



Minor Sixth/Diminished Scale Substitution

by Rick Stone

Introduction:

Back in the May and August 2000 issues we explored Sixth/Diminished Scales as taught by pianist Barry Harris. As a student of Barry's in the eighties, I came to see the incredible wealth of tonal possibilities that this scale offers the composer, arranger and improviser. You will remember that the Sixth/Diminished Scale is created by combining the notes from a 6th chord (major or minor) with the notes from its leading tone diminished (the o7th chord built on the major 7th note of the scale) resulting in an eight-note scale with a chromatic passing-tone between the 5th and the 6th. Many people like to call these scales the "Bebop" Major and Minor scales because they were heavily used by musicians of that era.

Today we'll examine how the Minor Sixth/Diminished Scales can be applied to some common chord progressions by superimposing them over existing harmonies.

The Theory

As you probably already know, most chords can be named in more than one way depending on inversion and how they are being used in a given chord progression. For instance the chord Bm7b5 (B-D-F-A) can be also be viewed as a Dm chord (D-F-A) with it's 6th ("B") in the bass (see example 1). In fact, if you look at how this chord is actually used in a progression, this is *exactly* how it sounds. For example, think of the simple "iv V7 I" progression in the key of A minor. The chords would be D minor, E7 and A minor (example 2). In jazz, we often find this progression replaced by the ii-7(b5) V7 I (example 3).

Example 1

D minor triad
"B" in the bass

Example 2

Dm E7 Am

Example 3

Bm7^(b5) E7 Am⁶

Now if we were to alter the E7 chord by sharpening the 5th and adding a flatted 9th (as is often the case in a minor key) we might end up with a chord spelled E G# B# D F: And if we forget about the E for a second and look at the remaining notes in their enharmonic spelling "Ab C D F" you'll notice that it spells out an inversion of an Fm6 chord (F Ab C D).

Example 4

E7 Fm⁶

And so it is that when you play the ii-V-I in the minor key, all three chords in the progression are actually minor 6th chords. For example: “Bm7b5 E7alt Am “ is really just “Dm Fm Am.” If you’ve by now guessed that this can make this sometimes difficult chord progression much easier to play over, you’re right. It also opens up a world of possibilities for voice-leading and movement when you use these very basic chords as key centers for Minor 6th/Diminished Scales, and then use these scales, with their inherent richness of tone color, as the basis for your harmonic lines.

The basic rule is simple: for minor chords use the corresponding Minor 6th/Diminished, for mi7b5 chord use the Minor 6th/Diminished built on it’s flatted 3rd, and for altered Dominant 7ths use the Minor 6th/Diminished a half-step up. Any notes and or chords built from the notes in the corresponding scale can be used to build harmonies and voice movement within the basic chord sound. Structures built by combining notes from the sixth and diminished offer some of the more interesting possibilities. Of course, as always, you have to listen to your musical instincts and learn what “sounds” good.

The Application:

Example 5 uses minor 6th/diminished scales to add harmonic interest to a ii-V7-I progression in the key of F minor. Listen carefully as you play through the example and pay close attention to how the “sixth” and “diminished” notes are combined.

Example 5

The diagram shows guitar chord diagrams and staff notation for a ii-V7-I progression in F minor. The first line of chords includes G[♭]7, (B[♭]m6/dim), C7alt, and (D[♭]m6/dim). The second line includes Fm6 and (Fm6/dim). Each chord is accompanied by a fretboard diagram showing fingerings and a staff notation showing the chord voicing.

Listen:

This example can be heard in Real Audio format at <http://www.rickstonemusic.com>.

About 50 positive responses have been received to date.

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