HARMONIC PROGRESSIONS

We already know the nuts and bolts of harmony, the origins of diatonic triads and 7th chords in their possible inversions and how these inversions are represented via roman numeral and figured bass notation. The next step is to arrange the diatonic chords into some kind of order that makes "sense" according to common practice standards. To arrange and play chords/harmonies in a particular order is to create a *harmonic* (or chord) *progression*. As the term implies, a progression should be constructed such that the sequence of chords has a sense of direction and "progress", meaning that the progression is not aimless, but directed towards a goal. We can liken this idea to the natural direction that we hear in a scale as it ascends and descends. While the idea of direction or "goal-oriented" can be arguably subjective, the western music aesthetic has some basic and consistent models that inform the notion of what a truly "progressive" progression is.

DOMINANT TO TONIC MOTION

The most fundamental harmonic gesture in western music is based on the circle of 5ths/4ths relationship of keys. This gesture (small progression) consists of chords whose roots move up a 4^{th} or down a 5^{th} (ii to V, iii to vi, I to IV, etc.) in the same way that the keys in the circle of 5ths relate to one and other (G to C, C to F, etc.). The most "important" of these possible combinations is the V to I progression (or V to i in minor). The V chord (the *dominant*) moves up a 4^{th} or down a 5^{th} to the I or i chord (the *tonic*). This is called *dominant to tonic motion*. The larger part of basic diatonic chord progressions is modeled after this $4^{th}/5^{th}$ root movement relationship.

V → I/i

This ascending perfect 4^{th} (dominant to tonic) progression informs other chord relationships that, when put together, allow for larger progressions. If we consider the goal of a progression (like the goal of a scale) to get back to, or just get to, the tonic (I/i), then we can work backwards from the V to I/i sequence to see which chord would most typically precede the V chord. Given that the V is a perfect 4^{th} below the tonic, we can find the chord whose root is a perfect 4^{th} below the V chord's root: the ii (we will stay in major for now).

ii → V → I

Likewise, the chord whose root is a perfect 4^{th} below the ii chord is the vi.

vi → ii → V → I

A perfect 4^{th} below the vi chord is the iii chord...and the same goes for the IV and vii^{o} chords respectively.

IV → vii^{o} → iii → vi → ii → V → I

Remember that these particular chord sequences are derived from a single principal (the ascending perfect 4^{th} root) that underlies the aesthetic of western "classical" style music in particular, and also a portion of jazz. As much as this chord progression serves the classical style, other progressions based on other principals could represent other styles of music. The I – IV– V – IV progression is something we would be less likely to hear in classical music, but be very likely to hear in rock. This progression is the basis for *Loui-Loui*, *La Bamba*, *Twist and Shout* and *Good Lovin'*, for example.

Based on the information deduced so far, we can construct a chart that shows the basic path that chords follow in order to sound like a typical classical-style progression:

Major: **(I) → IV → vii^{o} → iii → vi → ii → V/V^{7} → I**

Minor: **(i) → iv → VII → III → VI → ii^{o} → V/V^{7} → i**

Note that the V7 chord has been added along-side the V triad. The V harmony is the most likely of all to be substituted with its 7th chord counterpart.

In either the major or minor mode, the ultimate goal of a progression is the tonic (even true in rock, jazz and pop music most of the time). Because the tonic chord represents maximum stability (or think of it as the strongest, most-inevitable stopping point: like in a scale), it can be followed by any chord. In other words, the tonic's sense of stability and neutrality resets the ear and allows a progression to start over or resume from any chord. The tonic doesn't require any *particular* chord to follow it.

ADDITIONS AND EXCEPTIONS TO BASIC CHORD PROGRESSIONS

As much as this *up a perfect 4th principal* underlies common practice style progressions, there are exceptions. After all, if this were the only way to allow one chord to follow another, the music would run out of interesting possibilities rather quickly. In either the major or minor keys, the IV/iv and the vii° chords can *also* act as substitute chords for the ii/ii° and V/V7 chords respectively. We can add these chords to the progression charts:

Major: **(I) → IV → vii° → iii → vi → ii/<u>IV</u> → V/V7/<u>vii°</u> → I**

Minor: **(i) → iv → VII → III → VI → ii°/<u>iv</u> → V/V7/<u>vii°</u> → i**

FUNCTION

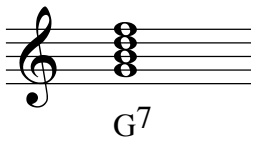
The reason some chords can substitute for other chords is due to the notion of function. As long as certain chords are fulfilling the proper function, the sense of progression is maintained. If we liken function to food, consider the function of an appetizer, whether it be cheese and crackers, fancy shrimp cocktail, or caviar. The appetizer functions as a pre-dinner food. It has its place in an organized stage of events. If dessert immediately followed the appetizers, convention and expectation would tell us that the order of events was "abnormal" (or in musical terms, "not progressive").

