Using Tensions in Voicing Chords

Chord tensions are the notes in between the chord tones, and are usually identified as 9th, 11th, and 13th (sometimes called 6th). For example, a Bb7 is constructed with Bb, D, F, and Ab. The 9th is a C, 11th is Eb, and the 13th is G. Put all that together and you get a complete chord scale or modal scale. Can you identify the scale or mode for this example?

Adding tensions to your chord voicing is an effective way to color the sound and add variety to your comping. In this discussion we will take a look at how tensions can be used

1. To indicate the tonality of the current key
2. To imply substitute dominant 7
3. In a blues tune
4. As passing notes to move smoothly from one chord to the next
5. In tunes with simpler triad-like harmony

The table below lists all available tensions for 5 of the most frequently used chords. We'll take a look at each chord type and identify the typical situations when each tension could be used and when is should not be used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Available Tensions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Major 7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maj 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maj 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td># 11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Let's start with major 7 chords. In general, adding a 9th or 6th can be done anytime you want. You can often include the #11 even if the chord symbol doesn't specifically indicate it, but since the #11 is an especially distinctive sound it should be used only when appropriate. If the tune ends on a maj7 chord musicians will often add the #11. See if you can find a recording where the #11 is applied to the final chord.

Choosing what tensions to use often depends on what is happening in the music at that moment. For example, during the beginning of a tune when the melody is being played it is always good to choose chords that support the melody and don't conflict with it. The tune “Blue in Green” starts with an E in the melody, and the first chord is a Bbmaj7. A good voicing for that chord could have a 9th in the top, which would compliment the melody note. Having an F in the top of your chord would create some noticeable dissonance and would probably not work. Try to be aware of what the melody or the soloist is playing when choosing an accompaniment chord.

Remember that for maj7 chords all the available notes (chord tones and tensions) have equal value. This means that you can build your chords with ANY combination of available notes. Some possible
choices for a Gmaj7 could include

- g, a, b, d
- f#, b, e, a
- a, c#, d, e
- d, f#, g, b

Some of these shapes will sound open and harmonious while others will sound dense and even dissonant. But all are available.

For min7 chords you want to first determine if the chord is functioning as a tonic sound or as a sub-dominant sound. The most common situation where a min7 is a sub-dominant chord is when it is part of a II – V progression. Returning again to “Blue in Green” the 4th bar contains a c-7 which is part of a II – V. What key is this progression outlining? The last 2 bars of the tune have an a-7 and a d-7. Both of these are functioning as tonic sounds.

Min7 chords with a tonic function can be treated much like maj7 chords. Any and all of the available chord tones and tensions are available to you, in any combination you want. Be somewhat cautious of the natural 6 though. As it is with the #11 on maj7 chords, the natural 6 is a very distinctive sound and should be used only when the time is right.

If the min7 chord is part of a II – V you'll want to give some priority to the 3rd and 7th notes in the chord. These notes, often called “guide tones” are usually played in the left hand. The right hand will usually have some combination of root, fifth, 9th, and/or 11th.

It might be good, at this point, to say that tensions can be thought of just like spices you add to food. And just like herbs and spices, some tensions have a mild character, while others can be rather explosive. Knowing how to add these “sound flavors” to your chords is very similar to how we season food. Make sense?

The style of the tune can help you determine what tensions, if any, to add in. Pop tunes, or any tune that uses simple triads will be treated differently than harmonically complex jazz tunes. “Heartsong” a great tune by Fred Hersch, starts off with some very simple chords – D, G, and A. For triad-type chords like this you are limited to the 9th or the 6th to keep the flavor of the sound. Here is a link to a youtube clip of Heartsong – [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czCivvnX0ME&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czCivvnX0ME&feature=related).

Let's return to the ever popular II - V progression, which is ubiquitous in jazz and popular music. We've already concluded that the 3rd and 7th notes (the guide tones) are best handled with the left hand. One other factor to consider when choosing tensions for the right hand is knowing the tonality of the moment. Remember that a II – V progression outlines a key. An A-7 to D7 is typically analyzed as being in the key of G. But is it G major or G minor? You can use tensions, especially on the V7, to indicate major or minor tonality. The notes that differentiate major and minor are the 3rd, 6th, and 7th. In the key of A those notes would be C#, F#, and G#. If you flat those notes to C, F, and G you turn A major into A minor. Notice that many of those notes can be used as tensions for the II – V (B-7 – E7 in the key of A). Can you identify how those 6 notes – C, C#, F, F#, G, and G# function on the B- and the E7? Remember not all the notes work on all the chords. Try to figure out how/if each of the 6 notes will work in a B-7 and an E7.

You want to remember that tensions, especially when used in a II – V, can be used to differentiate whether you're in a major or minor key.
Looking back at the tension chart it appears that dom7 chords have the biggest list of available tensions. Blues tunes usually have a large collection of dom7 chords. In fact, a very basic blues progression includes nothing but dom7 chords. Let's take a look at the dom7 as used in the hundreds of jazz style blues tunes. A few of the most popular of these tunes would include Straight no Chaser, Billies Bounce, Blue Monk, Sandu, etc, etc. The dom7 chord needs to have its 3rd and 7th notes somewhere in your voicing (usually in the left hand). In general, dom7 chords can handle lots of tension choices. Especially in a blues you can add tensions, natural or altered, very freely to the chord. Try experimenting with different combinations of tensions to see what interesting sounds you can get. Combine a major9 with a b13, or the reverse. See what using both b9 and #9 sounds like. Try them all. On a standard blues tune anything is possible.

Continuing on with tensions on dom7 chords let's first clarify a couple of terms that were introduced previously – natural tensions and altered tensions. Looking at a basic C7 chord let's assume that it is the V7 of F major. We can say it is diatonic to the key of F. Can you explain why that is? Because of this the available tensions would include the natural 9 and natural 13, also called major 9 & 13. (The natural 11 is not available for a dom7). To alter these notes we raise or lower them a half step. So an altered 9th could be a b9 or a #9. We can also alter the 13th by flatting it. What happens if we raise it? Is there such a thing as a #13?. Try to figure out what alterations can be made to the 11th. Can it be raised? Lowered? Both?

One other way to make use of tensions, especially on dom7 chords, is to imply a substitute dominant chord. It is interesting to notice that the 3rd and 7th of a dom7 chord can have 2 roots! In the key of D, we readily know that the V7 chord is an A7. If we examine the guide tones of an A7 (C# and G), we discover that there is another dom7 chord that shares those same notes. It is the Eb7 chord. Take a good look at that and make sure you understand this. This Eb7 chord is usually analyzed as a substitute dom7. It can be used as a substitute for the A7. The ballad “Peace” by Horace Silver is loaded with these “subV” chords. Can you find other tunes that contain substitute dominants?

Returning to the A7- Eb7 relationship let's see how choosing the right tensions can help us with a substitute dominant chord. Looking at the available tensions for an A7 we can list a natural 9, a flat/sharp 9, a sharp 11, and a natural or flat 13. Some of those tensions are very much a part of an Eb7 chord. In fact, all the altered tensions are useful to indicate an Eb7. Those notes include a Bb, C, Eb, and F. All of them are very much a part of an Eb7. Try to analyze how each of those notes functions on the Eb7.

So by using tensions correctly we can imply an interesting substitution for a V7. So Simple!

The diminished chord, to me, is a very interesting creature. It contains a tri-tone interval, 2 of them, in fact, and is most commonly used like a dom7. But the diminished chord includes some surprising tension choices – a major 7 and natural 11, which are odd for a such a restless sounding chord. The other interesting feature of the diminished chord is that the chord scale that makes up its chord tones and available tensions has 8 notes in it.

As with the dom7, diminished chords can take any and all of the available tensions easily. Out of habit I tend to grab for the 9th or 7th most often. To construct a diminished chord start with a tri-tone in your left hand (either the 3rd & 7th or the root & 5th) and add remaining chord tones or tensions in the right. It's very similar to building a dom7. A tune that will give you a chance to really experiment with dim7 chords is Billy Strayhorne's “Upper Manhatten Medical Group”. This tune has some nice long stretches of dim7 chords. You will have lots of time to try different shapes and tension choices.
I hope this brief look into adding tensions to your chords was helpful. It's interesting to note that when you study the music of different world cultures you'll find that western music is one of the few (perhaps the only one) to really get into harmony and chords. Classical Indian music often employs harmony in only a very rudimentary way with the use of a drone instrument. African music is very advanced rhythmically, but not so much with harmony. I think it is safe to say that Western European music is where harmony and counterpoint has had the most development.

And I think it is also safe to say we owe our amazingly sophisticated harmonic system to J.S. Bach, who had a huge hand in creating the chordal concepts we still utilize today in virtually all our contemporary music.