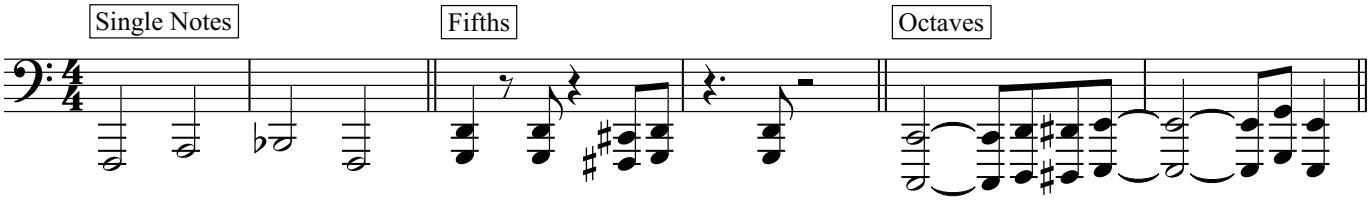
B. THREE POSITIONS OF THE LEFT HAND

The left hand is often responsible for covering both the bass and at least some portion of the chords. Because each register of the piano lends itself to particular intervals and functions, pianists typically choose different voicing types for different parts of the piano. Left-hand voicings can be divided into three main categories.

Bass Notes

Bass notes, generally the roots of chords, should be played essentially as low as possible on the piano. Bass notes are often played as single notes but can also be harmonized with fifths or octaves above the bass. Fifths provide a particularly strong harmonization because they add a robust sonority to the bass note but have an open timbre that does not sound muddy outside of the very lowest notes on the piano. Octaves are generally only used for special effects and should not replace more colorful harmonizations.

Example B.1
Bass notes in the typical register, harmonized three different ways

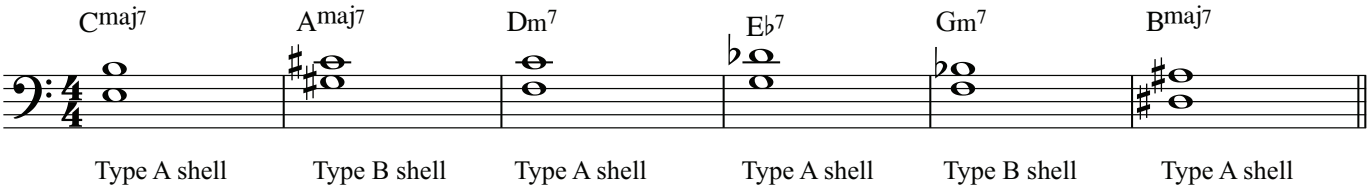


Bass Shells

Bass shells are the most common voicing used in the middle range of the left-hand territory, roughly between the second-to-lowest C on the piano and the G above middle C (C2 and G4). **Bass shells** are voicings that combine a bass note and the **essential tones** of a chord, the third and seventh. The third and seventh are considered the essential tones because they define the sonority of the chord, that is, whether it is major, minor, or dominant. Occasionally, other notes act as a chord's essential tones. For sixth chords, the sixth replaces the seventh as an essential tone. For sus chords, the fourth replaces the third as an essential tone.

