

# **Sing Us a Song, Piano Man:**

## **A Breakdown of the Art of Playing Pop Music at the Piano**

**Danny Milan, Assistant Professor of Piano Pedagogy  
Texas Woman's University, MTNA 2024**



## **Pop Music for the Classical Musician**

### **The Key Elements:**

- ◆ Rhythm
- ◆ Intuition
- ◆ Listening
- ◆ Don't be afraid to make mistakes!

## **A Breakdown: The Basics**

- ◆ Ideally, no performance should be the same twice
  - ◆ Let rhythmic variation be your first tool (i.e. syncopation)
  - ◆ Then, experiment with merely thickening the harmonies
  - ◆ Vary chord progressions with other tools such as arpeggiated figures and embellishments with scalar passages
  - ◆ Play like a percussionist rather than a pianist most of the time, except for specific solos
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- ◆ Experimenting and having fun are key components to success
  - ◆ Let rhythm and intuition take the front seat

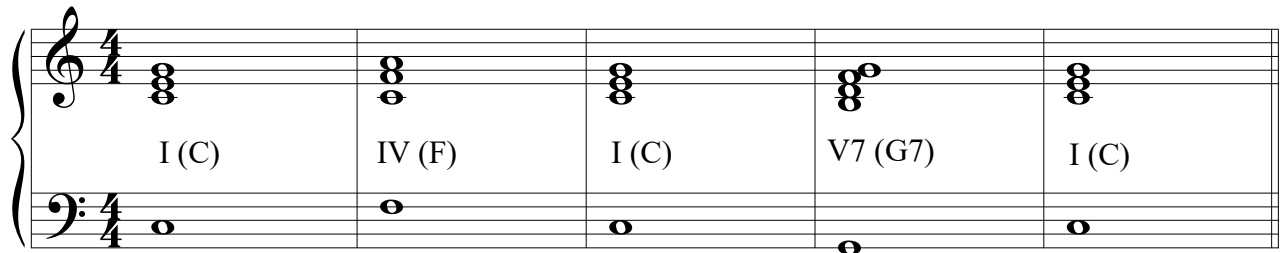
## **The Examples**

- ◆ See attached examples for written-out depictions of these rhythmic possibilities
- ◆ These examples are just a written-out *fraction* of the possibilities available
- ◆ These patterns and others can be applied to most any pop music available

# Style Sampler

Danny Milan

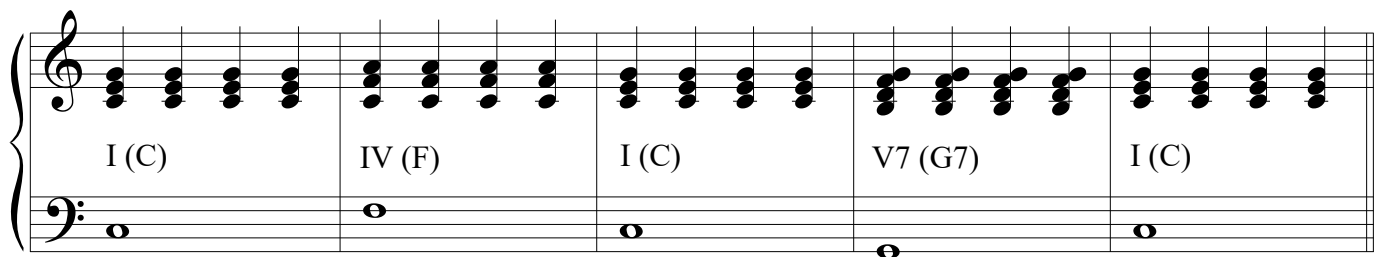
## No. 1: The Basic Progression



Musical notation for No. 1: The Basic Progression. It shows a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The right hand plays chords in the treble clef, and the left hand plays single notes in the bass clef. The progression is: I (C), IV (F), I (C), V7 (G7), I (C).

