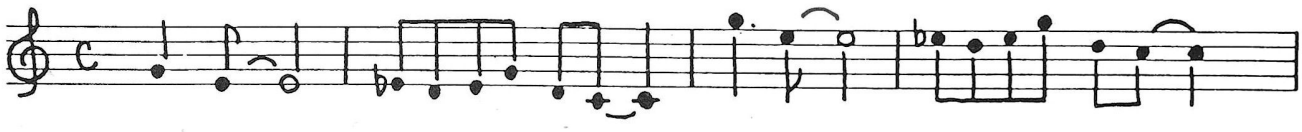
We will now examine some of the techniques used to develop a melody. Again the over-riding consideration is the use of tension and relaxation.

REPETITION

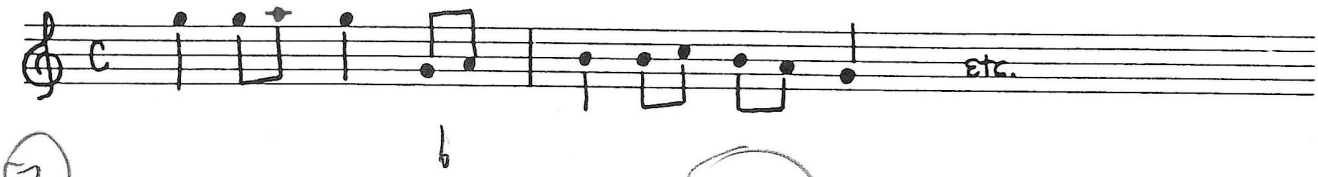
Repetition is an important unifying principle used in traditional western music (jazz included). Exact repetition palls very quickly so the task of the player is to use repetition skillfully and subtly. Exact repetition of an idea more than two times, except for special purposes, is rarely effective.



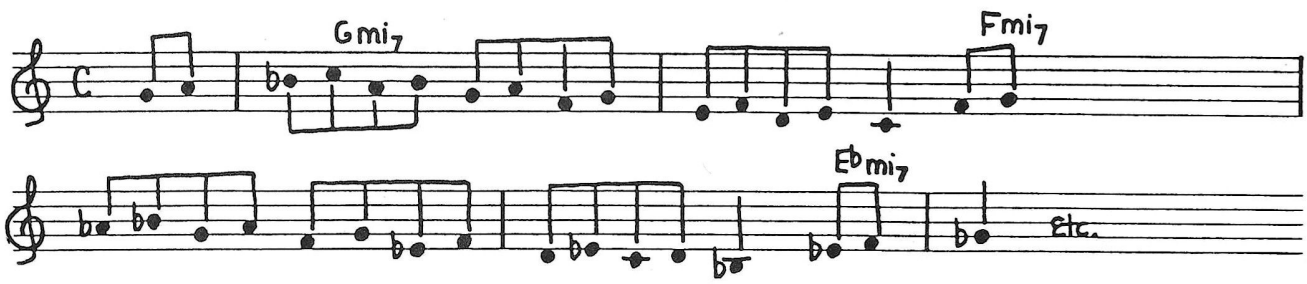
1. One of the easiest techniques for avoiding exact repetition is octave displacement of all or part of a line. Its strength and its weakness is its lack of subtlety.



OR

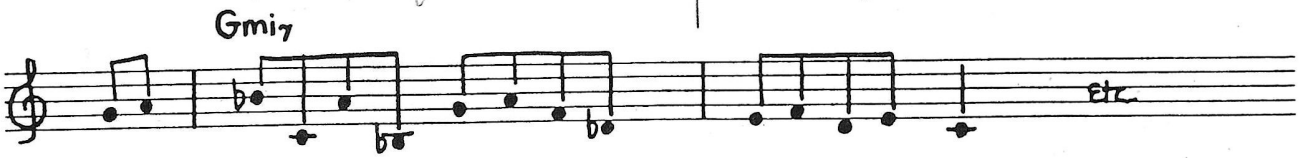


2. Another technique for avoiding exact repetition is sequence. Sequence is the technique of transposing a section of a theme by an interval other than an octave. This usually implies a change of key center and for this reason it proves valuable to the jazz player who is faced with the concept of constant modulation in dealing with vertical structures (changes). Even sections using this technique become uncomfortable to listen to after two or three repetitions.

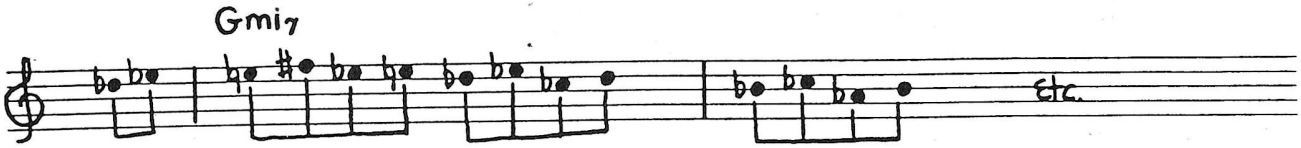


The technique is considerably more effective if slight changes are made in the sequences, as in the following examples:

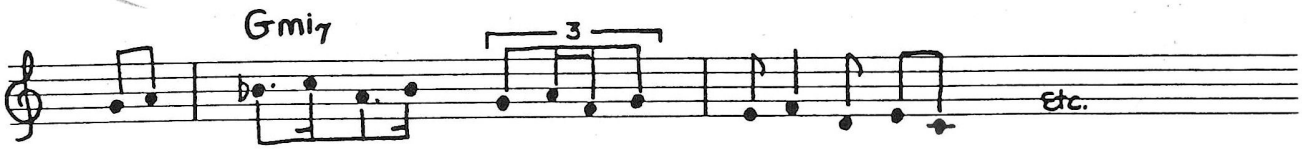
(a) Change of contour (by octave displacement)



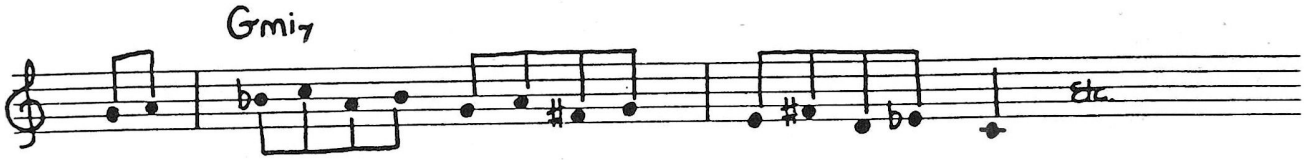
(b) Harmonic changes



(c) Rhythmic changes



(d) Altered notes



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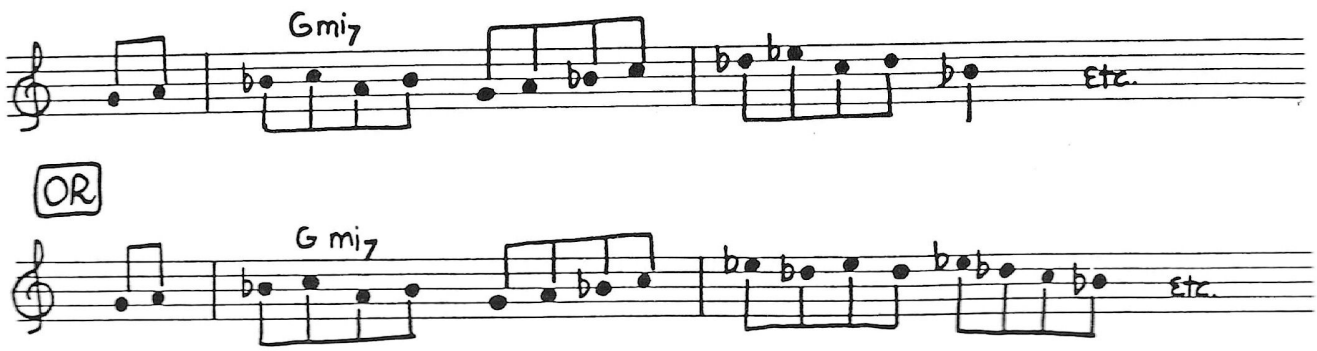
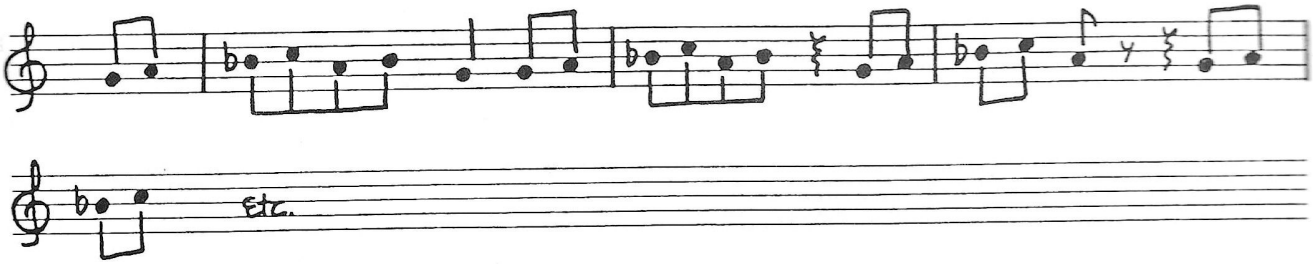
3. **Extension** is a technique of modification in which the phrase is extended to include more measures than its original form. The process might take place over many measures with a note or notes being added to each subsequent repetition. This technique is particularly effective in a situation where the harmony is slow-moving or static, as in "So What," "Speak Low," the blues, etc. (Needless to say, this technique presupposes the ability of a player to remember the phrases he plays.)

