

DIMINISHED RESPONSIBILITY

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Jazz musicians don't use the harmonic minor scale, right? Wrong.

Of course, everyone would admit there are occasions where the harmonic minor is specifically called for, to evoke a sort of "Eastern promise" sound (as in *Nardis*, for instance). But actually this scale is commonly used in all sorts of "non-ethnic" situations as well.

Here's a clue. People who think that you don't use the harmonic minor scale in jazz often struggle (though they'll probably not admit it) when playing over diminished chords... We'll start by looking at the sort of places diminished chords appear in functional harmony.

Diminished chords as dominant substitutes

Diminished chords are very often just substitutes for dominants, which imply the use of a diminished scale and allow for chromatic bass motion. For instance:

B \flat CM

G7 \flat 9/B CM

are the same thing, and you'd play the G half-step whole step diminished scale over the first chord in both situations:

G A \flat A \sharp B C \sharp D E F

(note that this is the same thing as the B whole-step half-step diminished scale)

Diminished chords for passing chromaticism

There are other uses of diminished chords that you tend to find in older standards (*Body & Soul*, *Night & Day*, *Here's That Rainy Day*, for instance) and some bossas (*How Insensitive*, *Corcovado*). Typically, they are used to add extra chromatic steps when ascending or descending in the lower reaches of the tonic scale. For instance, in the key of C:

Em7 E \flat Dm7 G7 CM

C Dm7 E \flat Em7

That sort of thing. These figures were sometimes substituted on the fly by pianists, to add interest when the harmony rests on the tonic for a bar or more.

Diminished chord on the tonic

Motion between I \flat and I was a fairly common harmonic device during the Tin Pan Alley era – in modern times these diminished tonic chords are usually substituted as #IVm7 \flat 5 VII7 \flat 9 instead. The classic example here is *Stella* by Starlight, which originally began:

B \flat o

but is usually played today as:

Em7 \flat 5 A7 \flat 9

You can play the whole-step half-step diminished scale over any of these diminished chords. But you can also play harmonic minors.

There are a few simple rules to remember to determine *which* harmonic minor to play.

RULE ONE

Over a diminished chord on the root, b3rd or b5th, play the harmonic minor of the 3rd degree of the scale.

For instance, in the key of C:

Over C^o, E^b and F^o
play E harmonic minor:

E F# G A B C D#

RULE TWO

But, if the diminished chord moves up a semitone, play the harmonic minor scale of the note you're resolving to instead.

So, over C^o going to Dm7
play D harmonic minor:

D E F G A B^b C#

Actually, rule two gives us another way of playing over dominants resolving down a fifth. Since C^o Dm7 can also be seen as a bassline substitution for A7^b9 Dm7, we could play D harmonic minor over A7^b9 as well. Doubtful? Pick any Parker solo you like, and you'll find this kind of scale sound in it somewhere.

So we can restate rule two as a sort of rule three.

RULE THREE

Over a minor V-I, play the harmonic minor of the I over the V chord.

Actually this harmonic minor scale can be used over the whole of a minor II-V (the half diminished chord as well) – a useful simplified gloss, particularly when the chords are whipping past at speed. So, over a minor II-V-I in C, for instance:

(Dm7^b5) G7^b9 Cm

C harmonic minor C melodic minor (or whatever takes your fancy)

This harmonic minor scale can also, although less commonly, be used when you have a minor II-V resolving to a *major* I.

Best of luck with this approach. Free to e-mail me with any (preferably constructive) comments at jlyon@opus28.co.uk.

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