6 - Passing Notes

Playing a bunch of chords in the right hand of every bar may sound tiresome and repetitive. Our first step towards creating interesting melody lines, runs and fills is to start small, with a couple of passing notes.

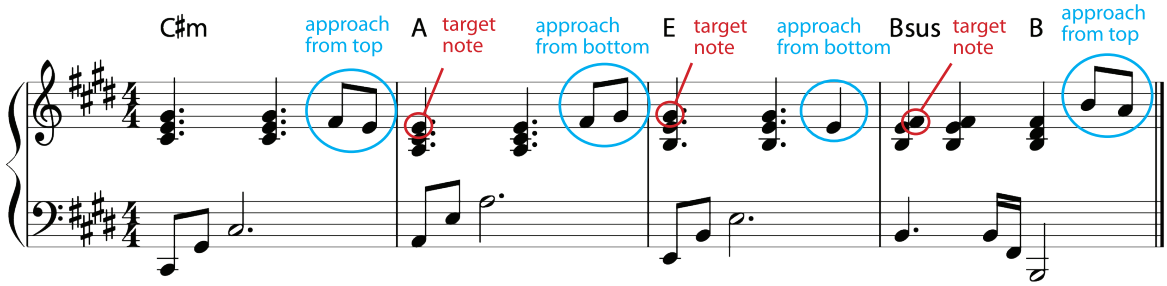
As its name suggests, passing notes are 1 or 2 notes that are used in passing as you move form one chord voicing to another. They form a short melodic bridge between chords. Once you can confidently insert these notes, extending them to produce a longer, more complex run will be less of a challenge.

In this lesson

- Passing notes lead to the top note of the next chord voicing
- Replace the last chord in a bar with 1 or 2 passing notes
- The use of melodic passing notes provides contrast against the strength of chords, creating variation in the sound produced
- Learn to confidently use passing notes as they can easily be extended to form basic runs and longer fill lines.

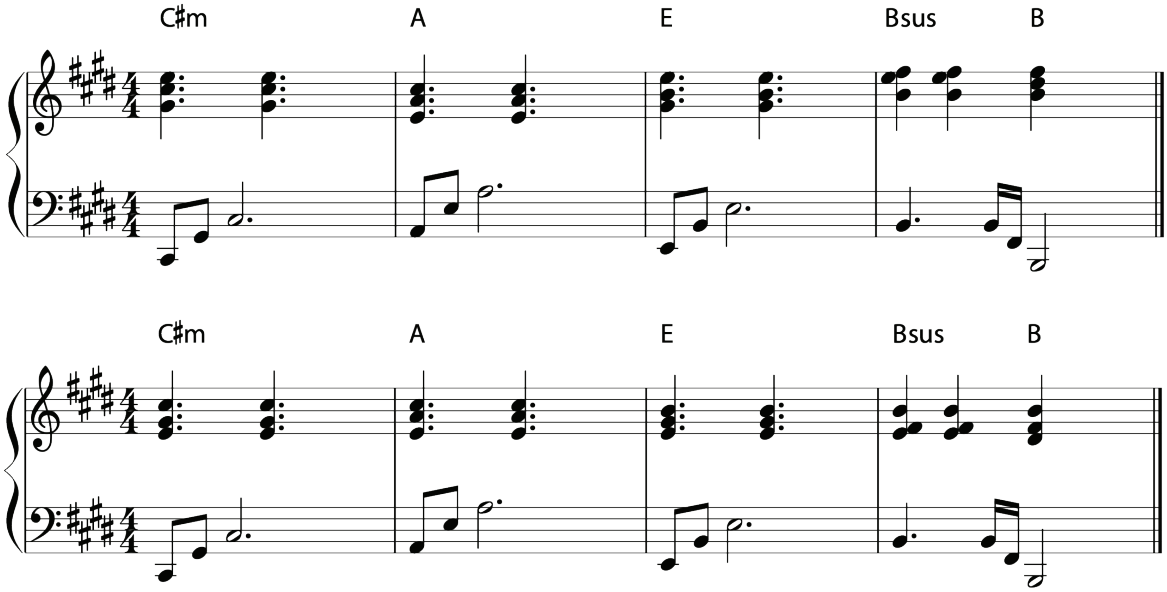
Exercise 6.1

Below is a progression in the key of E. If you aren't familiar with the key of E, take the time to learn its three major and three minor triads as we discussed in Lesson 4. For this progression, we're dealing with the I, IV, V and the VI, which is the relative minor. Play the example, ensuring the left hand arpeggio and the dotted rhythm sound identical to what I've demonstrated on the video.



