



# 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
- **Post chorus**
  - 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 hemiola (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  $\frac{1}{8}$  or  $\frac{1}{16}$ ) 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 (1) is Do
- "Modal Do" - The note with WWH 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

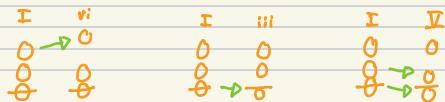


In classical music, there is a proscribed progression of feeling to feeling



## ▷ 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.  $I^6$   
- You cannot write  $I^6$  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 ("Viva la vida" - Coldplay)
  - Cadence happens in the middle

### - I VI ii V

- Very similar to doo-wop since VI & III both serve subdominant function
- 2-5-1 root movement by 5th

### - I iii vi IV V

- Very similar to doo-wop since VI & iii both serve tonic function
- Upwards root motion
- Downwards voice motion: 1 2 3 4

### - I vi II IV

- Harmonization of a descending root - a retrogression
- Lacks traditional common practice-style functional progression (tonic  $\rightarrow$  subdom  $\rightarrow$  dom) but still sounds OK

### - I III IV iv

- RARH MINOR 4 MENTIONED
- Note chromatic stepwise motion in top note

0	#0	0	b0
0	0	0	0
θ	θ	θ	θ
I	III	IV	iv

### - VI II 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

- **Supercessive 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