Extension:



4. **Truncation** is the technique of omitting a note or notes from the end of a musical phrase. As with extension, the process may take place over an extended period of time, and as with extension, the technique is particularly effective in a situation where the harmony is slow-moving or static.

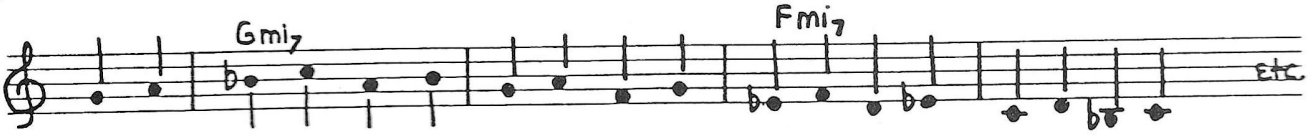
Truncation:



Both extension and truncation are more effective when the phrases which utilize the techniques are consecutive; however, the technique is still useful as long as the phrases are close together enough to be remembered and perceived as modifications of the same basic idea. Thelonious Monk's "Straight No Chaser" is a marvelous example of both extension and truncation.

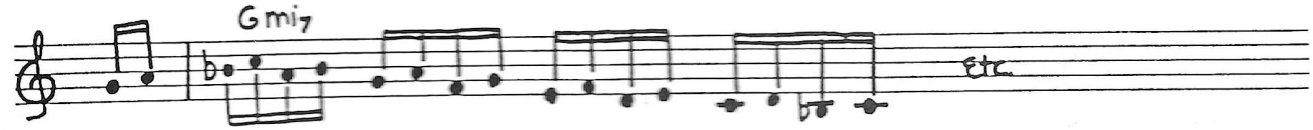
5. **Augmentation** (or elongation) refers to the process of increasing the rhythmic values of a theme. This is usually done by increasing the value of the notes by a constant ratio. A caution: don't stretch the theme too much; it loses its identity.

Augmentation:



6. **Diminution** is the process of decreasing the rhythmic values of a theme. This is usually done by decreasing the value of the notes by a constant ratio.

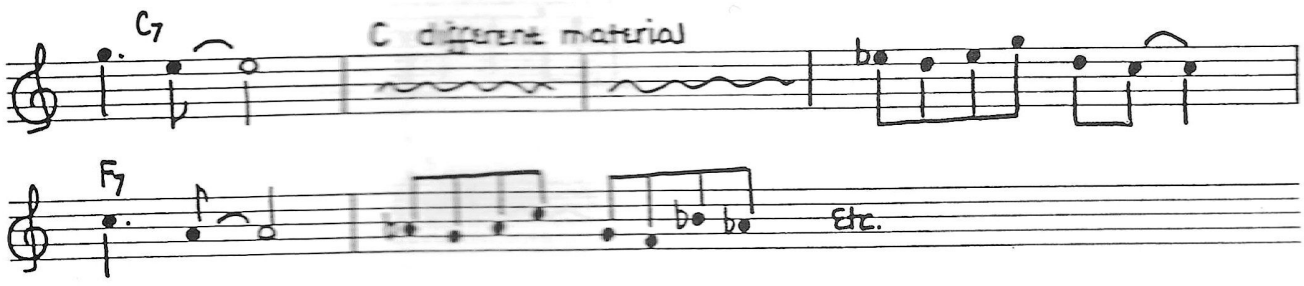
Diminution:



In an actual jazz situation augmentation and diminution are rarely used in a pure form and are generally used briefly, are modified, and are used in combination with each other and other developmental techniques.

7. **Fragmentation** is the technique of presenting the theme in parts. This particular technique is very popular with many jazz players, among them Thelonious Monk, J. J. Johnson, and John Lewis, to name just a few. Almost all jazz players use this technique, consciously or otherwise.

Fragmentation: (The material in this example comes from the sample melody in chapter XII.)



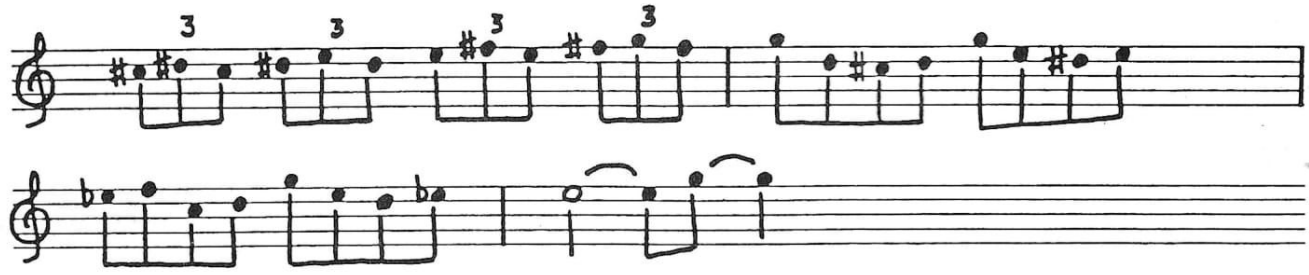
8. **Inversion.** 9. **Retrograde.** 10. **Retrograde inversion.**
All motifs or themes have four basic forms: original, inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion.

8. **Inversion** changes each ascending interval into the corresponding descending interval and vice versa.

Inversion: (This example is an inversion of the first three measures of the sample melody from chapter XII.)

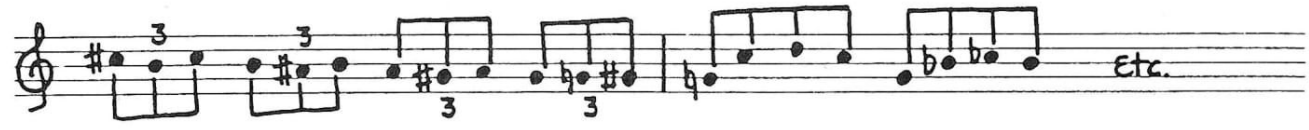
9. **Retrograde** is the playing of a theme backwards, that is, beginning with the last note and ending with the first note.

Retrograde: (This example is the retrograde of the first four measures of the sample melody from chapter XII.)



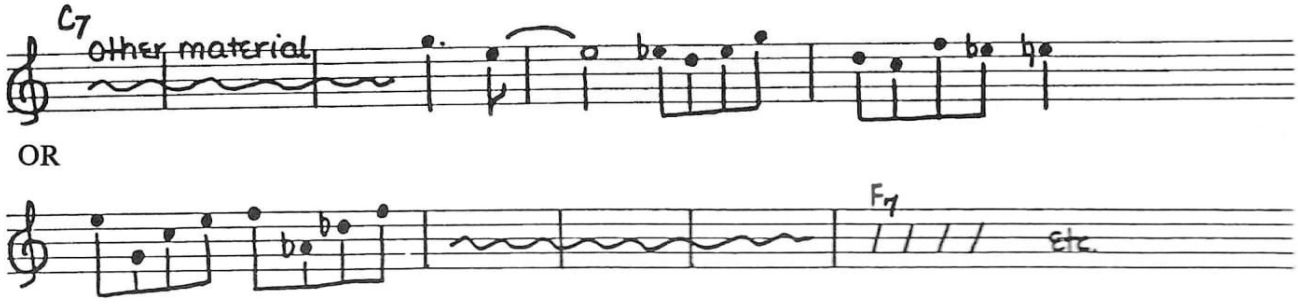
10. **Retrograde inversion** is the technique of combining retrograde and inversion, that is, playing a line both upside down and backwards.

Retrograde inversion: (This example is the retrograde inversion of a portion of the first four measures of the sample melody from chapter XII. The example starts at measure four, as does the example of retrograde, and moves backwards towards measure one.)

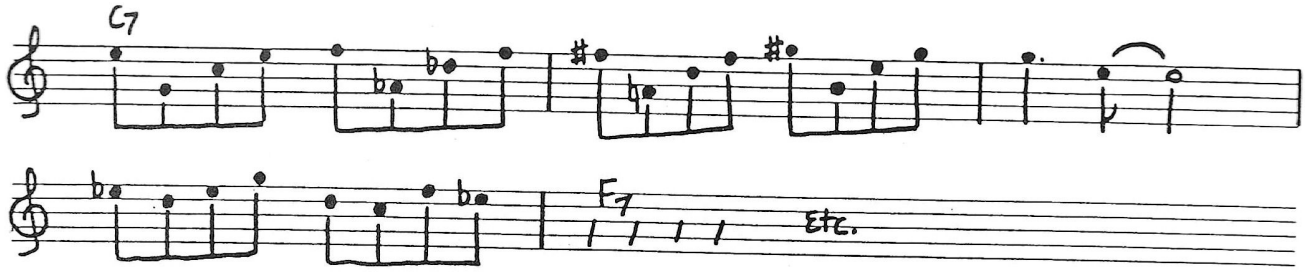


Inversion, retrograde, and retrograde inversion are not generally considered practical or musically feasible for use in a jazz context except in extremely modified form. These strictly calculated practices are the antithesis of jazz. First of all, it would require a remarkably mathematical mind to remember and transform any but the simplest themes exactly; once transformed they would probably appeal only to the pendant. Usually a musical hint of one or more of the three techniques is enough to convey the basic idea.

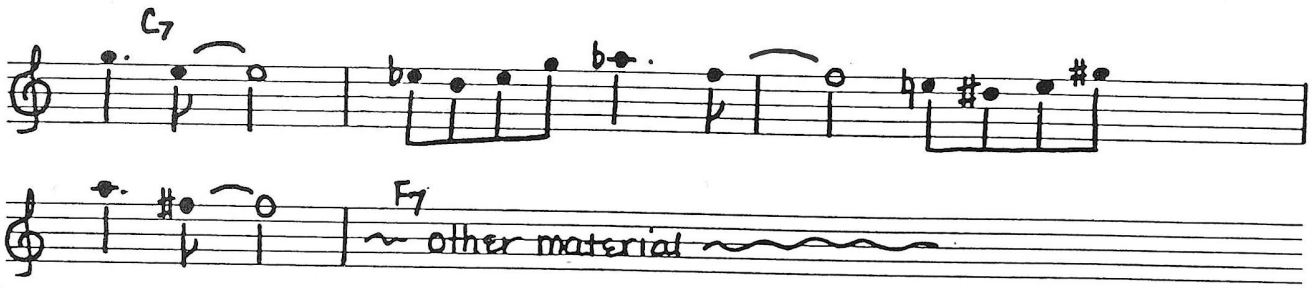
11. **Rhythmic and melodic displacement** are techniques of removing a rhythm or a theme from its usual position in the time or harmony. The following examples use material from the sample melody in chapter XII:



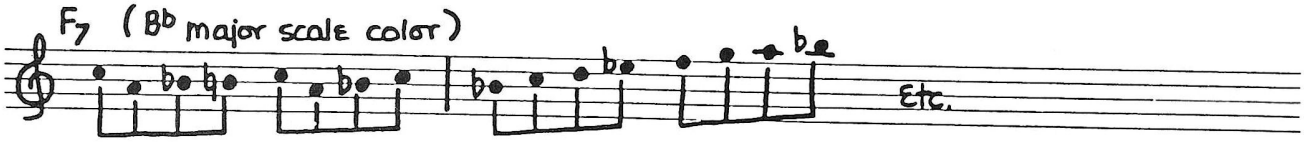
12. **Contextual placement for consonance or dissonance** is a technique of placing a theme or section of a theme within the harmony in such a manner as to render the theme consonant or dissonant by context. In most cases the theme remains unaltered. The following example uses material from the sample melody in chapter XII:



13. **Tonal shift** refers to the technique of arbitrarily moving a theme or theme fragment to another key area irrespective of the underlying harmony. This is a technique practiced more and more by modern players to add harmonic and melodic interest to the line. It usually occurs with the horn moving independently of the rhythm section and often involves a half step or whole step movement. (Listen to Sonny Rollins, Ornette Coleman, and John Coltrane.) The following example uses material from the sample melody in chapter XII:



