

TIPS FOR KEYBOARD PLAYERS:
simplification and accompaniment of *Singing the Journey*
by Susan Peck

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I. Introduction, getting started

The songs in *Singing the Journey* range from simple chants to pop-jazz arrangements. The arrangers provided a wealth of stylistic information in the varied accompaniments. Some are challenging, but only represent one way of many to play these songs.

Listen to plenty of music in the styles of the pieces you want to play. Rhythm and blues riffs may look difficult on the page, but most of us have a fair amount of Motown in our ears. Let your ears guide your eyes and hands. Start with the easier tunes and work up to the complex ones.

Read Jeannie Gagné's invaluable guide to rhythmic styles in contemporary music.

Take a few minutes to map out the piece. Know where the verses and choruses begin and end, and where the repeats go. Use colored highlighters to mark sectional barlines and repeat signs.

II. Comping from chord symbols and chord symbol primer

The art of "comping" is something pianists can practice at any level of proficiency. You are creating an accompaniment on the spot. Jazz players and guitarists comp from the chord symbols written above the vocal line, which is an additive process. This is the easiest way to create a simple accompaniment. The chord symbol tells you which notes to use, and the style of the music helps determine the rhythmic patterns.

Start with very simple harmonic rhythms. Play sustained chords on the main beats of the measure (beats 1 and 3 in 4/4 or 12/8, beat 1 in 3/4). Use the chord symbols to help you find the

harmonic rhythm. Use your ear to determine which chords are structural and which are passing harmonies. Omit the passing harmonies.

Using Jeannie Gagné's rhythm tips as a guide, move the chords to the backbeat. If you have the luxury of working with a drummer or bass player, this step is great fun because either bass or drums can hold the downbeat. Your LH can play chords and your RH can play melody. As you get comfortable with the chords, you will begin to feel and hear natural syncopations and accents in the style, as well as places to "fill" between vocal phrase. If you're the whole band, your LH will take care of the bassline and your RH will play the chords. Yup, you should practice grabbing chords with both hands.

Chord symbol primer

It's well worth your while to get familiar with major and minor triads, and seventh chords, and how they are related within a key signature (diatonic triads). Start by learning the I, IV, V7 chords for the keys you play most often. Warm-up by creating your own "harp" pieces based on broken chord patterns, so that you can get the shape of each chord into your hands and the sound in your ears.

For reinforcement of any of the following examples, compare the chord symbols in the music to the actual notes in the accompaniment underneath the chord symbols.

The first letter you see is the fundamental and the name of the chord. Play this note with your left hand.

Major triads are indicated by a single, upper-case letter that stands for three notes in root-third-fifth relationship: chord symbol C means notes C-E-G, with the C played in the bass.

Minor triads have a small m after the chord name: Cm = C-E flat-G, with the C played in the bass.

Diminished triads have a small circle (like temperature) after the chord name, indicating a chord with a minor third and a lowered fifth. Cdim = C-E flat-G flat

If you see two letters with a slash, the second letter represents a bass note that is different than the fundamental tone of the chord. C/E = C-E-G, but put the E in the bass. C/B means play a B in the bass.

A “7” following the name of the chord adds a color tone a minor 7th above the root tone of the triad. Easiest way to find this note: add a note one whole step below the root tone (but not in the bass unless indicated with a slash). C7= C-E-G-B flat. Cm7 = C-E flat-G-B flat.

For simplification purposes, omit all other upper extensions (add 9, add 11, #11, 6).

There are a number of free websites that offer instruction in basic music theory. Ricci Adams’ musictheory.net is very good, and it is also downloadable as an offline freeware package. It’s interactive, and offers tutorials like [this one](http://www.musictheory.net/utilities/html/id95_en.html) on learning the chords in various keys:

III. Comping from score, choosing what to keep, what to leave out

You can also comp from the written accompaniment by leaving out non-essential notes from the written arrangement. You will develop your harmonic knowledge by learning which notes are essential. Here are some steps to comping by omission, aka “faking it”:

Musical texture consists of one to four layers: melody, bass line, chords in various rhythmic patterns, fills. To simplify, practice shifting your focus to different threads in the texture:

Play only the melody line and the bass line.

Play only the bass line and add chords on the main beats only.

Play only the melody and add chords on the main beats only.

When you’re comfortable with the chords, shift them to the backbeat. Leave out filler notes. You may even want to make yourself a playing copy and use white-out to hide them. For example, in #1010, We Give Thanks, you can play the LH bass-line, but omit the 16th notes in measure 2, 4, 8, 12, 14, 16.

Scan for broken chord patterns and play them as blocked chords in close position: this is good “note reduction therapy.” Example: in #1043 “Székely Áldás,” all of the 8th notes in each measure of the right hand accompaniment are simply an arpeggio of the triad or seventh chord indicated by a single chord symbol above the music. It may be easier think of grabbing one chord than to sort out a set of seven 8th notes. You’ll see more extended arpeggios in the left hand accompaniment of #1044, “Eli, Eli.” Each arpeggio can be reduced to a single chord with 3 or 4 notes.

IV. Other tips:

Pianists will find that the spiral-bound large-print edition is much easier to read, and stays open on the music rack. If you have the small book, take it to a copy center and have them cut off the spine and rebind the pages with a spiral binder.

Use two copies of the book at the piano to reduce page turns, especially in pieces with multiple verses where you're flipping back and forth to the beginning of the song.

When you practice, set a *slow* tempo and stick to it. Use a drum machine or metronome to keep yourself honest, but get used to looking ahead and letting wrong notes go by without stopping you.

Play with other musicians whenever you can: singers, drummers, guitarists, bassists, horn and string players, piano duet partners. Decide ahead of time how to divvy up the musical texture, so that nobody has to play *all* of the notes. Set a tempo and stick to it. If you play a note you didn't intend, listen to it and go on--maybe it was that extra-cool jazz note the music needed at that moment.

Comping takes time to learn. Be patient and practice a little every day. Get familiar with key signatures and chord symbols so that you can grab chords quickly. Take a few lessons with a jazz teacher or folk musician.