

SOLO PIANO BASICS



A. THE MANGO PROBLEM

There are three musical elements that are crucial to a jazz performance – the bass, the chords, and the melody.

The **bass** needs to be played as low as possible on the piano because sonic resonance is built like a pyramid that requires a wide base to achieve a solid structure. Bass notes sounds best in approximately the bottom two octaves of the piano. Although the lowest E on the piano, which correlates to the lowest string of the bass, is a good landmark to reference for low bass notes, just as some basses have C extensions, it is acceptable for pianists to venture lower into the bass territory. The lowest three notes of the piano (A, B-flat, and B) are rarely used.

In swing and bossa nova music, the rhythmic function of the bass is to define the strong beats, either in half notes, for a bassline in two, or in quarter notes, for a walking bassline. The bass provides the stable framework against which the other musical elements can syncopate.

Chords provide both harmonic context (major, minor, dominant, etc.) as well as color and richness. Chords providing essential harmonic context should be played approximately between the C below middle C (often called C3) and the G above middle C (G4). If chords are placed lower, they become muddy. If they are placed higher, they sound pleasing but do not provide essential harmonic definition. To add color, texture, and variety beyond the essential sonority, chords can be expanded into the two octaves above middle C and beyond.

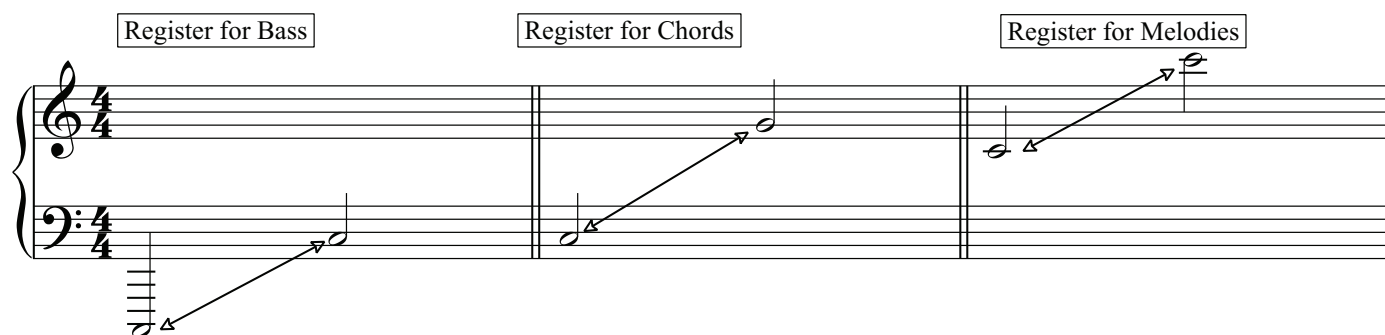
Although chords are played on the beats in some swing comping styles, they are more commonly played off the beat in bebop and post-bebop styles. It is useful to think of comping as providing rhythmic accents similar to the jabs of a boxer trying to surprise an opponent with an unexpected cadence of punches.

Although the **melody** can be played in any range, it is typically placed roughly in the two octaves above middle C because jazz musicians imagine a singer singing the melody or a horn player, like a trumpeter or saxophonist, playing the melody.

Melodies can be played with single notes, octaves, or chords. Jazz musicians are typically expected to **personalize** a melody, that is, play it differently than it is presented on a page. The process of personalization gives pianists a lot of flexibility regarding the rhythmic presentation of melodies, which allows the right hand to create rhythmic openings to venture into the midrange and cover the chords between melodic phrases.

Example A.1

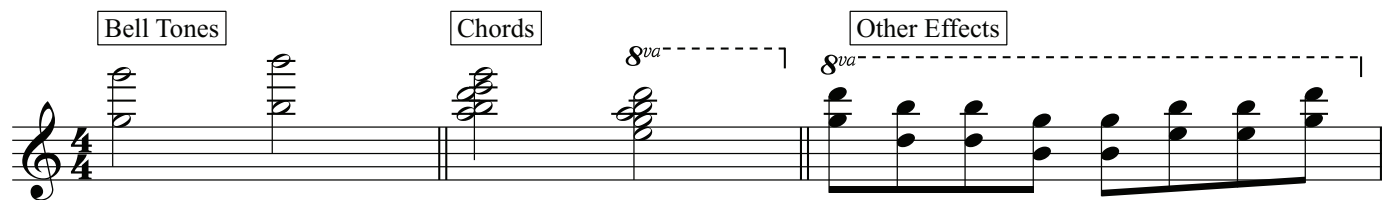
The typical registers for bass, chords, and melodies



Notice that the top two octaves of the piano are not typically used for the bass, chords, or melody. Pianists commonly use the top two octaves for special effects like doubling the melody, playing octave bell tones, or arpeggiating crystalline chords. It is relatively rare to present the bass, chords, or melody in the top two octaves.