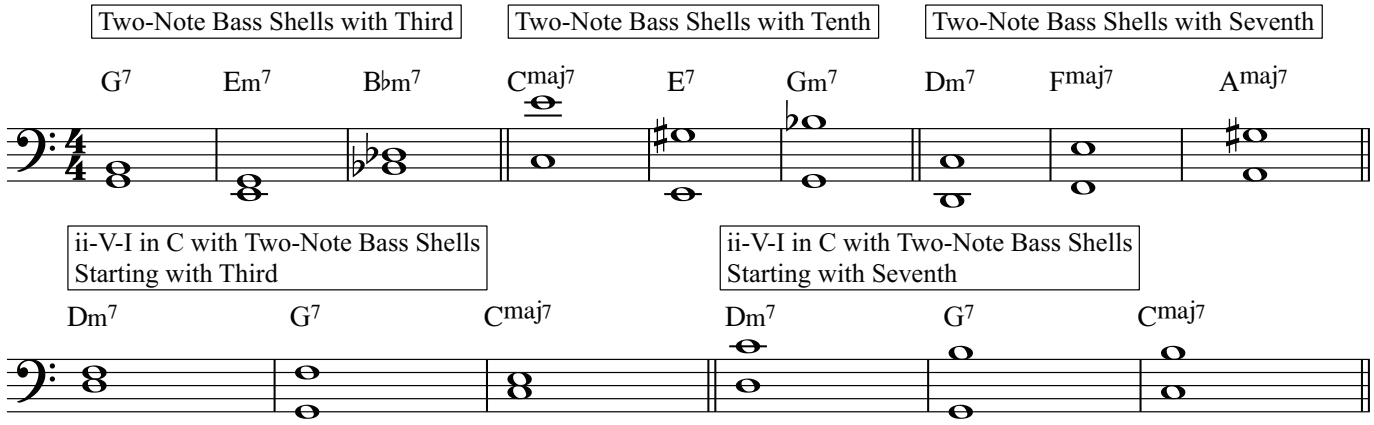
Voicings consisting of only the third and seventh above the bass can be referred to as **shells** or **shell voicings**. Shells can have two basic forms, a **Type A** form with the third below the seventh, or a **Type B** form with the seventh below the third. Type A is not necessarily better than Type B, or vice versa, and both types should be deployed towards the goal of achieving the smoothest possible voice leading between chords. Because they provide the essential harmonic content, shells are typically played between the C below middle C (C3) and the G above middle C (G4).

Example B.2
Shells consisting of only the third and the seventh



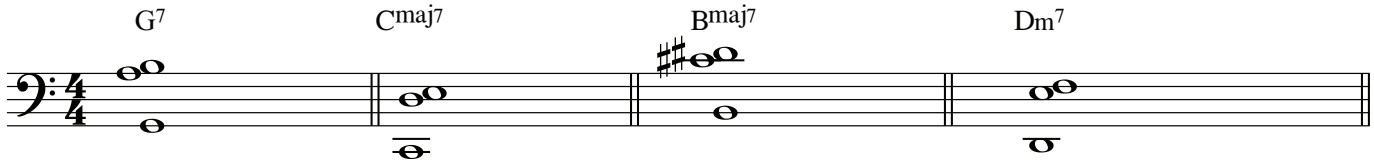
Two-note bass shells, sometimes referred to as **Bud Powell voicings**, combine a bass note with only one essential tone. When playing two-note bass shells, pianists can place the third of the chord either a third or a tenth above the root. Playing a tenth above the root allows pianists to play a lower, more sonorous bass note while including the third of the chord in an appropriate register. Powell uses two-note bass shells on solo piano tracks like "Hallucinations" and "Oblivion."

Example B.3
Two-note bass shells, aka Bud Powell voicings



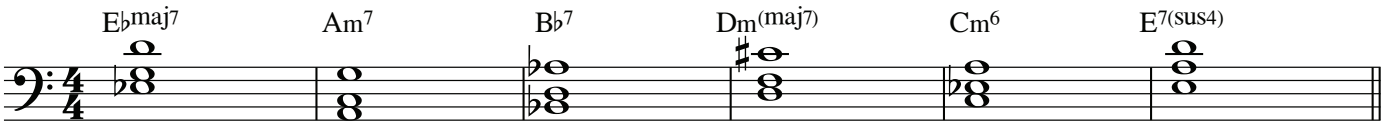
Tenths are a stretch! If a pianist cannot quite reach a tenth, in some cases, adding the ninth can help. If the ninth and third are both white keys or both black keys, the pianist can play both notes simultaneously with the thumb. This technique allows pianists to play the tenth without arching the thumb to avoid grazing the adjacent note. Although adding the ninth technically disqualifies the voicing as a shell voicing, it still articulates the harmony clearly.

