

Simple Concepts for Improvising Long Lines on Diminished Dominants

By: Ryan Kerwin

At some point in a young improviser's development, "making the changes" with eighth-note lines becomes relatively intuitive. Tunes with constantly shifting harmonies like "Confirmation" or "All the Things You Are" start to feel easy – improvising a solo with engaging forward momentum starts to feel like a simple matter of connecting scales with effective voice-leading and resolutions. Surprisingly, tunes with slow harmonic rhythm become much more intimidating. Tunes like "So What" or "I'll Remember April" start to seem like blank canvases. The harmony itself ceases to be a source of forward motion, putting the spotlight on the improviser's ability to make melodies. This can feel even worse if the improviser has developed a linear solo concept because eighth notes within a single scale quickly feel repetitive. This predicament is magnified when slow harmonic rhythm is combined with less familiar chord qualities, like the extended dominant flat-nine harmony in the A section of "Caravan". This article will present a few simple concepts for overcoming the challenge of improvising long eighth-note lines on diminished dominants.

Fundamental Harmony:

Before considering how to improvise lines on any any harmony, it's helpful to investigate how this harmony is realized on a comping instrument.

Diminished dominants are typically implied with some of the following chord symbols and realized with some of the following voicings:

The image shows three chord voicings for diminished dominants in 4/4 time, presented in a grand staff format (treble and bass clefs). The chords are labeled above the staff: D^{7(b9)}, D^{7(#9)}, and D^{13(b9)}.

- D^{7(b9)}**: Treble clef has notes G⁴, B⁴, D⁵, F⁵ (with a flat sign); Bass clef has notes G², B², D³, F³ (with a sharp sign).
- D^{7(#9)}**: Treble clef has notes G⁴, B⁴, D⁵, F⁵ (with a sharp sign); Bass clef has notes G², B², D³, F³ (with a sharp sign).
- D^{13(b9)}**: Treble clef has notes G⁴, B⁴, D⁵, F⁵ (with a flat sign), A⁵ (with a sharp sign); Bass clef has notes G², B², D³, F³ (with a sharp sign).

Melodically, the characteristic sound of this harmony is created when the root, 13, #11, and #9 of the chord are placed on downbeats, and approached from above by half steps.

Example:



This collection of pitches is an octatonic scale, sometimes referred to by jazz musicians as the diminished scale. *It is crucial to understand that the most basic characteristic sound of this scale is achieved through descending stepwise motion.* This scale could be played in eighth-notes for many octaves without sounding resolved because it will place the same pitches on the beat measure after measure.

Example:



More Advanced Patterns:

After spending time digesting the relationship between the scale/chord and achieving some basic technical fluency, a student can begin to work on a variety of common patterns used by jazz improvisers. For clarity and ease, patterns referred to in the following section will all be notated in the same key, however they are heard in other keys on the referenced recordings and can be transposed to any other diminished dominant.

One of the most iconic diminished patterns was used by John Coltrane on his recorded rendition of “Moment’s Notice”¹:



A similar descending pattern is also frequently used in recorded solos by the tenor saxophonist, Eric Alexander²:



Other patterns are built on three-tone sequences:



A similar pattern can be heard in the melody to Freddie Hubbard’s composition, “Happy Times”³:



¹ Coltrane, *Blue Train*.

² Alexander, Eric, *Improvising With The Diminished Scale*.

³ Hubbard, *The Artistry of Freddie Hubbard*.

More complex sequences can also be created by incorporating diatonic triads and 7th chords found within the diminished scale. The following pattern incorporates diatonic triads and can be heard in Tom Harrel’s recorded solo on the tune, “Adjustment”⁴:



A similar pattern incorporates diatonic 7th chords and can be heard on Eric Alexander’s recorded solo on “They Say It’s Wonderful”⁵:



This pattern incorporates triads approached by half-step:



Developing facility with these patterns will go a long way towards helping a student improvise long sequences while maintaining rhythmic and intervallic variety.

Incorporating the “Wave Line” over Diminished Dominant Harmonies:

One of the hallmarks of bop improvisations is the “wave line” – in other words, 1/8th note phrases that weave through changing harmonies throughout the range of the instrument. Most commonly, this is achieved when improvisers use arpeggios for ascending melodic motion and scales for descending melodic motion.

Example:



⁴ Silver, *Silver 'n Brass*.

⁵ John Swana-Joe Magnarelli Sextet., *Philly-New York Junction*.

Because the diminished scale and many of its sequences lend themselves to descending motion, it's important to have strategies for adding upward motion to your phrases.

One strategy is to launch into diminished scales using diatonic triads:

D^{13(b9)}



The image shows two staves of music for a D^{13(b9)} chord. The first staff begins with a descending eighth-note scale: D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3. The second staff begins with a diatonic triad: D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5. Both staves conclude with a descending eighth-note scale: D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4.