Example A.2

Upper register used for special effects



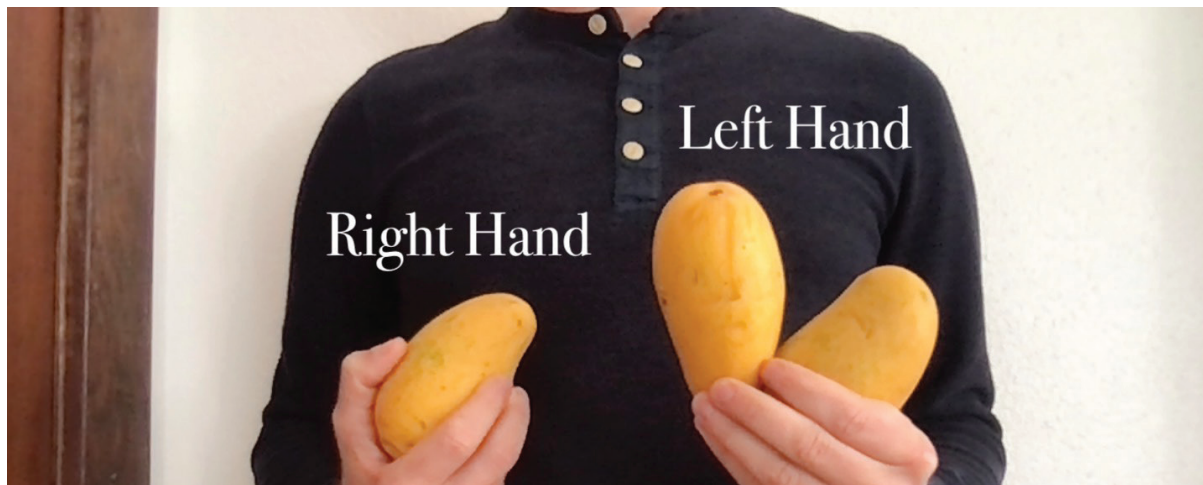
The Mango Problem

When playing solo piano, there are three musical elements (bass, chords, melody), each with a typical register and rhythmic characteristic. I refer to the challenge of accommodating all three elements with only two hands as the mango problem. The **mango problem** is as follows: imagine that you purchased three mangos from the supermarket and you have to walk them home without a bag, using just your two hands. Each of the three mangos represents a musical element: bass, chords, and melody. There are five possible solutions to the problem:

1. Hold two mangos in your left hand and one in your right

Example A.3

Two mangos in the left hand, one in the right

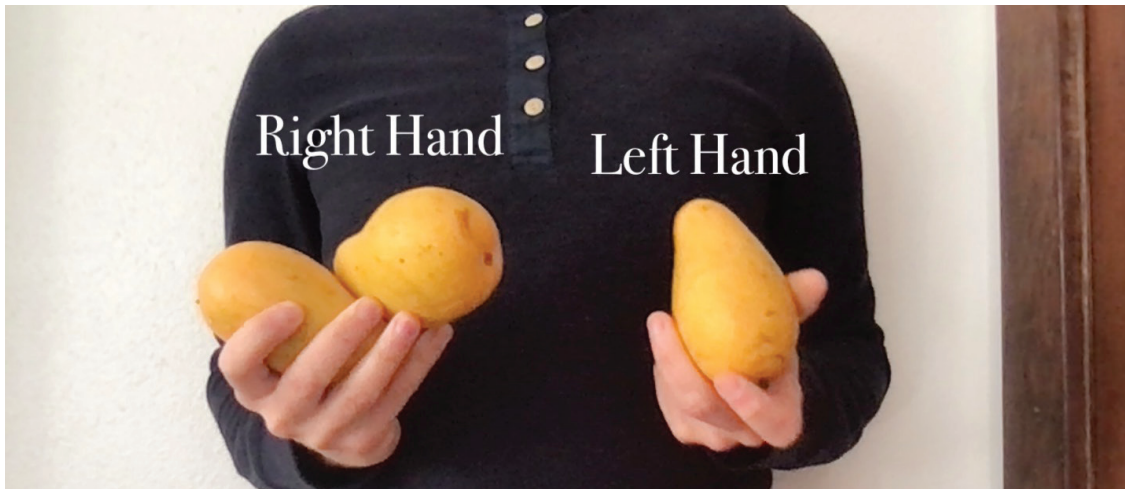


Playing both the bass and the chords in the left hand is the traditional solution for solo jazz pianists because it gives the right hand maximum flexibility to present the melody and improvise. Stride piano, bass shells, and any style in which the left hand shuttles between bass and chord functions are all versions of Solution 1. These styles are covered in Chapters 1-6.

2. Hold two mangos in your right hand and one in your left

Example A.4

Two mangos in the right hand, one in the left

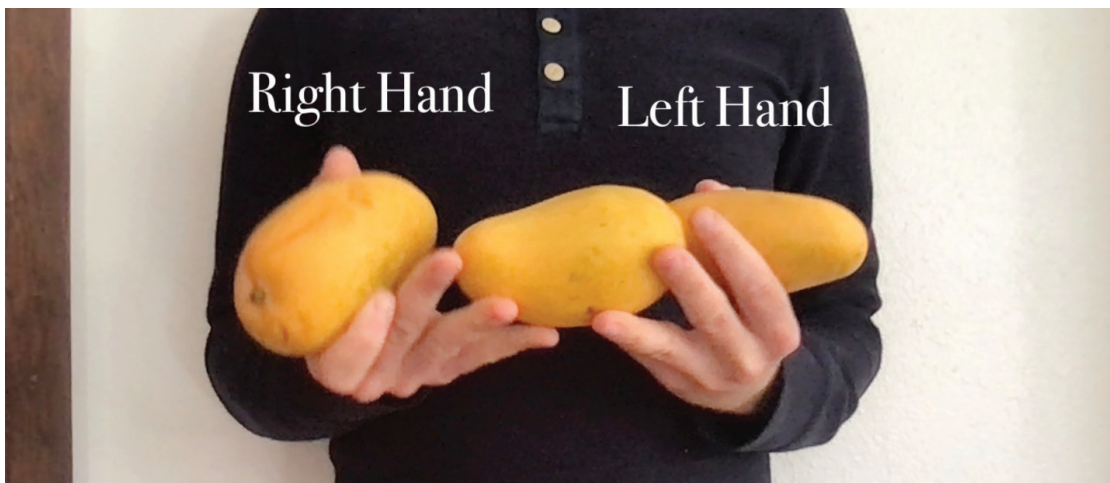


Covering both the melody and chords in the right hand allows a pianist to play a consistent, uninterrupted bassline in the left hand. Keeping a consistent bassline is especially important for groove-based music like funk and latin styles, that rely heavily on an active bass. Chapter 7 discusses ways to play both the melody and chords in the right hand, including shuttling between the melody and chords, harmonizing chords beneath melody notes, and implying chords by outlining them melodically.