Example B.4
Adding the ninth to reach the tenth



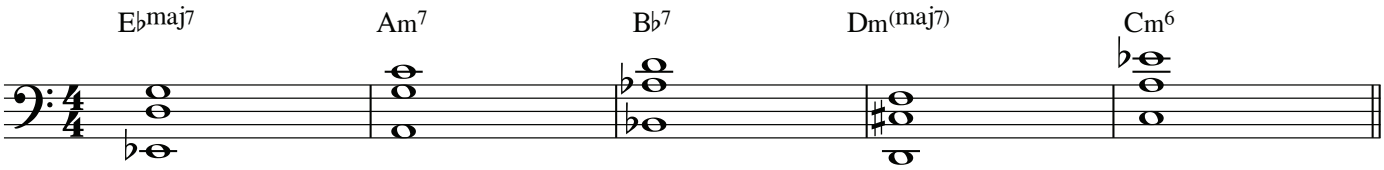
Three-note Type A bass shells consisting of (from bottom to top) the root, third, and seventh, are simple, intuitive, and can be played by pianists with virtually any hand size. Notice that each bass shell is positioned so that the essential tones fall in their ideal range between C3 and G4. Because of the position of the essential tones, Type A bass shells usually have a relatively high bass note.

Example B.5
Three-note Type A bass shells



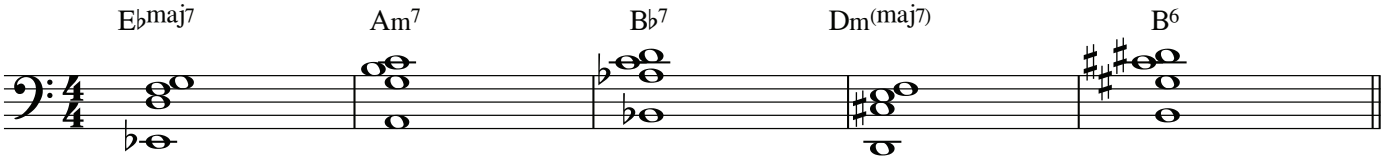
Three-note Type B bass shells consisting of (from bottom to top) the root, seventh, and third a tenth above the root, are more spread out and can only be played simultaneously by pianists with larger hands. It is rarely possible for pianists to play a sus chord using a Type B bass shell because the stretch between the highest and lowest notes would exceed a tenth.

Example B.6
Three-note Type B bass shells



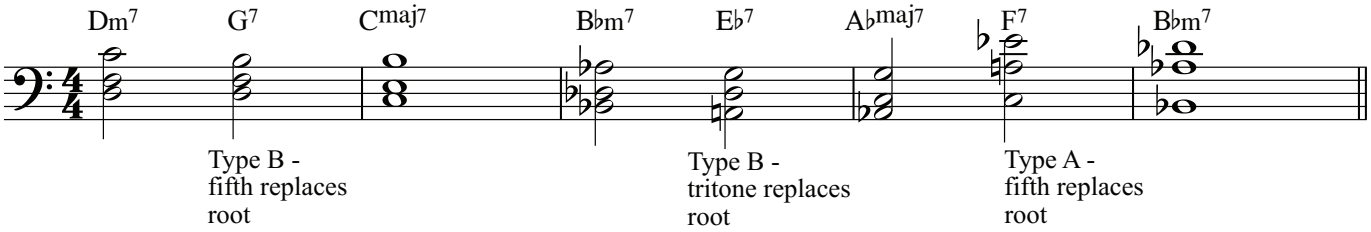
As with two-note shells, pragmatic pianists can play both the ninth and tenth with the thumb for Type B bass shells to facilitate reaching the larger interval.

Example B.7
Three-note Type B bass shells with ninth added



Although it is most common to play the root as the bass note of a bass shell, the fifth frequently replaces the root for both musical and practical reasons. For Type A shells, replacing the root with the fifth helps a pianist to stretch lower into the bass register. When playing Type B shells, pianists who cannot reach a tenth can avoid the large stretch by replacing the root with the fifth. For dominant chords, the tritone (flatted fifth) can replace the root, creating a **tritone substitution**.

Example B.8
Three-note bass shells with fifth replacing root

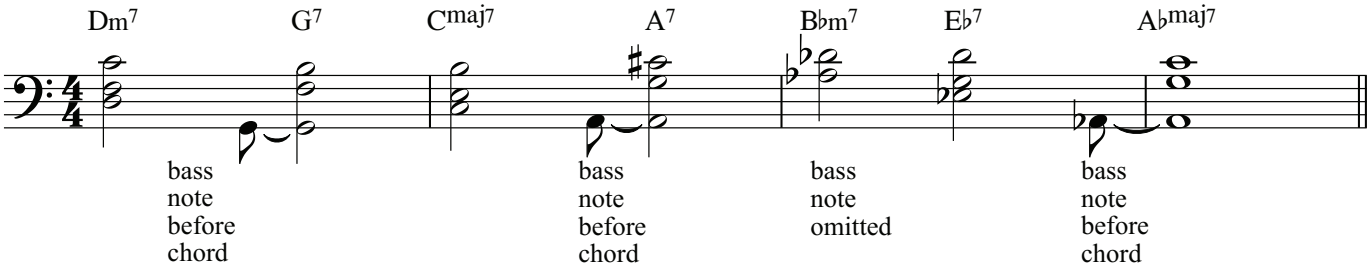


Whether or not pianists can reach a tenth, they should plan to utilize bass shells with tenths in their arrangements to achieve lower bass notes and better voice leading. When they cannot play all the notes of a chord simultaneously, pianists frequently play the bass note before the essential tones.

Even when playing a chord non-simultaneously, pianists must convey precise rhythm by placing the essential tones squarely on the intended beat. Depending on the tempo and style, a pianist can either hold the pedal so that all three notes of the chord are heard together or rely on the proximity of the attacks to create a sense of the full chord without any pedal.

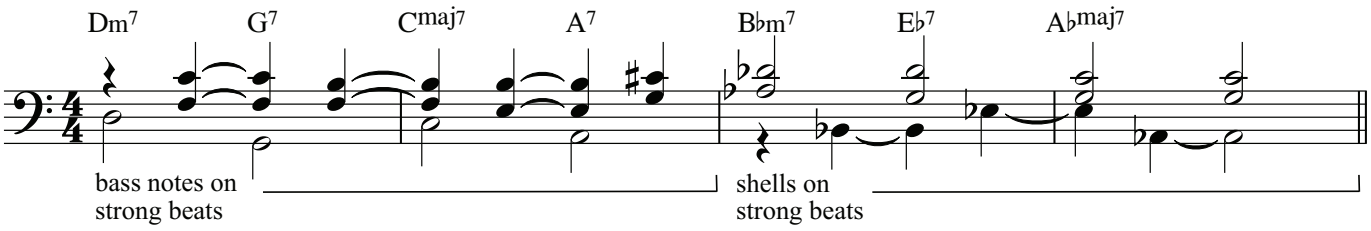
Alternatively, a pianist can omit the bass note from the chord and play only the essential tones. Omitting the bass is particularly effective at medium and fast tempos when the context provided by the bass note will not be keenly missed.

Example B.9
Playing the bass note before the chord and omitting bass notes



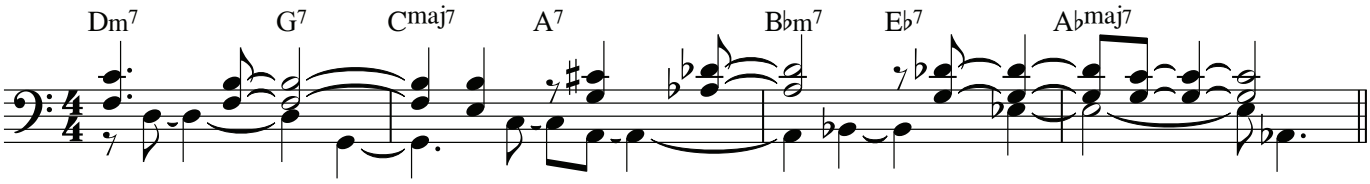
Even if all the notes can be played simultaneously, pianists frequently choose to separate the bass and essential tones when comping with a bass shell. When playing a ballad, for instance, a pianist might alternate every beat between the bass and essential tones. They could place the bass on the strong beats, creating a pseudo-stride piano feel or they could place the essential tones on the strong beats, cultivating a sense of syncopation and anticipation.