DOMINANT AND PRE-DOMINANT FUNCTION

In music, the idea of function is important because it identifies the purpose of something or a *group* of things. In earlier examples, we recognized the function of the leading tone in the major scale (it's all in the scale!) to "lead" up to the tonic; it announces the imminent arrival of the tonic note (which is why the harmonic and melodic minor modes add the leading tone; to function like a major scale). Similarly, on a harmonic level, the V/V7 chord (the dominant) leads to the I/i chord (tonic), as we learned in the first section about chord. So in other words, the function of dominant harmony is that it leads to tonic harmony. In fact, this will be our new definition of dominant harmony: harmony that wants to be followed by tonic harmony (the I or i chord). Likewise, because the IV can substitute for the ii (or in minor keys, the iv for the ii°), we can call that group of chords "pre-dominant" because their usual purpose is to be followed by dominant-functioning (V/vii°) chords.

Pre-Dominant → Dominant → Tonic *is the same as* **ii/ii°/IV/iv → V/V7/<u>vii°</u> → I/i**

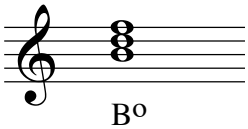
In terms of function, the vii^{o} chord can be considered *dominant*. One reason for this is that the notes in the vii^{o} chord are the same as the upper three notes of a V^{7} chord.



G^{7}

A V^{7} chord in the key of CM

The top three notes of the G^{7} chord are the same as the notes of the B^{o}.



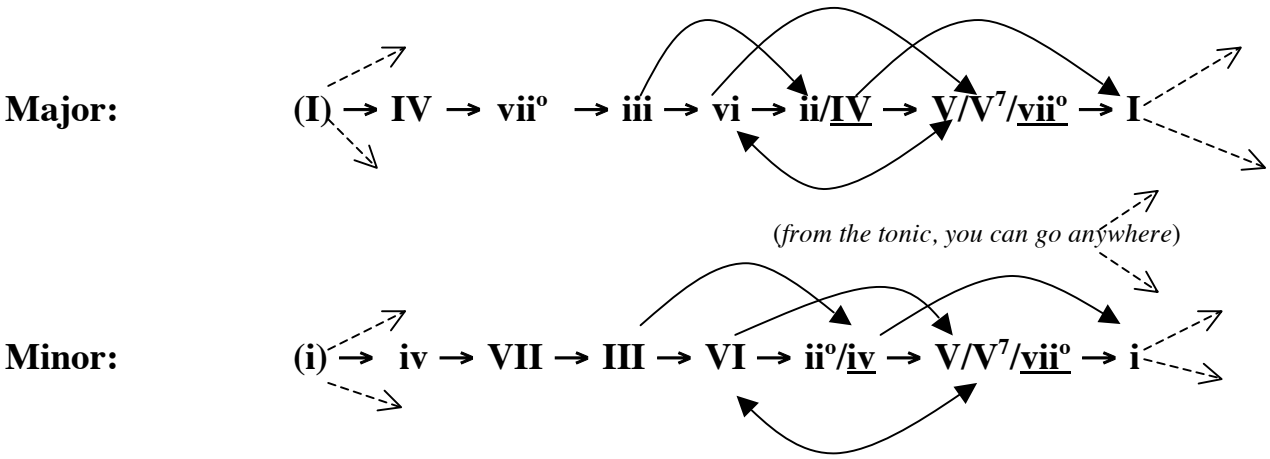
B^{o}

A vii^{o} chord in the key of CM

In this sense, the subdominant, dominant and tonic relationships can be heard as an inevitable process: each fulfilling a certain function that progresses to the next. Certainly these functions could be re-ordered, but then they would be perceived as not adhering to the classical style of a progression; like dessert following the appetizer. A re-ordering of the functions would simply yield a type of progression that fits into a different style of music, perhaps folk, rock or pop. Such progressions are not inherently "bad", they are just stylistically different from the classical sound much in the same way *cubism* is stylistically different from *impressionism* in the world of painting.