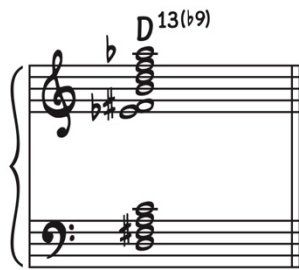
A similar contour is created by using triads with a chromatic approach note:

D^{13(b9)}



The image shows two staves of music for a D^{13(b9)} chord. The first staff begins with a chromatic approach: C#4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5. The second staff begins with a diatonic triad: D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5. Both staves conclude with a descending eighth-note scale: D5, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4.

Ascending melodic motion can also be incorporated by arpeggiating fully-extended chord voicings. This would work as follows:



Becomes a melody line through arpeggiation:



Incorporating Harmonic Variety:

Developing familiarity with various diminished patterns will help a student create longer phrases over diminished harmony, however an over-reliance on symmetrical patterns and sequences can lead to solos that sound more like predictable exercises than compelling melodies. In these cases it can be helpful to incorporate *implied harmonic motion* from related chords.

In the same way that that a melody can imply a related ii chord over a V7 chord, a melody can imply that related ii-half-diminished chord.

Example:

D⁷

Becomes:

Amin⁷ D⁷

D^{13(b9)}

Becomes:

Ami^{7(b5)} D^{7(b9)}

This concept can be extended for a considerable length of time before resolving as in the second phrase from Freddie Hubbard’s recorded solo on Caravan⁶:

The image shows a musical score for Freddie Hubbard's solo on "Caravan". It consists of four staves of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat).

- Staff 1:** Labeled "Phrase 1:" and "D7(b9)". The melody starts with a quarter rest, followed by a series of eighth and quarter notes.
- Staff 2:** Labeled "Phrase 2:". It begins with a measure starting on a 5 (representing the fifth of the previous phrase), followed by a series of eighth and quarter notes.
- Staff 3:** Contains two highlighted sections: a red-shaded area from measure 9 to 12, and a green-shaded area in measure 13. An arrow points from the red area to the text "Melody implies Ami7(b5) through common bebop language". Another arrow points from the green area to the text "Melody implies D7(b9) through arpeggio".
- Staff 4:** Labeled "Gm7". It continues the melodic line with eighth and quarter notes.

At faster tempos, a performer can also incorporate different V7 chord qualities within an improvised line. While at first glance it may seem counterintuitive to play phrases built on material other than the diminished scale in these instances, switching in and out a different implied chord qualities (e.g. V9 or V7(b9,b13)) creates an appealing unpredictability and momentary dissonance. Consider this line from Tom Harrel’s recorded solo on “Adjustment”⁷:

The image shows a musical score for Tom Harrel's solo on "Adjustment". It consists of two staves of music in 4/4 time, with a key signature of one flat (B-flat).

- Staff 1:** Labeled "D 13(b9)". It shows measures 9, 10, 11, and 12. Measures 11 and 12 are highlighted in red and green respectively. Below measure 11 is the text "Implies Ami7". Below measure 12 is the text "Implies D7(b9, b13)".
- Staff 2:** Shows measures 13, 14, 15, and 16. Measures 13 and 14 are highlighted in purple and cyan respectively. Below measure 13 is the text "Implies G9". Below measure 14 is the text "A 13(b9)". Below measure 15 is the text "Implies Emi7-A7". Measure 16 is labeled "D 13(b9)".

⁶ Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers, *Caravan*.

⁷ Horace Silver, *Silver 'n Brass*.

Conclusion:

The preceding strategies cover just a few common techniques for improvising linearly over extended diminished dominant harmonies. As the student works to assimilate these approaches, it's important to remember that long lines of eighth-notes are not the only ingredient of a beautiful improvised solo. Contrasting these dense phrases of your solo with open melodic moments and rests balance the overall effect. Take note of how frequently master improvisers like Freddie Hubbard, who clearly have the ability to play endless lines over any harmony, elect to play varied types of figures to contrast the effect of their lines.

References:

Art Blakey and the Jazz Messengers. *Caravan*. CD. Riverside, 1963.

Coltrane, John. *Blue Train*. U.S.A.: Blue Note, 1985. WorldCat.org.

Hubbard, Freddie. *The artistry of Freddie Hubbard*. Originals. New York, N.Y.: Impulse!, 2009. WorldCat.org.

John Swana-Joe Magnarelli Sextet. *Philly-New York Junction*. Enschede, Holland: Criss Cross Jazz, 1998. WorldCat.org.

Silver, Horace. *Silver 'n brass*. Los Angeles: Blue Note, 1975. WorldCat.org.

Further Reading for Diminished Dominant Patterns:

Alexander, Eric. *Improvising With The Diminished Scale*, 2012.

<http://www.ericalexanderjazz.com>.

Baker, David f. 1931. *How to Play Bebop*. Vol. 2. Van Nuys, Calif.: Alfred Publishing, 1987.

Coker, Jerry. *Elements of the Jazz Language for the Developing Improviser*. Alfred, 2009.