Example B.10
Separating the bass and essential tones



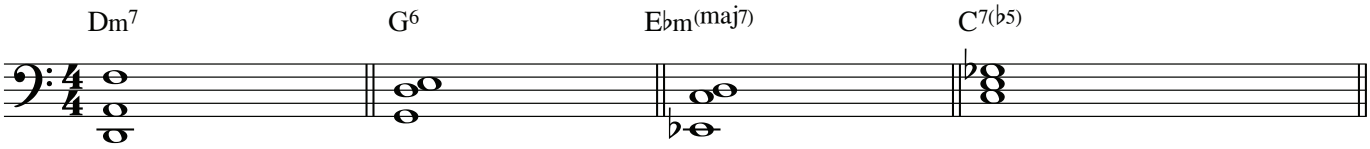
Bill Evans uses bass shells frequently in his solo piano recordings. When comping, Evans commonly plays the essential tones of a bass shell first and adds the bass note afterwards. In addition to omitting the bass notes, Evans obscures the chords further by syncopating his comping. Listen to the first half of "All the Things You Are/Midnight Mood" from *Alone* to hear Evans comping with three-note bass shells while creating interest through syncopation.

Example B.11
Bill Evans-style comping with shell voicings



Sometimes one essential tone can be combined with a color tone to create a three-note voicing that is not a bass shell but still includes the bass note. These voicings should be played in the same register as bass shells (C2-G4) because they also straddle bass and chord functions. Substituting a color tone for an essential tone is most common when it allows the bass to remain in a lower register.

Example B.12
Other voicings with both bass notes and chords



Rootless Voicings

When the left hand plays chords around middle C, it typically plays rootless voicings. **Rootless voicings** define the chord using essential tones and beautify the chord with color tones or altered tones. As their name indicates, they typically do not include the root, or at least do not place the root at the bottom of the chord because doing so would place the bass in an awkwardly high range.

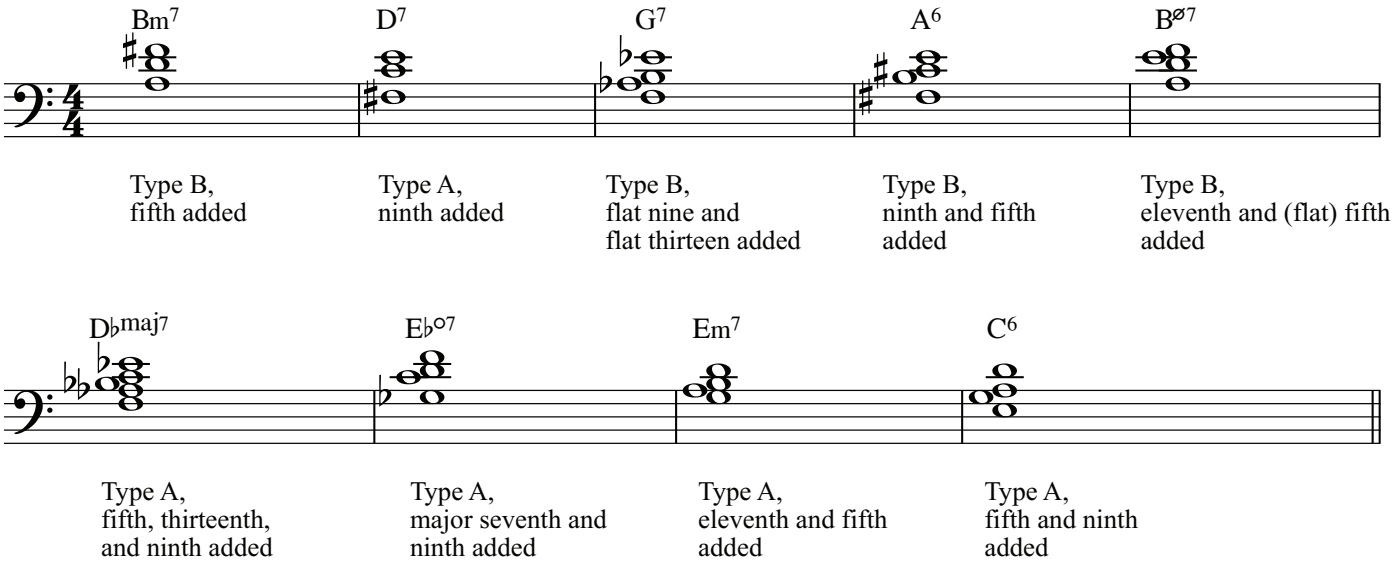
Traditional rootless voicings include the shell (third and seventh) in the typical range between C3 and G4. Like shell voicings, rootless voicings are commonly referred to as Type A if they have the third on bottom and Type B if they have the seventh on bottom, although not all rootless voicings are placed in these two positions. **Color tones**, chord tones other than the essential tones that are added to make a chord more sonorous, beautiful, or tense, can be placed both in between and above the essential tones.

