Chord Substitutions to Keep Your Audience Awake

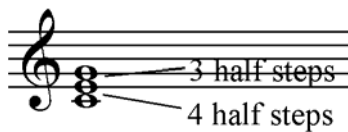Dr. Glen Newton, July 13, 2004

Goals

Support the melody with appropriate interesting chords and logical progressions.

Pick progressions appropriate for the genre and tempo of the song (e.g., simpler for folk songs, richer for jazz; simpler for up-tempo, richer for slow songs).
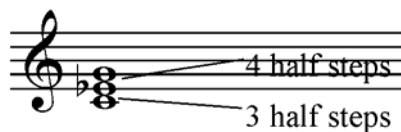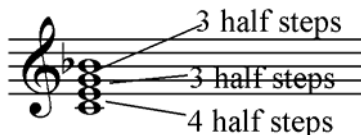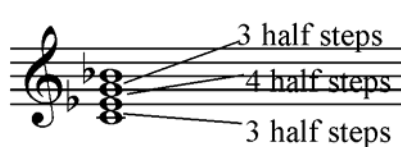
Background

Basic Chords
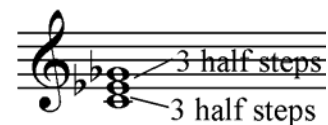
Major:

Minor:

Dominant 7th:

Minor 7th:

Diminished:

Notation

Chords roots are written as Roman numerals that designate the root of the chord. For example, "I" is the first degree of the scale, and "IV" is the fourth degree of the scale. In the key of C, I and IV would be the chords C and F. In the key of A, I and IV would be the chords A and D.

In these class notes, "b" means "flat", "#" means "sharp", "m" means "minor", and "dim" means "diminished." If minor or diminished aren't written, the chord is major. For example, in the key of C, the chord IIIb is E-flat major, and the chord IVm is F minor.

"/" means to repeat the previous chord on the next beat. "|" is a bar line "||" is a double bar line.

Techniques

Enhance individual chords with added tones

Tonics (I's)

Major or minor. Add 2nd, 6th, major 7th, 9th, but not 4th or dominant 7th.

Dominants (V's)

Dominants lead to tonics. Build on dominant 7th chord – 9th, 13th; raise or lower 5th or 9th.

Enhance chord progressions

Add a dominant 7th before going up a fourth

Example:

Red Wing before: G / / / | G / / / | C / / / | G / / /

Red Wing after: G / / / | **G7** / / / | C / / / | G / / /

Bad: G 7 / / / | G / / / | C7 / / / | G / / /

(Don't remove the dominant 7th; and C7 is questionable, since C to G is not up a fourth.)

Resolve a suspended 4th

Use the suspended 4th as the first half of the duration of a dominant 7th chord. (That is, raise the 3rd of the chord to the 4th.) Resolve it in the second half of the duration.

Example:

Red Wing before: G / / / | **G7** / / / | C / / / | G / / /

Red Wing after: G / / / | **G7sus 4** / **G7** / | C / / / | G / / /

The chord G7 sus 4 includes G (root), C (suspended 4th replacing the 3rd), D (5th of chord), and F (7th of chord).

Replace V^7 chord with IIm^7 – V^7 or II^7 – V^7

Example:

Red Wing before: G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / | G / / / | D7 / / / | G / / / | D7 / / / | D7 / / / |

Red Wing after: G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / | G / / / | **Am7** / **D7** / | G / / / | **A7** / / / | D7 / / / |

Replace I – II^7 with I – VIm^7 – II^7 and replace I – IIm^7 with I – VIm^7 – IIm^7

Example:

Red Wing before: G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / | G / / / | Am7 / D7 / | G / / / | A7 / / / | D7 / / / |

Red Wing after: G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / | G / **Em7** / | Am7 / D7 / | G / **Em7** / | A7 / / / | D7 / / / |

Note that a VIm (in this case Em) also works well.

