Developing Your Own Chord Voicings

stack 'em up

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There are many requests to newsgroups and in sessions for "charts of chord voicings." In my opinion, learning disconnected chords from a chart is not necessarily the best way to make those chords part of your vocabulary. Here's an alternative method.

Consider working out the chord voicings yourself. If you go to a chart, you're likely to find a ton of disconnected voicings, the applications and relationships of which are not likely to be clear. In contrast, if you work out your own voicings, even if you don't have as many "shapes" memorized, you will have a much greater command of those voicings, and more importantly, you will know how to employ and manipulate them. This helps you develop a personalized approach, and to know **why** certain things work or don't work. I would encourage you to experiment extensively with this practice; it's one of the great advantages of playing a chordal instrument, and one that supports alterations in tunings. We can get many unique and individualized chordal sounds.

Try this:

1) Determine the correct chord tones for the chords you want to learn. If you don't know how to figure out chord tones, any basic "introduction to harmony" textbook will explain it, or you can refer to the large section "Understanding Celtic Harmony" in my book **Celtic Backup** . There is also information in these same sources on how to understand and build the various modes in which Irish traditional music melodies tend to be written.

Once you know the chord tones of the chords you want to build, do this:

2) In first position, and using open strings, figure out fingerings that give you those chords. Realize that in any tune in Dmaj, Gmaj, Am, Bm, or Em, you can allow certain notes to ring through---any note that functions as the tonic, second, fourth, fifth, or seventh of the key is potentially available as a drone (provided that drone note fits within the mode of the tune).

For example, if you are accompanying a tune which is in D Mixolydian mode, then the notes of the mode (and therefore of the tune), are:

D E F# G A B C D

1 2 3 4 5 6 b7 1

So the available drone notes are the tonic (D), second (E), fourth (G), fifth (A), and flat-seventh (C) of the mode. Potentially, any of these notes, that is D, E, G, A, & C, can be used momentarily or for an extended period as a drone.

Of course the commonest drones in this music are on the tonic, or perhaps the fifth (D and A). These are the tones commonly used as drones by various sorts of pipes. However, the second, fourth, and seventh can also be used as drones, provided that they agree with the notes of the tune's mode.

This means that many of your chords can combine elements of the chord juxtaposed with a drone note or notes. In the same D Mixolydian mode, then, your "tonic chord" could be spelled:

D F# A

1 3 5 (the standard D major triad)

D G A

1 4 5 (in technical terms, a "suspended 4th" chord")

D E A

1 2 5 (in technical terms, a "suspended 2nd chord")

D A C

1 5 b7 (in technical terms, a fragment of a "D7" chord)

Two provisos (n.b., these are **very important**):

1) You should avoid using a drone note in your chord which clashes aggressively with a note in the melody. If your chord is spelled D-G-A, and the melody hangs on an F#, it will not sound good.

2) Similarly, you should avoid combining drones and chord tones in a fashion which juxtaposes 2 notes which are ½ step apart. E.g., if your chord is spelled D-F#-G, it will not sound good.

In both cases, this is because the dissonance of one-half step between chord tones, or between a

chord tone and a melody note, clashes too much. You **can** make use of the distance of one whole step between chord tones or melody notes (D-G-A, for example) to good effect.

In all cases, you should strive for a judicious use of drones and partial chords, especially focusing on maintaining **continuity**, using drone notes held in common between chords which are changing. This retention of a droning element along with partial chords is very suitable for the droning, modal character of the tunes.

Realize also that you can get away with using only 2 of the 3 notes in the triad, plus drones. It is **not** necessary to have all three notes of every triad represented, and in fact is likely to work against your having a suitable chordal sound--- excessive diatonicism (use of full triads) tends to detract from the modal character of the traditional melodies.

In practical terms, this means that you have to learn your way around your chosen tuning. You need to know where notes are on your instrument, and you need to know what notes at any given moment need to be fingered as chord tones or can be left open as drones.

As an example, here are a couple of demonstrations for how to work out a few chords on a bouzouki tuned DGDAD (low pitch to high pitch). If you play a four course instrument (cittern, octave mandolin, or mandolin), you can mentally "leave off" the references to the lowest course.

Please note also that **exactly the same principles** hold true for working out chord voicings on other stringed instruments (say for example guitar). Though the specifics of the tuning or number of strings may be different, the principles for building chord voicings are identical.

Say for example you're working out an Em chord (spelled EGB in standard practice). On a four-course instrument tuned GDAD (low to high) you would leave the lowest string open (yielding G), the 2nd fret of the 3th string (yielding E), the 2nd fret of the 2nd string (B again), and either finger the top string's 2nd fret (E again) or leaving it open (yielding a drone D, the seventh of the mode). This means you are fingering a combination of notes that yield an EGB chord, with the addition of a drone D on top. This is, in technical terms, an Em7 chord, but for Irish music purposes, you can think "Em plus drone strings."

Second example:

For an A chord (which is neither major nor minor, and works in both sorts of tunes): finger the 2nd fret of the lowest string (yielding A) or damp that string by wrapping your thumb, finger the second fret of the 3rd string(E), leave the 2nd string open (A again), and finger the 2nd fret of the top string (E) or leave it open (drone D). You get a chord spelled (A)EAD, with drone Don top. In technical terms, an Asus4 chord; for Irish purposes, "A modal." Note that this chod does not include the 3rd (C or C#) which would dictate whether the chord is major or minor. Because it lacks the C or C#--that is the flat 3 or natural 3--the chord is neither major nor minor, and can therefore be used in both major and minor situations: for tunes in A major and also tunes in A minor. Such ambiguity is very useful and highly desirable: it lets the **tune itself** determine the major/minor sound of the performance.

Further exercises:

Do the same thing with other chords: work out voicings in first position, using open strings wherever possible, for all the chords you use in accompaniment. Remember to experiment and familiarize yourself with the effect of adding drone notes on open strings(which can be high or low) to full or partial triads.

Now do the same thing up the neck. Realize that you really only need to finger the bottom 2 or 3 strings: the top A and/or D can be allowed to ring if you're in Dmaj, Gmaj, Am, or Em (and selectively in other keys as well), because those top notes can open be made to function as temporary drones on the tonic, second, fourth, fifth, or flat-seventh degrees of the scale.

Also, you will frequently want to damp a certain string, stopping it from sounding, and fingering the notes on the other strings, perhaps letting the top A and/or D ring out. This is how you get moving basslines and chord inversions going up and down the neck (see also the article on "Improvising Counterpoint" for much more on this last).

I think you'll find if you work out this stuff on your own, your vocabulary may be smaller, but you'll have a MUCH better grasp of how and why it works (and how you can use it).