How do you choose color tones? Here are some rules to keep in mind:

- the fifth and the ninth are appropriate color tones for any kind of chord
- the thirteenth is an appropriate color tone for major and dominant chords
- the eleventh is an appropriate color tone for chords that have a minor third such as minor seventh, minor sixth, half-diminished, and diminished chords
- although it is not very colorful, it is possible to use the root as a color tone above the shell
- for diminished chords, any notes from the whole-half octatonic scale can be added as a color tone

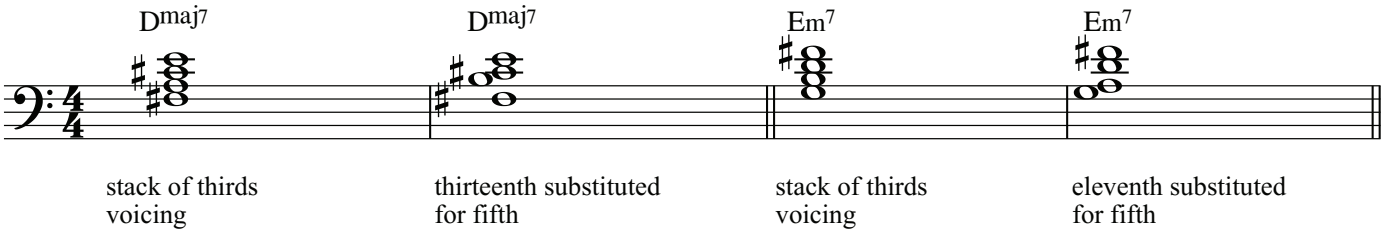
When adding to the shells of dominant seventh chords, pianists frequently add **altered tones**, pitches a half-step away from color tones that serve the same purpose as color tones. Altered tones include the flat nine, sharp nine, flat thirteen, (sharp five) and sharp eleven (flat five).

Example B.13
Rootless voicings for chords of various sonorities



When forming rootless voicings, pianists usually avoid creating a **stack of thirds**, a pattern of intervals that consists of all thirds, like a root position seventh chord. Stacks of thirds typically pose a problem in Type A voicings, in which pianists might stack the third, fifth, seventh, and ninth. For major and dominant seventh chords, the thirteenth can substitute for the fifth to avoid a stack of thirds. For minor seventh chords, stacks of thirds are widely accepted, but the eleventh is sometimes substituted for the fifth to avoid the stack of thirds.

Example B.14
Rootless voicings arranged in a stack of thirds with potential fixes