3. Hold one mango in each hand and share the third between the hands

Example A.5

One mango in each hand and one shared between the hands

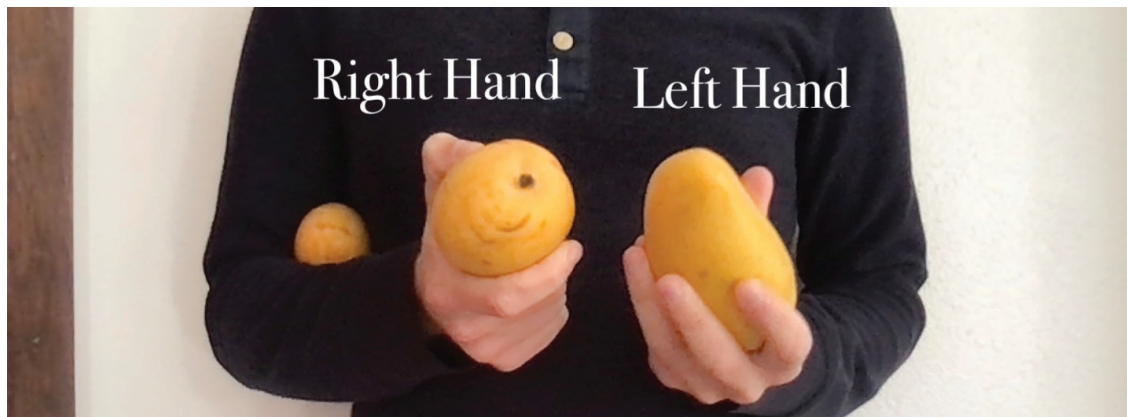


The best way to keep the bass low, the melody high, and create a big, rich voicing in the middle is to share the chords between the two hands. Although sharing the chords creates very pleasing and sonorous voicings, it limits the independence possible for each of the three different parts. Because of the rich chords but limited independence inherent in this approach, Solution 3 is most often used for ballads, which generally include less syncopation and allow the pianist more time to find dense, five-to-eight-note voicings. Techniques in which the chords are shared between the two hands are covered in Chapters 9-16.

4. Tuck away or discard some mangos

Example A.6

Only one mango in each hand

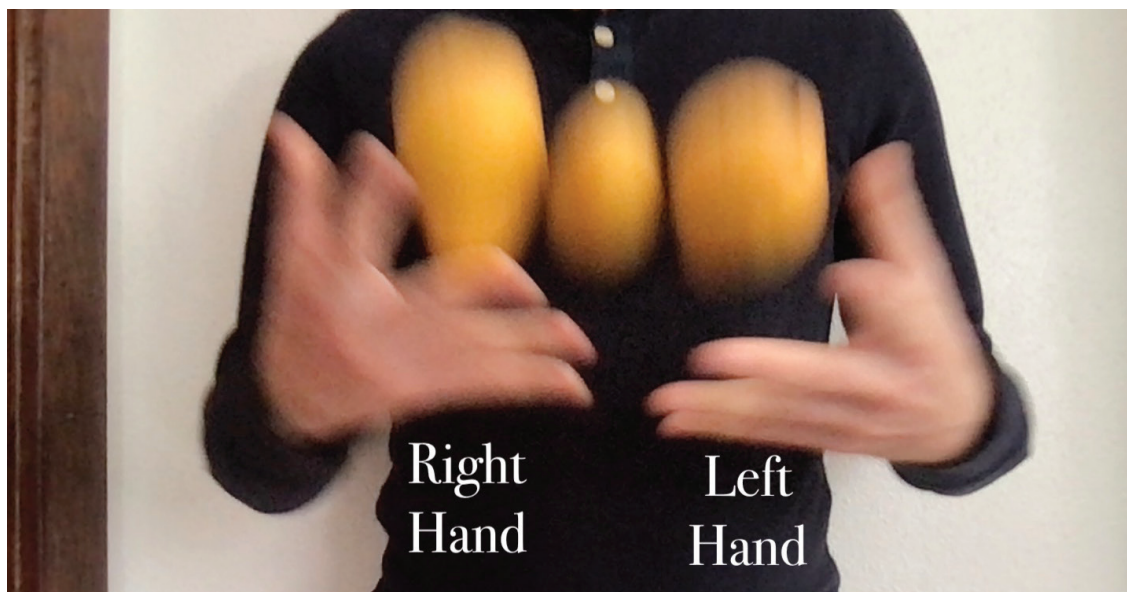


Maybe it is too uncomfortable to carry all three mangos all the way home! For some musical moments, pianists choose not to include all three musical elements and feature only one or two instead. Sometimes, pianists start an arrangement with just a bassline or just a melody. Most commonly, pianists choose to omit the bass for long stretches. Chapter 8 discusses techniques that omit the bass.

5. Juggle the mangos

Example A.7

Juggled mangos



Many of the great jazz pianists are so comfortable shifting between different methods of playing the melody, chords, and bass that they constantly switch which hand is covering which element. A style in which the chords are sometimes covered by the right hand and sometimes covered by the left can be referred to as the **third hand approach**, a term associated with the pianist Dave McKenna. Although the devices in this book are presented as individual styles, in truth, many great pianists mix freely and fluidly between different hand divisions at the piano.