

Dominique Di Piazza's Wicked Technique

By Chris Jisi | April, 2007



Visitors strolling through aisle 5200 at the Winter NAMM show couldn't help but be drawn to the spiraling melodies and rich baritone chords emanating from the Fodera/Epifani booth, courtesy of solo bass master Dominique Di Piazza. Born in Lyon, France, Di Piazza—who has Sicilian roots but was raised among Gypsies—was a self-taught guitarist who switched to bass in the late '70s upon hearing Jaco Pastorius on Weather Report's *Heavy Weather*. Dominique's subsequent recordings with artists like John McLaughlin, Dennis Chambers, and Bireli Lagrène have earned him cult-hero status among bassists, while his rapid-fire right-hand fingerpicking and lush, close-voiced chords have been a direct influence on such bass heavies as Matt Garrison and Adam Nitti. We asked the soft-spoken 47-year-old for some insight into his right-hand technique and left-hand chordal concept. (Mike Pope, who was in the NAMM booth jamming with Di Piazza, lent a hand with the harmonic analysis.) Di Piazza plays his 5-string (tuned EADGC) either with his bare fingers or with a fingerpick on his index or middle finger, and a custom thumbpick with a special leather edge. Regardless of your technique, he feels the best way to learn his right-hand approach is to start with alternating thumb and middle-finger plucks in octaves (Ex. 1), which is the foundation of his concept.

Dominique also incorporates his index finger a great deal (and even his ring finger and pinkie at times). To work in the index finger, he suggests a minor-7th arpeggio exercise (Ex. 2). He also offers a major-7th arpeggio that can be played with either the thumb and middle finger or the thumb and index finger (Ex. 3). With all three examples, begin slowly and evenly and gradually increase your speed; then feel free to play them in other keys and positions. While demonstrating how to play these examples, Dominique holds his right arm out in front of his bass, allowing a natural curl of the wrist, which gives his fingertips better access to the strings. If he needs to mute the strings with his palm, he straightens his wrist and brings his palm back against the strings, while still keeping his fingers curled for fingertip access.

Dominique's signature chord style is marked by dizzying runs, arpeggios, and hammered trills strung between angular voicings—as well as the occasional comp via thumb-plucked bass notes and finger-swept triads. For a taste, check out his solo bass track "Marie," from the John McLaughlin Trio's 1992 CD *Que Alegria* [Verve], or "Little Rose," from the 2005 bass trio CD *Carbonne-Di Piazza-Manring* [www.carbonne-dipiazza-manring.com]. Asked to reveal some of his favorite chord voicings, Dominique presented the four-chord progression shown in Ex. 4, from a piece in 6/8 that will be on his upcoming U.S. solo debut on Ghost Note Records (visit www.dominiquedipiazza.com for eventual release details). We've tabbed these chords for standard 4-string; Dominique plucked them fingerstyle, with his thumb, index, middle, and either the ring finger or pinkie. The small numerals near the noteheads indicate left-hand fingerings.

The progression's basic tonal center is A minor, but with plenty of clustered color notes added on. The first chord (Fmaj7/A) functions as an Am chord with an added F, suggesting an A natural minor scale or A Aeolian mode (a C major scale starting on A). The basic shape of two 5ths stacked a minor 6th apart is a tough reach, so keep your hand relaxed, and dig that ear-grabbing minor 2nd you're creating between the E and F notes. The second chord (Em7/G) can also be looked at as a G6, while the stretch of two 5ths a major 6th apart is an easier grab. The third chord is interesting because the ear is almost anticipating an F chord, descending to the subsequent V7 (E7) chord; instead, Di Piazza plays a C2/E via an index-finger barre with a pinkie stretch, which helps create the tasty major 2nd between the D and E notes. The final chord is indeed the V7, but it's colored as an E7/F, establishing an E Phrygian sound (a C major scale or A natural minor scale starting on E). Because Dominique lets his 5-string's open E ring, the chord also suggests E7b9, opening up all sorts of diminished and half-step/whole-step possibilities for soloing.

Finally, Ex. 5 shows an alternate chord Di Piazza uses for the V7 in his progression: Fmmaj7/E. It's shown here tabbed for his EADGC-tuned 5 so that the open E can ring. (Of course, it can also be played on a standard-tuned 6-string bass.) As suggested by the chord name, although we're still in A minor, you can also think F melodic minor when blowing. It's that sense of searching that has led Dominique Di Piazza to innovate on his instrument, inspiring the rest of us to follow suit.

Senior Contributing Editor Chris Jisi has been with Bass Player since its premier issue 17 years ago—interviewing dozens of top players along the way—and he's been a busy working bassist in the New York area for even longer.

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Ex.1(5)

T = thumb downstroke M = middle finger upstroke I = index finger upstroke

Musical notation for Ex.1(5) in 4/4 time. The bass clef staff shows a sequence of notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. The rhythm is quarter notes. The fretboard diagram below shows fingerings: 5 on the 1st string, 5 on the 2nd string, 7 on the 3rd string, 7 on the 4th string, 5 on the 5th string, 5 on the 6th string.

Ex.2(9)

Dm7

Musical notation for Ex.2(9) in 6/8 time. The bass clef staff shows a sequence of notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. The rhythm is quarter notes. The fretboard diagram below shows fingerings: 5 on the 1st string, 3 on the 2nd string, 2 on the 3rd string, 5 on the 4th string, 2 on the 5th string, 3 on the 6th string.

Ex.3(6)

Dm7

Musical notation for Ex.3(6) in 6/8 time. The bass clef staff shows a sequence of notes: G2, A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3. The rhythm is quarter notes. The fretboard diagram below shows fingerings: 5 on the 1st string, 3 on the 2nd string, 2 on the 3rd string, 5 on the 4th string, 2 on the 5th string, 3 on the 6th string.

Ex.4(5)

Fmaj7/A Em7/G C2/E E7/F

Musical notation for Ex.4(5) in 4/4 time. The bass clef staff shows four chords: Fmaj7/A, Em7/G, C2/E, and E7/F. The fretboard diagrams below show fingerings for each chord: Fmaj7/A (17, 15, 19), Em7/G (16, 14, 17), C2/E (12, 12, 12), and E7/F (13, 14, 13).

Ex.5(4)

Fmaj7/E

Musical notation for Ex.5(4) in 4/4 time. The bass clef staff shows a single chord: Fmaj7/E. The fretboard diagram below shows fingerings: 16, 13, 13, 0.