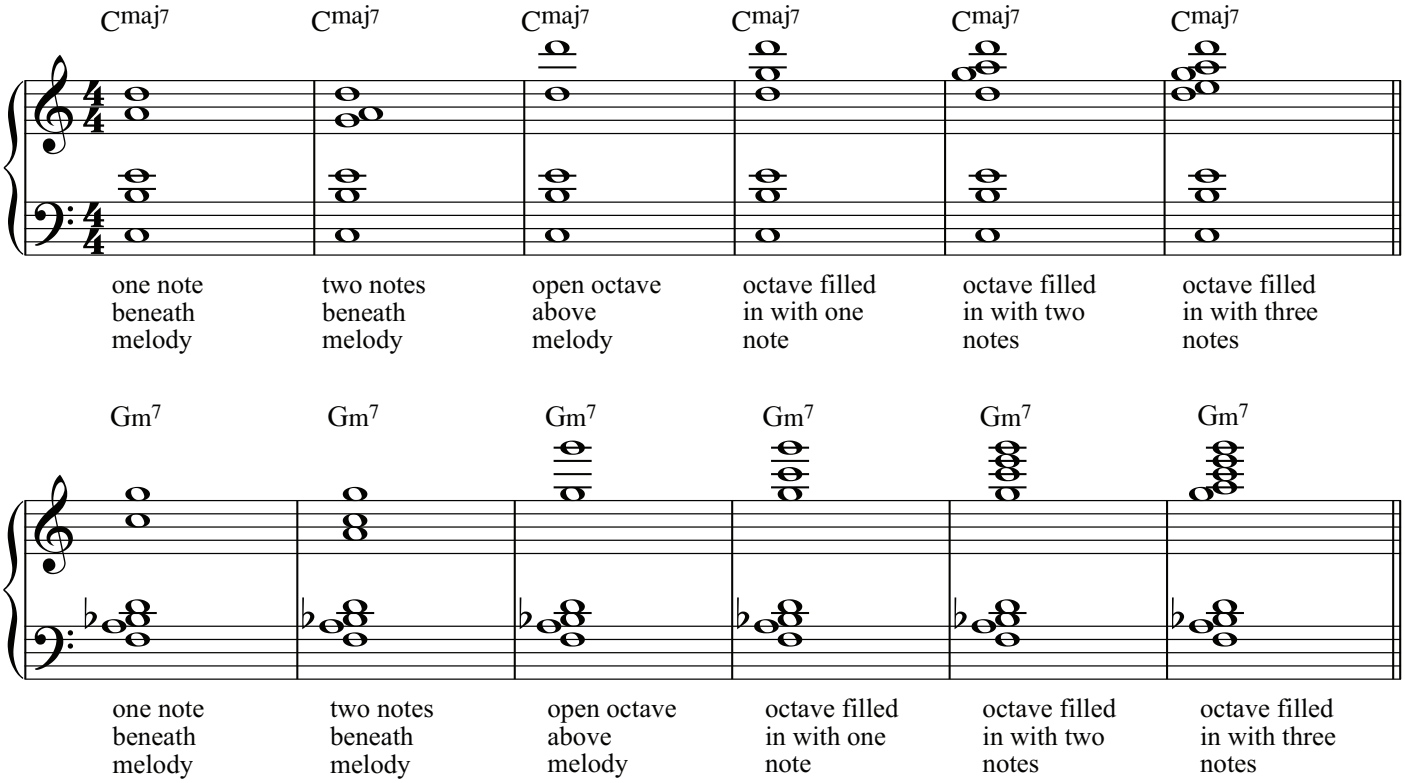


Because rootless voicings do not place the root on bottom, they are often played in alternation with a bass note or bass shell to express the root of the chord and fill in the bass range. In the stride piano style, for instance, pianists alternate every beat between a bass note or bass shell on the strong beats and a rootless voicing on the weak beats.

To create bigger chords or chords that expand into the treble clef, pianists typically play either a bass shell or a rootless voicing in the left hand and add chords in the right hand. These right-hand chords are generally chosen to frame the melody note and to avoid excessive **doubling** with the left hand. In other words, pianists try to play as many different notes as possible between the right hand and left hand.

Besides shared-hands voicings, discussed at length in Chapters 9-10, pianists commonly harmonize melodies by placing one or two notes beneath the melody or by adding an octave above the melody. Octaves can be left open or filled in with one, two, or three notes. Playing an octave above a left-hand bass shell or rootless voicing is sometimes referred to as a **shout chorus style**.

Example B.15
Bass shells and rootless voicings with harmonized right hand



In general, thick right-hand chords played in the treble clef without a supportive bass shell or rootless voicing sound empty and unsupported. For instance, if the right-hand chord is played with just a low bass note or low fifth, the chord will sound empty because it is missing the essential tones in their typical range.

Practicing the Three Positions of the Left Hand

Good pianists change hand shape and voicing type depending on the register in which they are playing. Practice presenting the same chord in different registers, keeping in mind that interval types must change depending on your position on the instrument.

Example B.16
Two chords presented in different registers