*Bad: G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / | G / / / | Am7 / D7 / | G / **E7** / | A7 / / / | D7 / / / | (The G# in the E7 chord clashes with the G in the melody.)*

Replace I – VIm – IV – V^7 with I – VIm – IIm^7 – V^7

Example:

Heart and Soul before: C / Am / | F / G7 / |

Heart and Soul after: C / Am / | **Dm7** / G7 / |

Use diminished chord between IV and I and elsewhere

Example 1:

Red Wing before: G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / | G / **Em7** / | Am7 / D7 / |

Red Wing after: G / / / | G7 / / / | C / **C#dim** / | G / **Em7** / | Am7 / D7 / |

The bass line should avoid jumping to the root of the next chord after moving up a half step. Instead, play these notes (not chords), moving smoothly to the 5th of the chord:

G 𝄽 D 𝄽 | G G A B | C 𝄽 C# 𝄽 | D 𝄽 E 𝄽 | A 𝄽 D 𝄽 | etc. (*𝄽 is a quarter (one count) rest*)

Example 2 - Red Wing chorus (letter "B" in the workshop copy):

Before: C / / / | C / / / | G / / / | G / / / | D7 / / / | D7 / / / | G / / / |

After: C / / / | **Am7** / **A#dim** / | G / / / | **G#dim** / / / | **Am7** / / / | D7 / / / | G / / / |

For this progression, the bass line should move down the scale, then back to the 3rd of the G chord. Here's one possibility for notes (not chords) that the bass could play:

C 𝄽 **B** 𝄽 | A 𝄽 **A#** 𝄽 | **B** 𝄽 G 𝄽 | G# 𝄽 E 𝄽 | A 𝄽 G 𝄽 | F# D E F# | G 𝄽 D 𝄽 | etc.

Be creative in turnarounds

A turnaround is the chord progression at the end of a song or song section that leads back into the repeat of a song or section of a song. The melody is usually static, giving you more freedom of chord choice.

Example for this section on turnarounds:
(|| indicates the end of the song and the beginning of the repeat of the song.)

Last 3 bars and 1st 3 bars of Red Wing: D7 / / / | G / / / | G / / / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

I – V^7 – I

D7 / / / | G / / / | **D7** / / / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

I – VIm – IIm^7 – V^7 – I (Heart and Soul)

D7 / / / | G / **Em** / | **Am7** / **D7** / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

I – IV – IIIm – V^7 – I

D7 / / / | G / **C** / | **Bm** / **D7** / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

On the V7 chord, the bass note would generally follow the descending line. Thus in the example, above, the bass would play these notes (not chords):

D 𝄽 D 𝄽 | G 𝄽 C 𝄽 | B 𝄽 **A** D || G 𝄽 D 𝄽 | G G A B | C 𝄽 C 𝄽 | etc.

I – III♭ – VI♭ – II♭ – I

D7 / / / | G / **Bb** / | **Eb** / **Ab** / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

You can combine these. Here are some examples:

D7 / / / | G / **Bb** / | **Eb7** / **D7** / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

D7 / / / | G / **Em** / | **Eb7** / **D7** / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

D7 / / / | G / **Em** / | **Am7** / **Ab7** / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

D7 / / / | G / **C** / | **Am7** / **D7** / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

D7 / / / | G / **Bb** / | **Am7** / **Ab7** / || G / / / | G7 / / / | C / / / |

Create memorable endings

99.9% of songs end with the "I" chord. (Want to know what key a song is in? Look at the last chord in the song.) However, you can take a lot of liberties leading up to that final chord! You can even end a song in a minor key with a major chord – the "tierce de picardie" or "Picardy third."

Traditional folk ending: I – IV – I

Alternate: $I – IV^7 – I$

Example (|| indicates the end of the song):

Last 3 bars of Red Wing: D7 / / / | G / **C** / | G / / ⁊ || *(When ending a song with 4 beats per bar, you usually stop on beat 3.)*

Limeliters ending: VI♭ – I or VI♭^{7} – I

Example:

Last 3 bars of Red Wing: D7 / / / | **Eb** / / / | G / / ⁊ ||

Alternate last 3 bars of Red Wing: D7 / / / | **G / Eb7** / | G / / ⁊ ||

Gospel ending: I – VII♭ – IV – I

Example:

Last 3 bars of Red Wing: D7 / / / | G / **F C** | G / / ⁊ || *(The tempo of Red Wing is too fast for this to be an effective ending.)*

Repeat the last part of the chorus (with flair!)

Example:

Normal ending:

Enhanced ending:

Repeat 2-bar phrase up a half step near the ending

Example:

Even more enhanced ending with surprise key change: