

# Building A Great Jazz Piano Voicing With Ease

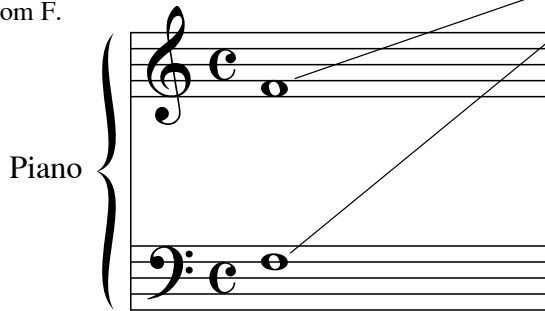
by Scott Wilson

Now that you are familiar with extending chords (as in the 2/1 principle) and familiar with Polychords, you can now build a great voicing on the piano by just following the one basic guideline listed below. There are many voicings a chord can have but by following this basic guideline, you know you will have a great aural understanding of what the basic voicing should sound like. This "root voicings" is the "nuts and bolts" of the overall sound of the chord. When reading the following pages, keep in mind that if you understand them really well you will be able to start making sophisticated chordal sounds in your song writing, start to read chord sheets and sound tasty, and use that knowledge to create nice colors in your arrangements.

## ONLY ONE BASIC GUIDELINE:

To get a basic yet tasty piano voicing: Place selected "chord tones and alterations between F and F. **NOTE:** The root of the chord will always be placed below the bottom F.

*\* NOTE: All exercises below must be done at the piano because the piano helps you visualize!*



Lets try a few examples and I will guide you through the thought process. Lets say you want to voice a Cmin13 chord on the piano and want it to sound tasty. First, we know the available notes in a Cmin13 can be thought of as  $\frac{Dmin}{Cmin7}$  or  $\frac{2-}{17}$

(If you do not understand this easy concept read the pages on Building Basic Extended Chords)

## To build any basic chord voicing from the Cmin13 family follow these easy steps.

**Step One** – First, get a good look at the chord and notes your are dealing with. Together, play the Cmin7 in your left hand and Dmin triad in your right hand. Listen to the colorful sound of the chord.

**Step Two** - Play the C minor seventh chord in your left hand by itself.

**Step Three** - Looking at your left hand, move any notes that are not between F and F so they are located between F and F. **Note:** Do not move the root.

**Step Four** - Keeping in mind the F to F guideline, try adding one note at a time from the ii triad which is D minor (first add only the D, next only the F, next only the A). Check out how cool and unique each color is (you are in essence individually adding the 9th, 11th, and 13th to the Cmin7 sound).

**Step Five** – Keeping in mind the F to F rule, play the 9th, 11th, and 13th in any combination and check out the cool musical colors created (perhaps add the D and F and leave the A out since it is such a strong color; or add the D and A and leave the F out).

	Step One	Step Two	Step Three	Step Four			
	<p>This bar is to help you remember the F to F guideline. Place chord tones in between these two Fs to build a solid voicing foundation.</p>		<p>Must move the Eb between F and F</p>	<p>Add just the D. Listen!</p>	<p>Add just the F. Listen!</p>	<p>Add just the A. Listen!</p>	

The cool thing is, you can add any note from the D minor triad and all of them will sound good in any combination. Now you have some wonderful colors to play with and if you feel like trying to add anything on top of a minor chord, you know exactly what notes to try adding. **NOTE:** Fun things like doubling notes up an octave can add range to your voicing which will give it a different vibe because voicings in the upper register can sound light and "angel like" or create waves of ascending motion by continually driving the voicing upwardly towards the top registers of the piano. It is not as hard as it sounds once you understand the above concept.

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The Cmin7 extends first to the Cmin9, then Cmin11, then Cmin13 chord. This is why the Cmin13 chord symbol automatically implies the presence of the 9th and the 11th. Basically, when the 13th is in the chord symbol, anything goes because you can voice one or all of the extensions depending on the musical moment. In addition if you were being very deliberate about having the sound of a 13th without a 9th or 11th, you would have to indicate this in the chord symbol (i.e. to exclude the 9th you would have to write Cmin13 (no 9)). The wonderful musical journey is learning to be carefully tasteful with regards to "when and how" you use specific extensions.

As with the 2min concept to build a minor 13th chord, Try various combinations of adding D, F and/or A over a Cmin7.

**Step Five**

Put them all together. Creates Cmin13

Add D and F together. Creates Cmin11

Add D and A together: leave out the F.

Leave the D out and the G (the fifth).

This chord sounds really thick and has its place "emotionally speaking" in music compositions. In practical application you would want to spread out the voicing to relieve some of the close dissonances. This is easily accomplished by moving any extension (the 9th, 11th, or 13th) up an octave.

**Jazz Gem \*** Always try to keep the 3rd and 7th in the lower foundation of the chord. This really helps the clarity of the chord and also makes the chord extensions function correctly in terms of color.

## LETS TRY ANOTHER ONE!

Lets build a D altered dominant seventh chord with ease! We know that the fully altered dominant chord can be sounded by using the:  $b2-$  principle. As in  $Ebmin = D7b9b13$ .