FURTHER ALTERATIONS TO THE BASIC PROGRESSION

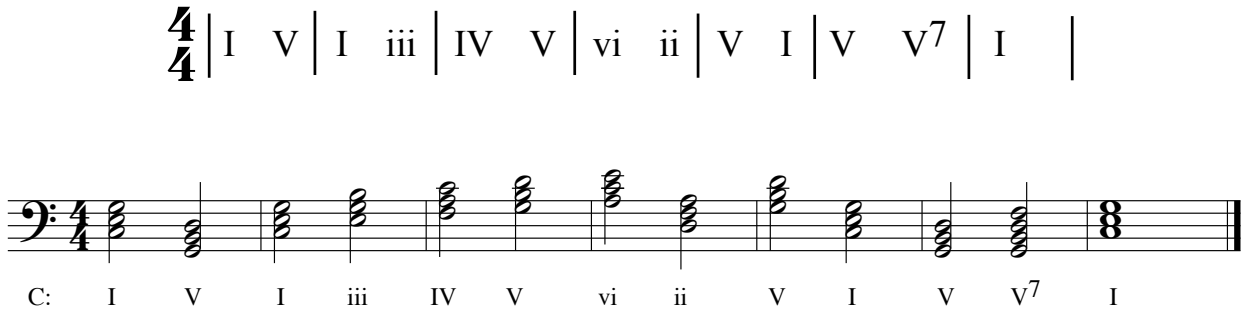
With the dominant and subdominant chords, and their substitute chords in place, the possible chord combinations are still rather limited when we operate within the basic *up a perfect 4th/down a perfect 5th* model. So added to this chart are the following exceptions/additions to the "rules":



- **The iii/III chord may skip to the IV/iv chord (but not to the ii/ii° chord)**
- **The vi/VI chord may skip to the V/V7 chord (but not to the vii° chord)**
- **The V/V7 chord may go to the vi/VI chord instead of to the I/i chord**
  Such an aberration (we usually expect the dominant V/V7 to resolve to the tonic) has earned the special name *deceptive progression*, since the dominant so strongly pulls our ears towards the tonic. When the progression turns instead to the vi/VI chord, the feeling is one of deception. This kind of progression is less frequent because it stands out from the "normal" dominant to tonic sound.

- **The IV/iv chord will occasionally be followed by the tonic**
  This is a less usual way to reach the tonic since the IV/iv is usually followed by dominant harmony. When the subdominant IV/iv goes to the tonic, it is called a *plagal progression*. As compared to the more typical dominant to tonic sound, the plagal sound is a much softer (not as clearly "lead") arrival to the tonic. This is, in part, because there is no leading tone in the VI/vi chord, while there is a leading tone in the V/V7/vii° chords.

These are all the basic rules and exceptions for writing diatonic chord progressions. In practice, basic progressions will both start and end on the tonic, and start and end on strong beats. The progressions might arrive at tonic chords in the middle as well (meaning that you don't have to wait until the end to use a tonic chord). So a basic progression might go like this (the chords change every two beats–on the strong beats [1 and 3]–in this case):



HARMONIC PROGRESSIONS SUMMARY

- A harmonic progression is a series of chords arranged in an order that makes "sense" and suggests the feeling of progressing towards a goal
- Harmonic progressions in the common practice style are based on chords whose roots move up a perfect 4^{th} or down a perfect 5^{th}
- This intervallic relationship is connected to the relationship of keys in the circle of 5ths
- The most fundamental of all these possible progressions is the dominant to tonic ($V/V^7/vii^o$ to I/i) because the ultimate goal of a progression is the tonic
- We can work backwards from the *up a perfect 4^{th}/dominant to tonic* relationship to find other chords that fit the progression
- In addition, there are some chords whose roots do not fit into the *up a perfect 4^{th}* model, that substitute for other chords
- When chords can substitute for one and other, they fulfill the same *harmonic function*
- On top of these other chords acting as functional substitutes, there are still <u>other</u> exceptions to the basic progression model; where the *up a perfect 4^{th}* root movement principal is not adhered to – this allows for a wide variety of possible progressions