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Spice Up Your **DIMINISHED** **7TH CHORDS**

By Roberta Piket

The first professional recording on which I ever played was a Lionel Hampton album. I had subbed for the regular pianist on a concert with Lionel's big band in New Jersey and, after the concert, he asked me to play on his upcoming recording. I was scheduled to play on two tunes (one of which made it onto the finished album); the band for those two tracks consisted of a collection of all-star musicians and myself, an unknown 20-something year old.

When we got to the studio, I found out that no one had thought to bring lead sheets for the tunes. These were American Popular Songbook standards, but not so standard as jazz tunes that everyone would necessarily play the same changes.

I had been helping Hamp prepare for some other tunes on the recording, which included some pop songs that he hadn't been familiar with, so I took it upon myself to scribble out lead sheets. I did it hurriedly, writing out the original chords from memory as best I could, because I didn't have any music or recordings to reference. (This was long before everything became immediately accessible via smartphone).

One of the tunes Hamp had chosen was the old chestnut "Sweet Lorraine." After I handed out the chart, one of these revered sidemen took me aside and gently chastised me for writing diminished seventh chords in the first two bars (see Example 1 on page 80). That musician told me, "Jazz musicians don't write diminished seventh chords."



Example 1

FMaj7 F#dim7 Gm7 C7 C#dim7 Dm7

Example 2

F#dim7 F7b9 (flat 9th)

(root)

Example 3

F#dim7 Adim7 Cdim7 Ebdim7

Example 4

F#dim7 Adim7 Ab7b9

Example 5

F#dim7 Cdim7 B7b9

Example 6

F#dim7 Ebdim7 D7b9

When you hear something like that directly from a living jazz legend, you pay attention. That day I resolved never to write or play a straight diminished seventh chord again.

Since then I've spent quite a bit of time thinking about different ways to approach those nagging diminished seventh chords that show up in old sheet music or vocal charts, and even occasionally in modern instrumental compositions.

An important thing to remember about the diminished seventh chord is that structurally it is almost identical to the dominant seventh chord a half step below. So, I can take the root of any diminished seventh chord (for example, F#dim7), add a bass note a half step below the root and create a dominant seventh chord (in this case, F7). The note that was the root of the old chord is now the $\flat 9$ of the new chord, as shown in Example 2.

For purposes of clarity, I've written out these chords in their most basic form. I've also chosen to use the same spelling for notes that sound identical, even if this means they are not enharmonically correct. Finally, it will help you to grasp these concepts if you play these examples on the piano, even if you're not a pianist.

Thinking of diminished chords in terms of their relationship to dominant seventh chords opens up many harmonic possibilities, because diminished seventh chords are symmetrical, built entirely on the interval of a minor third. So, for example, an F#dim7 chord has the same notes as Adim7, Cdim7 and Ebdim7. See Example 3.

As you can see from the lines connecting the same notes, all four of these diminished chords are the same; they are interchangeable. Here's the important part: If the four diminished chords are interchangeable, then the dominant seventh chords a half step below each of these roots also are interchangeable.

There are four possible dominant seventh chords that, theoretically, can be substituted for any diminished seventh chord. As an example, if you see F#dim7, you can think of it as Adim7. So, you can also substitute an Ab7b9 chord (the dominant seventh chord a half step below Adim7). See Example 4. F#dim7 also is identical to Cdim7, so, choosing the root a half step below C, we can substitute B7 for F#dim7. See Example 5. Finally, since F#dim7 is also the same chord as Ebdim7, we can choose the root a half step below Eb and substitute D7b9. See Example 6.

If you know your tritone substitutions, you already know that if F7 works, there's a good chance B7 will work, and if Ab7 works, the same goes for D7.

Similarly, Gdim7 is identical to Bbdim7, Dbdim7 and Edim7; and Abdim7 is interchangeable with Bdim7, Ddim7 and Fdim7. So, in reality, there are not 12 diminished seventh chords, only three.

Getting back to the "jazz crime" I committed in that recording session long ago: Example 7 shows how I originally wrote out the beginning chord changes to "Sweet Lorraine." When I finally had a chance to look at the original sheet music,

it turned out that the second chord in the first bar, which I wrote as F#dim7, was actually a D7 in the sheet music. See Example 8.

As jazz musicians, we've seen this chord progression of I-VI7-ii-V7 countless times. We can also look at the D7 chord as a dominant chord substitution for E♭dim7 (which is interchangeable with the F#dim7 chord that I had used).

Let's look at some other options I could have chosen. Since Cdim7 is the same chord as F#dim7, I could have substituted the dominant seventh chord a half step below C, which is B7. See Example 9.

This works nicely with the A in the melody, but B7 doesn't lead very well to the next chord (Gm7). It works better if I substitute a IV chord (B♭maj7) for the ii chord of Gm7. See Example 10. Normally, in jazz we substitute ii chords for IV chords, but in this case the root motion is smoother if we use the IV chord.

Now, let's look at the C#dim7 chord in the second bar. Remember that C#dim7 is the same chord as B♭dim7. We can substitute the dominant seventh chord a half step below, which is A7. This gives us a nice chromatic root motion from the third beat of measure 1 through measure 2. See Example 11.

The changes are starting to sound a little more interesting and modern now. A7 is a secondary dominant leading to Dm7. Inserting a ii before this temporary V7 chord adds a little more harmonic interest. See Example 12.

An important consideration in any reharmonization is the melody. In Example 13, we substitute A♭7 for F#dim7. I left out the melody in this example—if you try to play the tune over these chords, you'll quickly hear why. This substitution would work for soloing, however. In fact, it might lead you to some choices that you wouldn't have made otherwise. See Example 14.

The possibilities are endless. I've recorded a sample reharmonization of George Gershwin's tune "Embraceable You." At the following link, you can hear that recording, as well as download a lead sheet showing the dominant seventh substitutions I've used to replace the diminished seventh chords: tinyurl.com/RobertaDim.

You don't have to play a chordal instrument to make use of these substitutions. You can do so as a soloist as well. You might be concerned about an unrehearsed situation where the rhythm section may or may not go with your substitutions. Hopefully, you're playing with musicians who are aware of these concepts or have good ears and will play something appropriate. But the nice thing about this method of substitution is that it will generally work—even if the bassist plays the original diminished seventh chord.

For additional examples of how to spice up diminished seventh chords, visit the following page on my website: robertajazz.com/spicy. **DB**

Roberta Piket is a pianist, organist, composer, arranger and educator based in the New York area. Her most recent CD, *West Coast Trio* (Thirteenth Note Records, 2018), with drummer Joe La Barbera, features jazz and songbook standards, as well as original compositions. Visit Piket online at robertajazz.com.

Example 7

Example 8

Example 9

Example 10

Example 11

Example 12

Example 13

Example 14