Now lets take that knowledge and combine it with our new knowledge of building a great piano voicing. This will net us some truly tasty voicings.

### To build a D7b9#5 chord follow these easy steps.

**Step One** – First, get a good look at the overall chord. Play the D7 in your left hand and Ebmin triad in your right together. Listen to the colorful sound of the chord.

**Step Two** - Play the D7 chord in your left hand by itself.

**Step Three** – Looking at your left hand, move any notes that are not between F and F (all notes are ok so nothing moves).

**Step Four** - Keeping in mind the F to F guideline, try adding one note at a time from the Eb- triad. First only add the Eb, next only the Gb (it's already present as an F# so they cancel out), next add only the Bb (its placement ends up directly next to the fifth of the chord (In major chords this can cause a problem). Note: The natural fifth is always optional. When any altered fifth is present in the piano voicing you can leave out the natural 5th (leaving out the natural fifth really adds to the clarity of the "chord color"). The natural fifth is not needed because it is not a 3rd or 7th or vital extension (it really has no strong or colorful or harmonic significance).

**Step Five** – Play the extensions in any combination and combine their colors. In this case there are only a few options.

**Jazz Gem \*** to increase your options add a single note from the first 5 notes of the Eb minor scale (Eb, F, Gb, Ab, Bb which are the b9, #9, 3rd, b5 and #5). All of these notes sound great and are very useful.

	Step One	Step Two	Step Three	Step Four	Great Voicing
	Place chord tones in between these two Fs to build a solid voicing foundation.	Play b2- 17	Just left hand.	No need to move any notes. All chord tones fall between F and F.	Add Eb.
				No need to add Gb because it is already there as an F#.	Add Bb (or A#). The natural 5th is omitted because the altered 5th is present.

**Jazz Gem** \* Notice that all chords tones sound meaty when place in between F and F. In many cases, after you build your voicing, if you take away the root, what you have left is a perfect LEFT HAND comping voicing. In the examples below, try omitting the root and playing the remaining notes with only your left hand! This knowledge helps you instantly know how to build a cool left hand piano voicing.

In **Step Five** of this example we are going to expand our extention options by **adding any notes from the first five notes of the Eb minor scale (the b2min)**. NOTE: Always keep in mind the option to omit the 5ths when altered 5ths are present. Note #2: In practical application if you want to spread out the voicing a little to releave some of the close dissonances, you do this by moving any note up an octave. Again, remember this one rule when manipulating voicings: Try to keep the 3rd and 7th in the lower foundation of the chord. This really helps the clarity of the chord and also makes the chord extentions function correctly in terms of the color their supposed to create.

These come from  $\frac{b2min}{17}$  family

**Step Five**

$\frac{b9}{D7\#5} = Ebmin$   
 $\frac{D7}{D7}$

Put them all together (the notes from the D7 and Eb minor triad).

$\frac{\#9 b9}{D7\#5}$

To increase options add any note from the first five notes of the Eb minor scale. In this case, Eb, F, Gb and Bb are all being used from Ebmin.

$\frac{\#9 b9}{D7\#5 b5}$  — Also known as D7Alt

In this example all the members of the first five scale notes of Eb minor are present and placed in between F and F. This chord sounds great!

**Jazz Gem** \* The Natural fifth is generally omitted when an altered 5th is present.  $\frac{b2-}{17}$   
**Jazz Gem** \* All of the chords above are part of the  $\frac{b2-}{17}$  family with regards to building the basic altered dominant sound.

## LET'S TRY ONE MORE!

Lets build a CMaj13 chord with ease. We know that the Maj13 chord can be sounded by using the  $\frac{2}{1Maj7}$  principle. As in  $\frac{D triad}{CMaj7} = CMaj13\#11$ .

Now lets take that knowledge and combine it with our new knowledge of building a great piano voicing. This will net us some truly tasty voicings.

### To build a tasty CMaj13 chord follow these easy steps.

**Step One** – First, get a good look at the chord and notes your are dealing with. Play the CMaj7th in your left hand and D triad in your right together. Listen to the colorful sound of the chord.

**Step Two** - Play the Cmaj7 chord in your left hand by itself.

**Step Three** - Looking at your left hand, move any notes that are not between F and F (you will need to move E).  
 Note: Do not move the root.

**Step Four** - Keeping in mind the F to F guideline, try adding one note at a time from the D triad. First only add the D, next only the F# (Note: when placing the F# between F and F the F# ends up being placed below all other chord tones except for the root: In this case you should move the F# up an octave to get it above the chord tones so it can function more as a color instead of being mistaken for a 3rd or 7th). If the F# was placed that low in the voicing it could start to take on the role of a 3rd or 7th and therefore cloud the true quality of the voicing), and finally.....next add only the A.

**Step Five** – Play them in any combination and combine their colors (Not illustrated: At this point you have all the tools you need to be creative with this exercise).

**Step One Step Two Step Three Step Four**

Place chord tones in between these two Fs to build a solid voicing foundation.

Move E between F and F.

Add D.

Add F#. In this situation placing the F# between F and F places it below all the chord tones. This can cloud its function so, in this case, move the F# up an octave to give you a clearer sound of its true color. But, if you like the original sound use it!

Add A.