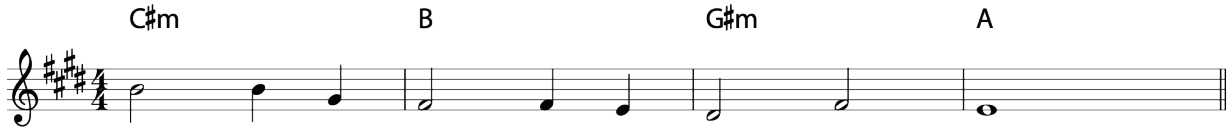
Notice that the passing notes lead into the *target note*, ie. the top note of the next chord voicing. They might approach it from the bottom, or from the top and in each case, they are played near the next chord.

In the following two similar progressions, add your own passing notes on the 4th beat of each bar in the space provided. You'll need to experiment until you find a set of notes that you like, then write those notes in. To choose your passing notes, it often helps if you hum or sing along with your playing then try to *sing* the passing notes *before* you play them. This develops the habit of properly *creating* your melodies and improves your ability to play by ear instead of randomly guessing notes which requires zero skill.



Exercise 6.2

Here you're given a melody line. The melody itself is often a good source of passing notes, so once you've decided on the chord inversions, choose some melody notes to use as passing notes whenever possible. If there aren't many melody notes to work with, as in bars 3 and 4, insert your own as you did in the previous exercise.



Remember the steps:

1 Play the melody as written to get the tune into your head and a sense of the rhythm

2 Choose your chord inversions - if you're trying to convey the melody, make sure the melody note is the highest note in your RH chord voicing (Lesson 2).

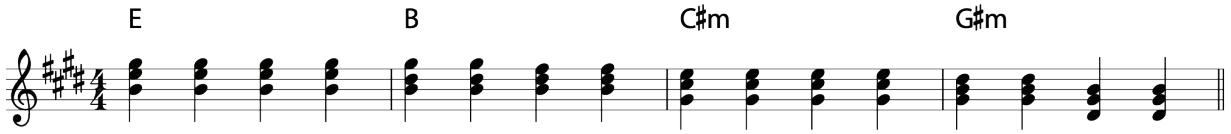
3 Decide whether you'll use a straight or dotted rhythm in each bar (Lesson 3)

4 Decide which LH technique to use for each bar (Lesson 5)

5 Where appropriate, use 1 or 2 passing notes on the 4th beat of the bar that lead into the *target* note.

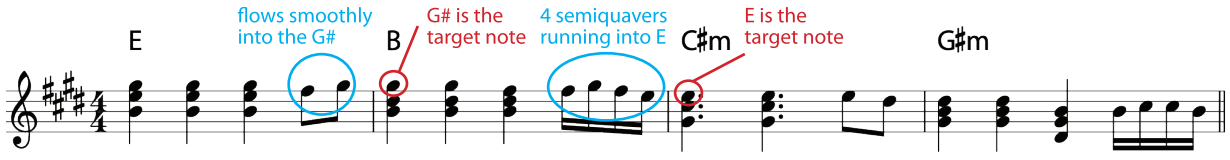
Exercise 6.3

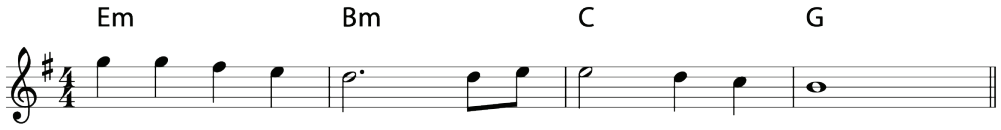
Here's a RH accompaniment for the given chord progression. Let's see if you can make it sound more interesting by either replacing the last chord voicing in each bar with passing notes, or inserting passing notes *after* the last chord voicing (you may have to use semiquavers to achieve this). Play the chords an octave lower if you prefer.



Exercise 6.4

Using the same example above, now try to convert some of the passing notes into 4 note runs. One possible solution is shown below. Create another of your own. By the way, if you'd like to extend the progression to 8 bars, the G#m flows nicely into an A chord. The rest is up to you!



Exercise 6.5

A familiar tune from Lesson 3 and 5. We're back in the key of G, and some of the melody notes already provide good passing notes so you may not need to create too much - work mainly with what's already there. However, try to use one 4 note run somewhere (perhaps in the final G bar as you lead back into the Em).