

“Spicing-Up” Diminished Chords

by Ryan Cullen

www.rycunmusic.com

This lesson was a response to a question at www.learnjazzpiano.com regarding how to make diminished chords more “interesting.” These were my thoughts:

One of the things I use to “spice-up” a fully diminished chord (make it more “hairy”) is to add another tone such as a ninth on any given chord. I especially like using this sound in succession to really build tension in otherwise bland spots.

For example, on *Bbdim7* try *Bb-Db-Fb-Abb-C*

Take the tune, “Caravan” for example...the whole first part of the tune is really one big V-i cadence (C7-Fm7). What I like to do is harmonize every melody note with one of the dim7 chords with an added (9th) tone. This would be for two-hands:

Start with a *Bbdim7(add9)* over a C base in your left hand. Forget the fact that this is really just a C7b9 chord (you could obviously analyze these chords many ways)...the important thing is that inside it is the dim7(add9) we're talking about. *Keep consistently playing a C base, and then move the dim7(add9) chords parallel to the melody keeping the exact intervals intact (m3-m3-m3-P4)*. It makes for some interesting sounds...the kind of tension I think works well in this situation.

Once you've gotten that down, while you're hanging out over the C7, try moving the dim7(add9) chords up in minor 3rds beginning on (Bb,Db,E,G). What you're doing there is building chords based on key tones (7th,b9th,3rd,5th) of the C half-whole dim scale.

You can also try this condensed version that fits in one hand:

Start on any one of the key tones in the C half-whole dim scale and build two minor 3rds followed by a perfect 4th i.e. (G-Bb-Db-F#). You could call this a “dim triad with a major 7th” I suppose. It's basically the same idea as before but with only 4 notes.

Another idea that comes to mind now is *really a good “use” of these “spiced-up” diminished chords*; that is the sometimes unexpected yet very effective V7-idim7-Imajor7 chord resolution (especially effective in ballads):

Whenever your melody note is a major 7th, you can use these dim7 voicings as a lead in to the major7 chord.

For example, take the tune, “Misty.” We'll do it in G since we just talked about that particular dim triad(maj7). The first bar of the tune begins with the melody (excluding the pickups) on the major 7th [F#] in this key. Try briefly (maybe the first one or two beats of the bar) substituting the first chord with either Gdim triad(maj7) OR (the 5 note

“Spicing-Up” Diminished Chords
www.rycunmusic.com

equivalent) Edim7(add9)/G and then resolving to the Gmaj7 or G6addmaj7 (whatever.) It really doesn't matter how you think of these dim chords or what you call them in my opinion...whatever you can see and remember best.

You could even take these concepts a step further and harmonize the V7 pickups into the first full bar the same way. So for Misty, again in G, starting from the very beginning (with pickups) on the [D] in the melody, we'd harmonize the D7-Gmaj7 like this (bottom to top, melody note in brackets):

C-Eb-Gb-A-[D],
A-C-Eb-Gb-[B],
E-G-Bb-Db-[F#...] (melody note sustained),
E-A-B-D-[F#...] (melody note sustained, harmonies resolve under it)

This concept can additionally work with the natural ninth and thirteenth in the melody as well since (as upper tones) they remain consistent (provided they aren't altered, which is also another possibility!) within both the dim triad(maj7) and the maj7 chords.

Finally, there's the “*double-diminished*” chord. This type of diminished chord consists of two contrasting fully diminished chords (a whole step apart usually.) You can certainly get some really cool sounds out of that!

For example, try Gdim7(G-Bb-Db-Fb) on the bottom (starting on G below mid C) and then A dim (A-C-Eb-Gb) right above that. These work nicely as really "souped up" natural 13#9 chords. In this case, Eb13(#9,#11,etc.) seems to fit the voicing best to my ear. You have every key tone in the Eb half-whole dim scale present.

Experiment, play around, there are lots of other possibilities!