

# Chord Progressions and Cadences

## Part I - I, IV, and V

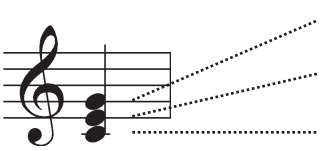
In the discussion that follows I'm going to use our "roman numeral" terminology, and I'm also going to talk a lot about "scale degrees" - the specific notes in the scale. Whenever you see a number with a caret over it, like  $\hat{1}$   $\hat{2}$   $\hat{3}$ , that refers to a scale degree. I'll also use solfège syllables, the "do re mi" language.



C major:      $\hat{1}$     $\hat{2}$     $\hat{3}$     $\hat{4}$     $\hat{5}$     $\hat{6}$     $\hat{7}$     $\hat{1}$   
                  do   re   mi   fa   sol   la   ti   do

### The I Chord (or "Tonic")

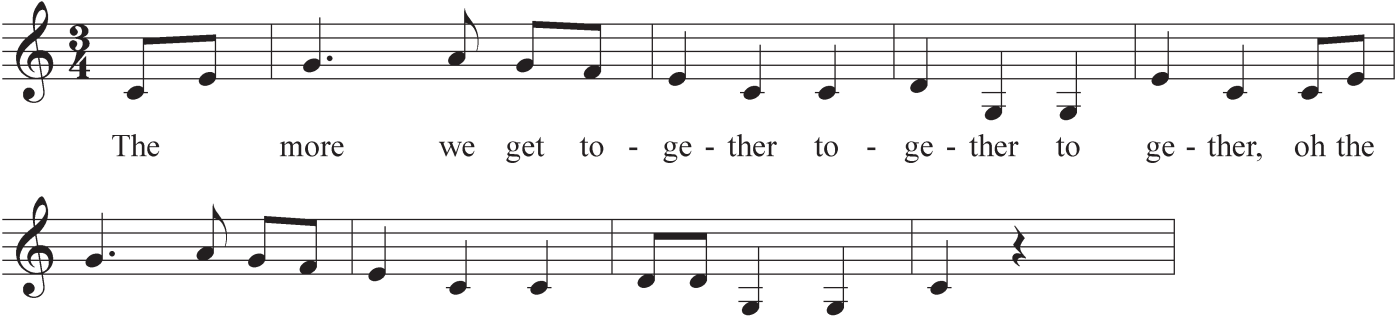
The tonic chord is the heart of the key. The upper tones,  $\hat{3}$  and  $\hat{5}$ , give the feeling of being very stable and important, but somehow still suspended "up in the air." That's because they are being heard in relation to a more important note,  $\hat{1}$ .  $\hat{1}$ , in contrast, sounds completely anchored. It is the end-all, be-all note, relating to nothing but itself.



$\hat{5}$  upper tones  
 $\hat{3}$   
 $\hat{1}$  the tonic note

C: I

A typical, simple tune will start by emphasizing the upper tones of the tonic chord, and eventually it will work its way downward toward  $\hat{1}$ . Consider this familiar children's song.

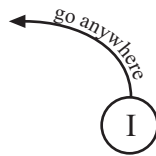


The more we get to - ge - ther to - ge - ther to ge - ther, oh the  
 more we get to - ge - ther the hap - pi - er we'll be!

You could boil down this tune to a simple line that starts on  $\hat{5}$  and eventually works its way down to  $\hat{1}$ . Notice how each phrase also begins and ends with the I chord.

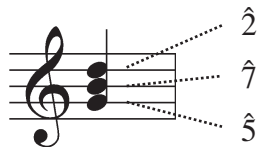


When you are on the I chord you are harmonically “home.” If you were to stay there for an entire piece it would be quite boring - we want to introduce a little tension by moving away from I and working our way back. I is free to move to any harmony it wants, so I’ll begin our little progressions flow-chart with an arrow that says “go anywhere.”

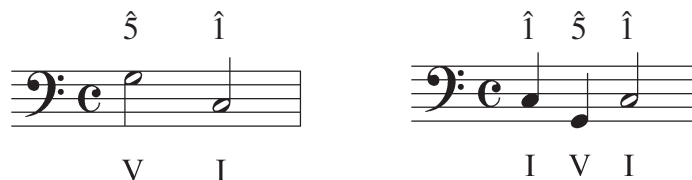


### The V Chord (aka the “Dominant”)

The V chord is the most important contrasting “pole” to I. It sounds very stable and yet you can usually hear how it “wants” to go back to the tonic. (This relationship is called its “tendency.”) The reason for V’s tendency toward I is the way its tones connect to the tonic tones. It gives us scale-degrees  $\hat{5}$ ,  $\hat{7}$ , and  $\hat{2}$ .



If the  $\hat{5}$  is in the bass line, it will typically jump to  $\hat{1}$ . This  $\hat{1}$ - $\hat{5}$ - $\hat{1}$  motion is already a part of the tonic chord, so it sounds right at home in the key. It is easy to hear or sing.



Scale-degree  $\hat{7}$  is also known as the “leading tone” because of its close relationship to  $\hat{1}$ . This connection is extra-strong because it is only a half-step.

C: V I

Scale-degree  $\hat{2}$  has a more mild tendency towards  $\hat{1}$ . You can hear how it just hangs out in the slot above the tonic.

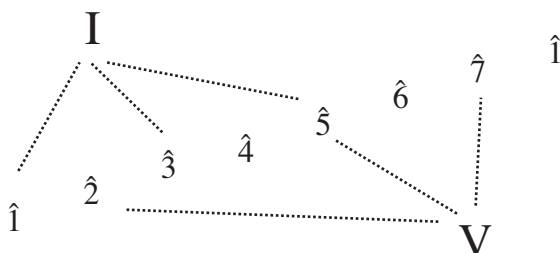
### V7 - an extra “tendency tone”

The  $V^7$  chord is particularly effective in pointing towards I because it is relatively dissonant, and thus unstable, and the seventh of the chord (scale-degree  $\hat{4}$ ) is closely related to  $\hat{3}$ . Thus, not only do you have a “ti-do” connection but also a “fa-mi.”

V<sup>7</sup> I

So the V is the perfect yin-yang partner to I. It covers all the notes “around” the I chord, and its bass is easy to hear because of the sol-do relationship with  $\hat{1}$ .

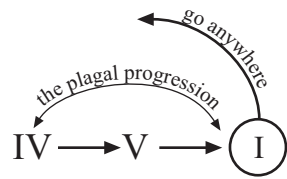
So far, with just the I and V chord (and sometimes  $V^7$ ), we’ve got enough chords to harmonize most of the scale-degrees.



We really need one more harmonic pole to cover all our bases. And that’s IV.



We can organize everything we've talked about to this point into our progressions flowchart:



This chart encapsulates the following information:

- From I you can go anywhere.
- V is the most closely related chord to I, so it is in next spot to the left.
- IV is a little more distantly related, so it goes further out in the chain. We often see the progression IV-V-I.
- The “plagal progression” is a slightly more unusual step out of the chain. It’s not as basic or key-defining as I-V-I.