

Substitute Triads

Although non-chordal tones can be superimposed on to an existing triad, the musical result is not always pleasing. The following lesson describes other solutions.

Any "Tonic" or "Subdominant" chord can be extended to the 7th or 9th degree. The 11th is usually best treated as the sus4 replacing the 3rd in the style described in Lesson 8a.

Notice that when the Maj7 is added to the basic triad, the upper three notes now produce a minor triad built on the 3rd of the major chord. Similarly, when the 9th is added above the Maj7th, the top most notes produce a major triad built on the 5th of the original major chord.

The "Em" triad is a very common substitute perhaps due to having two of the notes of the original chord. The "G major" triad may be a bit more difficult to digest as it is also the Dominant chord in the key of the original tonic triad, in this case the key of C.

Generally, the substitute triads will work well if they are positioned higher in pitch than the accompaniment material. Black note heads show the substitute triad played on the guitar. The white note heads can be any accompaniment instrument such as a piano or another guitar.

All of the above harmonic stacks would be reasonable with no great clashes but in the examples below, the sounds are so clustered that it would be a musical din as compared to any sense of harmony.

Rather than trying to outline all of the possible chaotic harmonies, let it be said that substitute triads best work at a higher pitch level than the accompaniment. Another thing to consider is rhythm. A short duration of tension and/or dissonance can pass by without too much trouble while a similarly sustained harmony will indeed be chaotic.

The following pages will examine a few of the possible triad substitutions. The examples will be restricted to a few keys with the understanding that an astute student would be able to work out similar ideas in all other keys.

Special note: The fact is that anyone playing a chordal instrument such as a guitar or a keyboard will tend to grab for the chord that is suggested. As an example, if the suggested chord is C, musicians will tend to go for a C chord fingering rather than looking for the extended possibilities. If the suggested chord is Cmaj7, chances are that we will still grab for a C chord and only see the Em chord possibility after the fact.