

XIV. Some Simple Techniques For Harmonizing Melodies

Note: Some fingerstyle technique, or pick + fingers, will be required for many of the following examples.

A. Melody + Bass Note

This is perhaps the most intuitive, and also the most useful, way to get started with chord-melody arranging on the guitar, especially for solo arrangements. It's a simple idea really. Find a fingering that allows you to play the melody and the Root of the chord (or the indicated bass note of a slash chord-symbol) at the same time, and see if there are any grips for the chord in question that you are already familiar with nearby, i.e. within the reach of your fretting hand.

1. If you are working from a Concert lead sheet, play the melody in the octave it actually sounds. Remember that Concert Middle C equals the 3rd spaced C on a part written specifically for guitar. So, if you see Middle C on a Concert lead sheet, it is the C that is fingered on the 2nd string - 1st fret, or the 3rd string - 5th fret, etc. that you're supposed to play; not the low C on the 5th string at the 3rd fret.
2. Play the bass note in the lowest possible location that the melody will allow so that the chord sounds as full as possible. We are trying here to develop the ability to perform solo guitar. So, in general, the fuller it sounds, the better. These techniques are a bit less suitable if you're playing with a bass player.
3. If there is a series of melody notes that are all on the same chord, then try to find a fingering that will allow you to sustain the bass note while you execute all the melody notes. There will, however, be many situations where you will want to re-strike the Root, perhaps even on a different string, and/or in a different octave.
4. See if there are any grips for the chord that are already familiar to you that lie within your fretting hand's reach.

Eg. If you were presented with the following lead sheet:

Chords: D⁺ G E_m7 E^b7 D7 B^b7 A_m7 D7 G₆ A^b7

Chords: D_m7 G+7 C_{Maj}7 A_m7^b5 G_{Maj}7 E^b7 D7 G₆

You might start out like this:

Guitar

Chords: D⁺ G E_m7 E^b7 D7 B^b7 A_m7 D7 G₆ A^b7

Chords: D_m7 G+7 C_{Maj}7 A_m7^b5 G_{Maj}7 E^b7 D7 G₆

Which could become this:

Guitar

or something similar.

- Try this with many, many tunes.
- Try this with EVERY tune you are working on!

B. Harmonizing A Melody With Shell-Voicings

1. Four-Note Voicings

Goal: To harmonize a simple melody (consisting mostly of notes with a long duration) with a 4-note voicing.

Note: Use voicings with only the Root on the bottom for now. I.e. No inversions, even if indicated by a slash chord-symbol. Also, for this to work, the melody note(s) must be finger-able on either the 1st, 2nd or 3rd strings. Eg. No melody notes lower than G below concert middle C.

For now, we always want the 3rd and the 7th to be present in our voicing, and we want the root on the bottom. It's usually best to not double any notes. Try to make each note count.

1. If the melody note is either the 3rd or the 7th of the chord, then first figure out the lowest possible spot on the fretboard where you can finger the Root along with the melody note, and allow for at least 2 other strings in between the melody note and the bass note. Remember, we're after a 4-note voicing here.

- If the melody is the 3rd of the chord, then between the melody and the Root, add the 7th, and either:
 - the 5th

- or an available tension (be careful not to create any bad sounding $\flat 2$'s or $\flat 9$'s)
- or double the Root (in addition to the bass note - in a higher octave of course)
- or double the 3rd (in a lower octave than the melody).

So the possibilities here are (depending on what is playable due to the specifics of the tune):

1 5 7 3, 1 3 7 3, 1 9-or11-or13 7 3, 1 7 5 3, 1 7 9-or1-or13 3

- If the melody is the 7th of the chord, then between the melody and the Root add the 3rd, and either
 - the 5th

- or the Root (in a higher octave than the bass note)
- or a colour tone.

- It is usually best not to double the 7th, but sometimes it can work very nicely.

[In a voicing with the 7th in the lead (i.e. the top note), doubling the 3rd usually results in an awkward voicing.]

Possibilities: 1 3 5 7, 1 5 3 7, 1 9-or11-or13 3 7, 1 3 9-or11-or13 7.