

Commercial & Popular Music Theory

Form

Characteristics of sections, common in pop music:

- Intro

- Instrumental (sometimes)

- Verse

- Expository - happens early
- Vocals - words change between repetitions
- Melody, harmony, rhythm mostly consistent between repetitions

- Chorus

- More stable between repetitions
- Higher energy, more instruments, higher pitch
- Simpler lyrics/melody

- Bridge

- A contrasting section
- Takes you back to something you've already heard
- Bridge can be within the verse, i.e. B in AABA verse

- Solo Verse

- Often has same chord changes as the verse
- Instead of lyrics, an instrumental soloist

- Prechorus

- Builds up to the chorus, often using fragmentation

- Postchorus

- Very similar to the chorus
- Perhaps gets layered with the chorus

- Coda

- Material that closes a song

Sections can have these qualities:

- Refrain

- Each repeated section ends on the same exact line

Meter

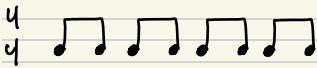
- While classical music is "in a time signature" due to the necessity of written notation, Pop music is usually just "in 3" or "in 4", i.e. what you count to.
- In rock & pop, in 4, beats 2 & 4 are usually accented (despite being weak beats) — "backbeat"
- Dance music often has "4 on the floor" — all 4 beats are equally emphasized

▷ SWING

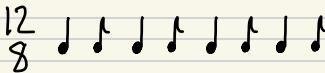
- Swing is a performance standard where the subdivisions are shifted:
- On the other hand, if there's prominent groups of 3 or hemicola (regrouping using polyrhythms), it's most likely compound meter and not swing.

SWING

Swing!

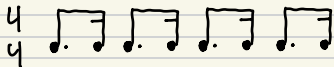


COMPOUND METER



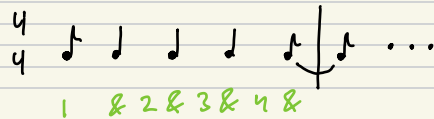
- Swing is often (imo incorrectly) approximated as this (implying 75% swing)

APPROXIMATION



▷ SYNCOPATION

Anticipatory syncopation

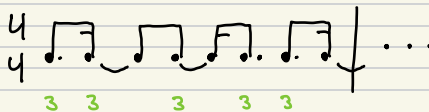


Tresillo is when standard subdivisions (usually ♩ or ♪) are re-grouped into groups of 3. Often, some groups may be commuted to fit the pattern into a bar (so it repeats earlier)

standard tresillo



longer tresillo



Melody

The context of melody includes information of a scale & a tonic

- **Scale**: 7 notes that are considered diatonic
- **Tonic**: the most important note in the scale

Things to look out for

- Register: are notes (absolutely) high or low?
- Pattern: stepwise, arpeggiated, or static
- Vocal timbre
- presence of dissonant intervals

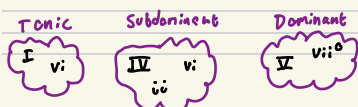
Degree & Tonic

- "Tonal Do" - Most stable note (1̂) is Do
- "Modal Do" - The note with WHH above and HHW below

Harmony

- The presence or absence of notes in a chord degree give it its subjective feeling

COMMON FEELINGS & EXAMPLES OF CHORDS THAT HAVE THEM

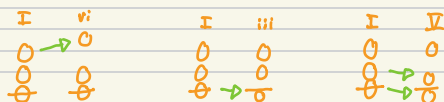


In classical music, there is a proscribed progression of feeling to feeling



▷ CHORD TRANSFORMATIONS

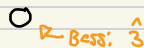
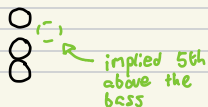
- Using only diatonic notes, you can move notes up/down to create new chords



These motions are arguably more important than root movement.
The more notes that are changed, the more dramatic the cadence.

▷ FUNCTIONAL NOTATION

- The bass note of a chord is usually the root of the chord, even if the chord tones say otherwise.
- This is because guitar-based harmony often implies a 5th above the bass.



iii
NOT I

▷ NON-CHORD TONES

- Non-chord tones can be notes in the melody, or be important to the harmony.
- In the latter case, information is included in the chord symbol, i.e. C⁶
 - You cannot write I⁶ since the 6 will be interpreted as figured bass.

▷ CHORD PROGRESSIONS

- A song having a "progression" implies there is important harmonic motion
- If it has one chord, it is a "drone"; two chords, it is a "shuttle"
- Chords often repeat in "chord loops", often 4 chords in length

▷ COMMON FOUR-CHORD LOOPS

- **I vi IV V**
 - Doo-wop progression; implies old-timey vibes
 - Rotations:
 - vi IV V I ("Trouble" - Katy Perry)
 - IV V I vi ("Yves is wild" - Coldplay)
 - Cadence happens in the middle
 - **I vi ii V**
 - Very similar to doo-wop since ii & IV both serve subdominant function
 - 2-5-1 root movement by 5th
 - **I iii IV V**
 - Very similar to doo-wop since vi & iii both serve tonic function
 - Upwards root motion
 - Downwards voice motion: $\hat{1} \nearrow \hat{6} \searrow \hat{5}$
 - **I vi V IV**
 - Harmonization of a descending root - a **retrogression**
 - Lacks traditional common practice-style functional progression (tonic → subdom → dom) but still sounds OK
 - **I III IV iv**
 - RAHH MINOR 4 MENTIONED
 - Note chromatic stepwise motion in top note
- | |
|---|
| $\begin{matrix} \circ & \# \circ & \circ & b \circ \\ \circ & \circ & \circ & \circ \\ \oplus & \oplus & \oplus & \oplus \\ \text{I} & \text{III} & \text{IV} & \text{iv} \end{matrix}$ |
|---|
- **vi IV I V**
 - Probably the most used chord loop in Pop
 - Resists a tonal hierarchy with lack of authentic cadence

▷ MODULATION

- Often, to set up a modulation, a song goes to the **V** of the new key
- **Pivot modulation**: when there is transitional material friendly to both old & new
- **Supersession modulation**: Modulation is used for dramatic effect; the new key often supersedes the old key
 - The key never goes back
 - Some musical material is presented, just in a new key
- **Subordinate modulation**: modulating to a new key for a "B" section
 - New musical material in new key
 - Usually by interval of 3rd
- **Circular modulation**: modulates back, but both keys are equally important