## No. 2: Every Beat

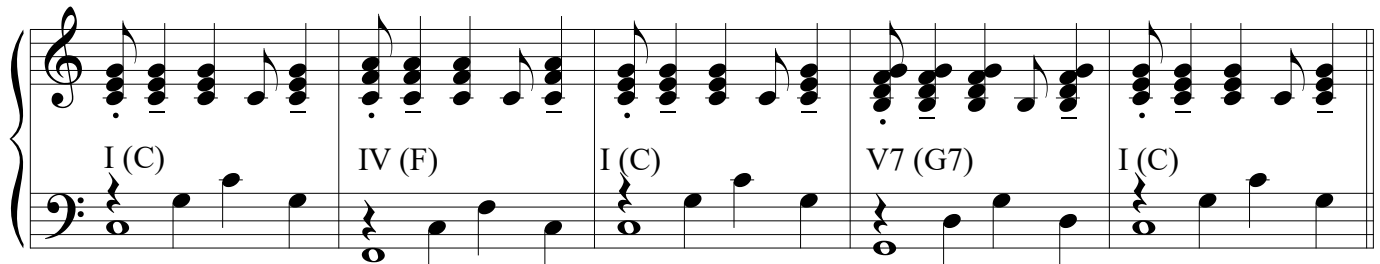
Perhaps the most basic of pop variation technique, this can be further varied by register and inversion.



Musical notation for No. 2: Every Beat. It shows a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The right hand plays chords on every beat in the treble clef, while the left hand plays single notes in the bass clef. The progression is: I (C), IV (F), I (C), V7 (G7), I (C).

## No. 3: Syncopation

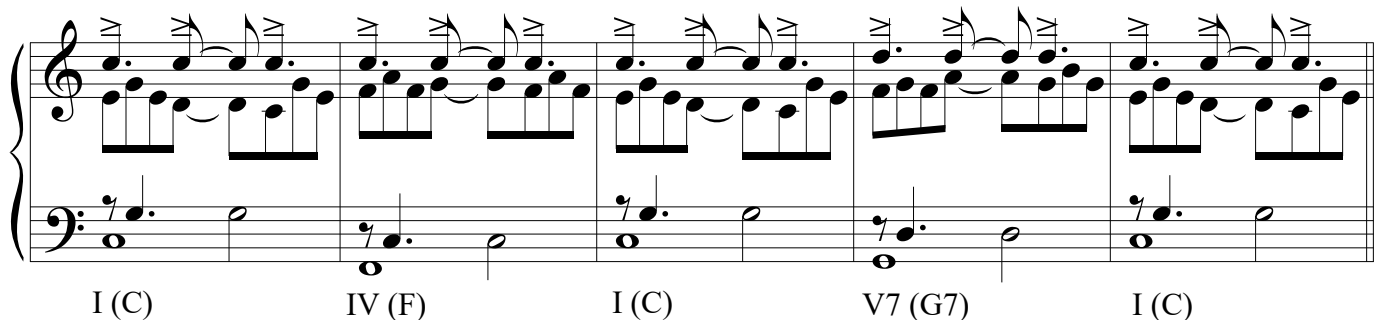
If a simple change of register or inversion isn't enough, rhythmic variation and syncopation is most certainly the next trick in the book. This can also be done with varying registers and inversions. Also, pay special attention to the articulations; purposeful articulation can make rhythmic patterns much more effective.



Musical notation for No. 3: Syncopation. It shows a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The right hand plays chords with syncopated rhythms in the treble clef, and the left hand plays single notes in the bass clef. The progression is: I (C), IV (F), I (C), V7 (G7), I (C).

## No. 4: Syncopation with Rhythmic Embellishment

Here, all of the previous ideas apply, but an independent and subdivided second voice in the right hand gets added to the texture. Keep in mind, it is only a representation; the subdivisions can and should be varied as it is meant to be an improvisatory figure that merely excites the pattern's effect.



Musical notation for No. 4: Syncopation with Rhythmic Embellishment. It shows a piano accompaniment in 4/4 time. The right hand plays chords with syncopated rhythms and rhythmic embellishments in the treble clef, and the left hand plays single notes in the bass clef. The progression is: I (C), IV (F), I (C), V7 (G7), I (C).

### No. 5: Syncopation with Perpetual Subdivision

The constant eighth note subdivisions alongside the syncopations will give this sample a more driving and intense effect. Note again the specific articulations being indicated. For full effect, it is more important for the right hand to get both full value and emphasis, whereas, the left hand really only needs the emphasis. This can be further varied by register, inversion, or mix of both. Passing tones can also be used with this pattern. Note the added intensity of the left hand. The suggested fingering makes it more idiomatic than it appears too.

### No. 6: Syncopation and Perpetual Subdivision with Double Harmonic Length

One of the major differences in this example as compared to the last one is that the chord lengths are doubled, meaning that each harmony now lasts for two measures instead of one. This example illustrates everything examined thus far but with an extended amount of time for pattern variation. The left hand pattern follows the lead of the last example with minor variations as does the right hand. Again, it is very important to note that these examples are representations; variations can and should occur and the performance should always be intuitive versus academic for full organic effect.

# STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

Words and Music by  
JIMMY PAGE and ROBERT PLANT

Slowly



N.C.



N.C.



There's a la - dy who's sure all that glit - ters is gold and she's buy - ing a stair - way to

C G/B F Am C G/B

the pip-er's call-ing you \_ to join \_ him, \_ Dear la - dy. can you hear the

Am C G/B F Am

wind blow, and did you know your stair-way lies on the whis - p'ring \_ wind. \_

C G/B D Am G F G

And as we wind \_ on down the road \_

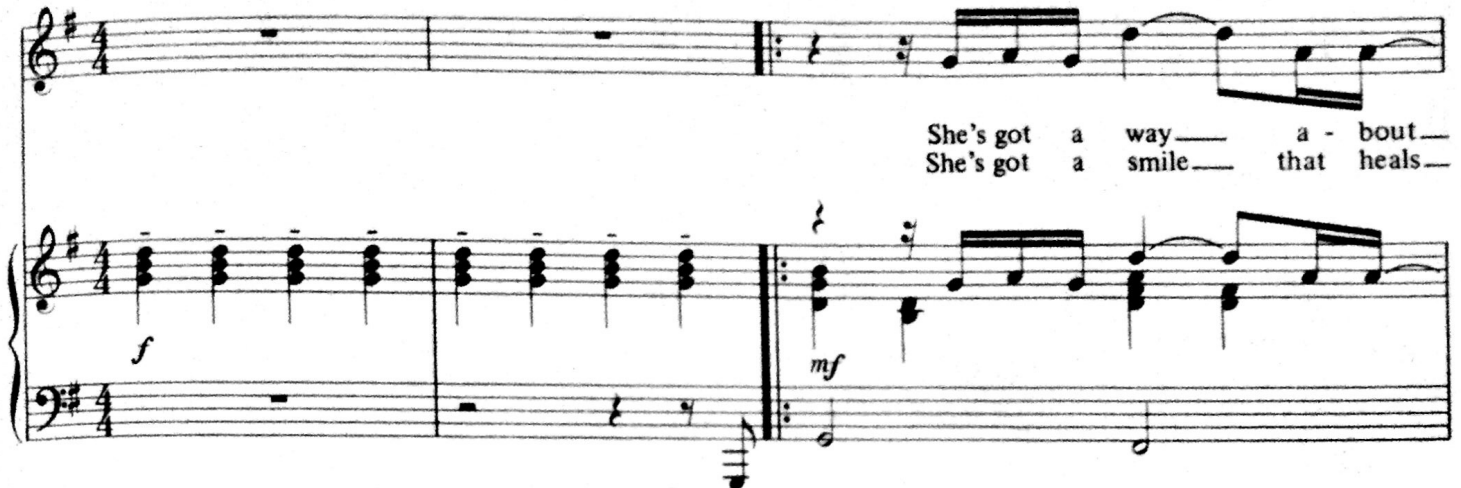
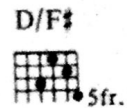
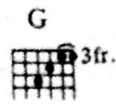
Am G F G Am G

our shad-ows tall-er than \_ our soul. \_ There walks a la - dy we all

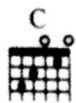
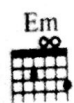
# SHE'S GOT A WAY

