

Altered Dominants: The Polytonal Approach

Matt Olson, Furman University, Conn-Selmer Endorsing Artist
Matt.Olson@furman.edu; www.MattOlsonMusic.com

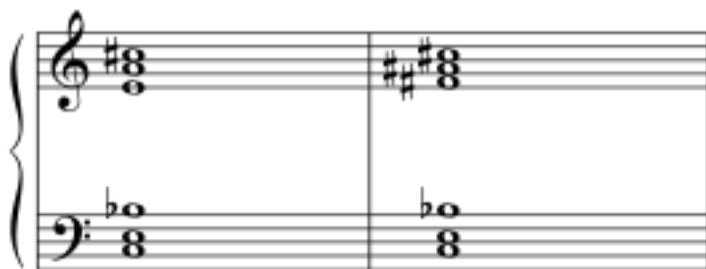
The dominant chord is possibly the most important chord in Western music, because of its need to resolve to tonic harmony. Of course, this principal extends into the realm of jazz music as well. However, in jazz, dominant chords are often presented with significant alteration. There are many different ways to alter a dominant chord in jazz. More often than not, the complex chord symbol that results can be confusing.

What follows is a discussion of some of the most common altered dominant chords and their corresponding scales, as well as a different way of thinking of these chords. It is crucial to both play these chords on the piano and spend a good deal of time practicing the melodic sounds that match the harmonies.

Diminished Harmony

The dominant 7th chord with a flatted ninth degree typically suggests diminished harmony, because when the root is removed from the chord, the remaining chord tones (3, 5, 7, b9) form a fully diminished 7th chord. If this chord is extended to the 13th, we notice that the 13, b9, and 3 of the chord in the first example below form an A major triad that rests atop a C7 chord.

The dominant 7th chord with both a flatted 9th and raised 11th is also suggestive of diminished harmony, and results in another polychord combining C7 and an F# major triad.



The #11 Chord

Another common altered dominant chord is one that has a raised 11th. This chord has a variety of uses, and frequently helps to resolve dominant chords in unusual and unexpected ways. For example, the second chord of *A Girl From Ipanema* (G7(#11)) resolves to Gmin7. In *Stella By Starlight*, we find an Ab7(#11) resolving upward to a BbMaj7 chord. These types of resolutions are common in many tunes, and this chord is something all students of jazz should learn well.

It is also possible to look at this chord in a polychordal manner. Extending the chord to the 13th, we find that the 9, #11, and 13 form a major triad. The example below shows a C13(#11) chord as nothing more than a D major triad atop a C7 chord.



The ALT Chord (aka the #9 #5 chord)

Perhaps the most mislabeled chord in jazz is the ALT chord, typically written as C7ALT. These three letters create more confusion than any other chord, and many players have differing opinions on what this chord really means. A way of looking at this chord is as a C7 (#9#5) chord, as seen below. Once again, this is a very commonly used chord, particularly over the dominant chord in a ii-V-I progression. It suggests a tritone substitution without replacing the root in the progression. Again, a polychordal way of viewing this chord would be to combine an Ab major triad and C7 chord, as seen below.



Scales for Altered Dominants

Because each of these altered chords suggests a certain unique harmony, each demands a different scale to be used for each chord.

Diminished Harmony

Chords that suggest diminished harmony also suggest the use of the diminished scale. There are almost limitless numbers of things you can do with a diminished scale, a topic for another discussion. For now, let's investigate why this scale sounds so good over C7(b9) and C7(b9#11). In the example below, we see a C7(b9) chord with a diminished scale written above it. Analyzing the notes of the scale and how they function over the given chord, we find the following relationships:

<u>Note</u>	<u>Function</u>
C	1 (root)
Db	b9
Eb	#9
E	3rd
F#	#11 (or b5)
G	5th
A	13th
Bb	7th

The image displays three staves of musical notation. The top staff is in treble clef and contains a sequence of eight notes: C, Db, Eb, E, F#, G, A, and Bb. The middle staff is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and contains a C7(b9) chord. The bottom staff is in bass clef with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and contains a C7(b9) chord.

The result is that we have all of the important chord tones (including the alteration(s)) and some additional color tones.

It is worth noting that another option for the b9 chord is to utilize the harmonic minor scale of the key the chord should resolve to. For example, when playing over a C7(b9) chord, one could use the F harmonic minor scale, as many Bebop players did.

#11 Chords

Turning our attention to #11 chords, we encounter a new scale, also known as the Lydian dominant scale. While this name can be scary at first, it is nothing more than a mode of the ascending melodic minor scale (which, in and of itself, is only one note different from a major scale). Let's look at the function of the notes of this scale:

<u>Note</u>	<u>Function</u>
C	1 (root)
D	9
E	3rd
F#	#11
G	5th
A	13th
Bb	7th

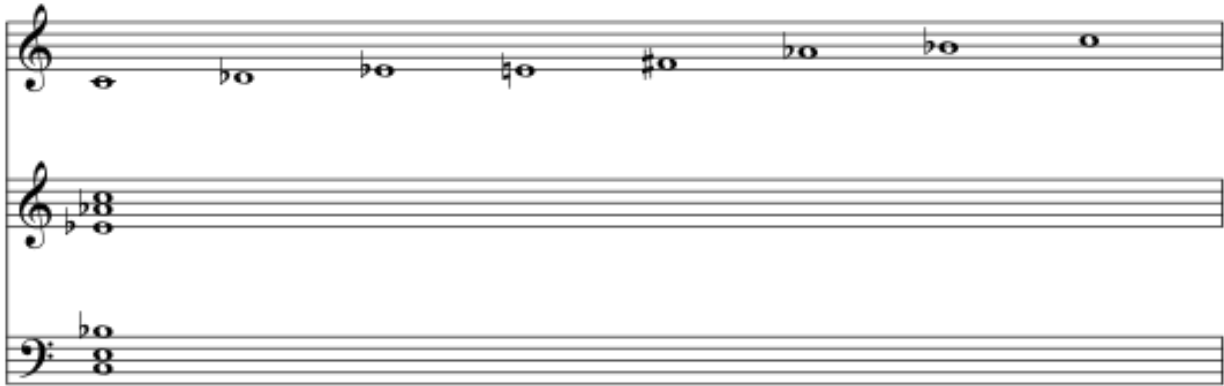


Once again, we find that this scale contains only chord tones if we include the 13th in our discussion. This is a very useful scale for a very useful chord.

ALT Chords

Finally, we arrive at the chord/scale relationship for ALT chords. We turn again to a mode of the melodic minor (this time the 7th mode of melodic minor). This chord has been referred to as the diminished-whole tone scale or superlocrian scale. Call it what you like—it works and sounds great! Here's how this scale works:

<u>Note</u>	<u>Function</u>
C	1 (root)
Db	b9
Eb	#9
E	3rd
F#	#11 (or b5)
Ab/G#	#5 (or b13)
Bb	7th



Here we have the most important chord tones (1, 3, 7) joined by four very beautiful color tones.

Mastery of these chords and scales will help you develop the modern melodic and harmonic vocabulary of today's leading players. There are a myriad of additional resources that cover all of these concepts in further detail, and they should be readily available.