

Unit Four: Accompaniment Options

Explore harmonic alterations in the piano accompaniment within each phrase. For example, phrases often begin on the tonic, but there are many other options.

One possibility would be to prolong the tonic either by moving between inversions, using neighboring chords, or a thumb line (particularly common practice in the golden age scores of musical theatre.) Alternatively, explore chords which move from the tonic (or the first chord in your phrase) toward the predominant which begins the cadence. Remember that the harmonic rhythm usually increases as the phrase moves toward the cadence, so be careful how much chordal movement you use at the beginning of a phrase.

Strong two voice counterpoint between the vocal melody and the bass line can be very helpful. Contrary motion is the most interesting choice between these two voices. A second choice would be oblique. The least interesting choice is usually similar motion (either direct or parallel) unless that is an intentional choice on your part.

Another possibility to consider is the use of a melodic answer. This accompaniment figure usually occurs at the end of a vocal phrase and offers a short response, such as descending woodwinds, to the vocal phrase. This may be particularly effective if you are using a comping accompaniment style and wish to either simply answer a vocal line or reference another dramatic motive at the end of a particular phrase.

Above all, remember that once you have a piano arrangement drafted for a song, go on to the next song! There will be time in the future to continue to play with harmonic choices, substitutions, rhythms, feel, and other elements of the song, but these choices may be influenced by other elements of the score that may not yet be written. So, move forward to complete your score and then bring the perspective of a complete score to reconsider your piano arrangement choices. Have fun!