Words and Music by  
BILLY JOEL

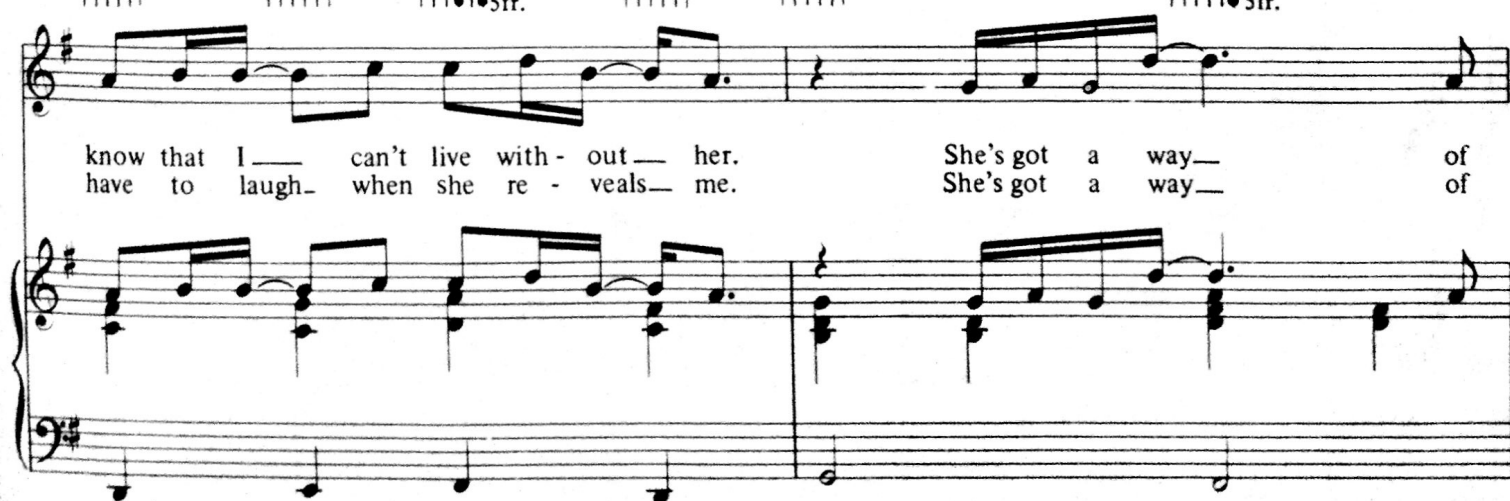
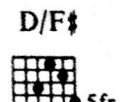
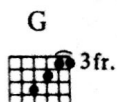
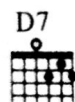
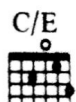
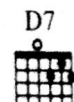
Slow and steady



She's got a way — a - bout —  
She's got a smile — that heals —



— her. I don't know — what it is, — But I  
— me I don't know — why it is, — But I



know that I — can't live with - out — her. She's got a way — of  
have to laugh — when she re - veals — me. She's got a way — of



Em



G7/D



C



pleas - in' - — I don't know - why it is, — But there  
 talk - in' - — I don't know - why it is, — But it

D7



C/E



D7/F#



5fr.

D7



1. Eb maj7



F4addG



does - n't have - to be - a rea - son an - y - way -  
 lifts me up - when we are walk - in'

2. Eb maj7



F4addG



G



3fr.

an - y - where - — She

# Song Examples

"She's Got a Way" by Billy Joel

Musical score for "She's Got a Way" by Billy Joel. The score is in 4/4 time and G major. It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system has four measures with chords G, D/F#, Em, and G7/D. The second system has seven measures with chords C, C, D, C/E, D/F#, D, and Ebmaj9. The bass line features a steady eighth-note pattern, while the treble line uses chords and moving lines.

"Stairway to Heaven" by Led Zeppelin

Musical score for "Stairway to Heaven" by Led Zeppelin. The score is in 4/4 time and G major. It consists of two systems of piano accompaniment. The first system has four measures with chords Am, G, F, G Am, G, F, and G. The second system has four measures with chords Am, G, F, and G. The bass line features a steady eighth-note pattern, while the treble line uses chords and moving lines.



# Corcovado

Antonio Carlos Jobim

D7/A

A<sup>b</sup>°

The first system of musical notation for 'Corcovado' is in 4/4 time. The right hand (treble clef) features a melodic line with eighth notes and quarter notes, including a half note in the final measure of each two-measure phrase. The left hand (bass clef) provides accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The first two measures are marked with the chord D7/A, and the last two measures are marked with A<sup>b</sup>°.

D7/A

A<sup>b</sup>°

The second system of musical notation continues the piece. The right hand maintains the melodic pattern. The left hand accompaniment consists of eighth notes and chords. The first two measures are marked with D7/A, and the last two measures are marked with A<sup>b</sup>°.

D7/A

A<sup>b</sup>°

The third system of musical notation continues the piece. The right hand maintains the melodic pattern. The left hand accompaniment consists of eighth notes and chords. The first two measures are marked with D7/A, and the last two measures are marked with A<sup>b</sup>°.

D7/A

A<sup>b</sup>°

The fourth system of musical notation concludes the piece. The right hand maintains the melodic pattern. The left hand accompaniment consists of eighth notes and chords. The first two measures are marked with D7/A, and the last two measures are marked with A<sup>b</sup>°.