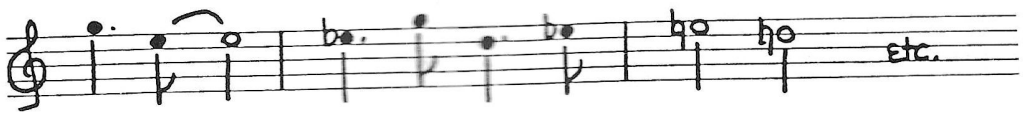
14. **Change of mode** is simply the technique of changing the scale color of the theme or theme fragments, for example, changing from the major scale color to the ascending melodic minor scale color. In the following example which uses material from the sample melody in chapter XII, the diminished scale color in measures five and six has been changed to a major scale color:



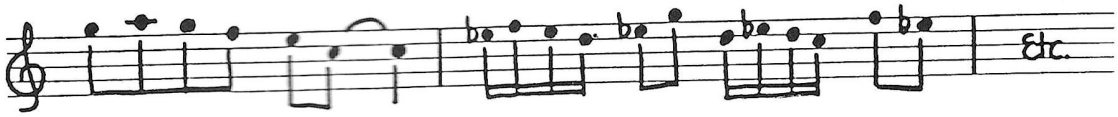
15. **Juxtaposition of tune sections** is the process of using the material from one section of the tune in another section of the tune (either verbatim or altered). In the following example which uses material from the sample melody in chapter XII, transposed material from measures nine and ten is used in measures one and two:

16. **Simplifying or complicating the line.** Simplification takes place when we **remove** everything but the essence of the line, getting rid of embellishing and decorating material. Complication takes place when we **add** embellishing and decorative (or other additional) material to the line. The following examples use material from the sample melody in chapter XII.

Simplification:

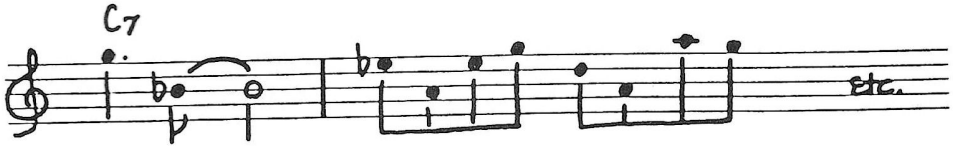


Complication:

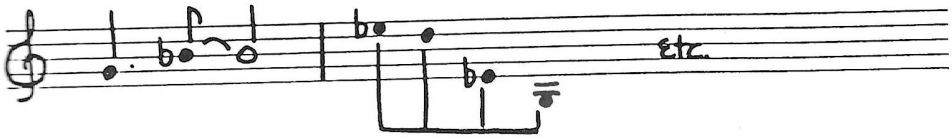


17. **Alteration of shape.** This can be done in two ways: (1) changing the size of the interval and (2) changing the contour of the line. The following examples use material from the sample melody in chapter XII.

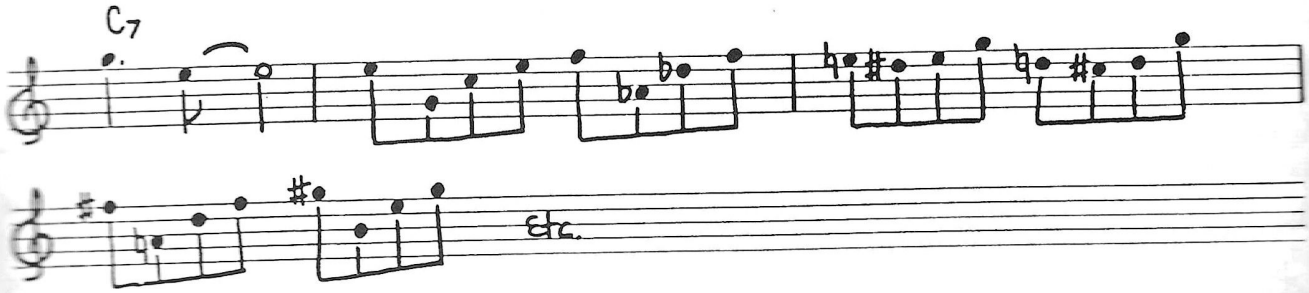
Changing the size of the interval:



Changing the contour of the line:



18. **Combining elements of the composition at random** simply means joining measures together that were formerly segregated. The following example uses material from the sample melody in chapter XII:



19. Isolating and using rhythmic aspects of the composition, for instance, using unique rhythmic factors. The following example uses material from the sample melody in chapter XII: