

# Playing pop ballads

using "break your heart" piano example at  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCQoBwj7vM>

by pianoboy from reddit

Most pop songs are based on simple chord progressions - a series of 3-5 chords that usually repeat throughout the song.

This song (see youtube link above) follows a very common 4-chord progression. In the key of D minor (or F major) it's: Dm, Bb, F, C. Once you know that, you're set! Songs that use this chord progression: Nuvole Bianche - Einaudi, Apologize - One Republic, Building a Mystery - Sarah McLaughlin, One of us - Joan Osbourne, and dozens of others.

We're only going to look at playing in a "new-agey" or "minimalist" piano style (as opposed to, say, a rhythmic pop style).

Diagram showing the basic 4-chord progression (Dm, Bb, F, C) in 4/4 time. The right hand plays triads, and the left hand plays single notes corresponding to the root of each chord.

Always start with single notes in left hand. Use the same note as in the name of the chord - e.g. for Dm, play a D note.

I'm not going to get into how to play triads in the right hand, playing different inversions (placing the notes in different orders), or many other music theory concepts. I'll just be showing how to apply some simple patterns to a chord progression in order to make you sound like a pro!

To make the above line more interesting and to add movement, we can "break up" the chords, either in the left hand or right hand, or both!...

Let's start with breaking up the left-hand. Here is the most common left-hand pattern (and easiest, once you get the hang of it):

Diagram showing the 4-chord progression (Dm, Bb, F, C) in 4/4 time, with the left hand broken up into a sequence of notes (D, A, D (octave higher), A, Bb, F, C, D).

Notice the left hand isn't using ALL the notes in the chord -- just 2 of them, what we call the root and the 5th.

E.g. D, A, D (octave higher), A.

After a while you don't even think about it as your hand just falls into place.

Now let's try a right-hand pattern. Notice the right-hand notes are EXACTLY the same as in the right-hand triads at the top of the page.

We're just pulling apart the individual notes that make up the triad and playing them in a certain pattern:

Top note, Bottom note, Middle note, Bottom.

Diagram showing the 4-chord progression (Dm, Bb, F, C) in 4/4 time, with the right hand broken up into a sequence of notes (D, Bb, F, C, D, Bb, F, C). The left hand plays triads. A pedal line is shown at the bottom.

By the way, use the pedal to make it sound nicer. Pedal on every chord change (i.e. always hold the pedal and then up/down at each new chord).

Try this: take just the top 2 notes of our original triads, and alternate them, like this:

7 Dm Bb F C

OR, take the top 2 notes \*played together\*, and alternate with the bottom note of the triad, like this:

9 Dm Bb F C(sus4) C

Adding a "suspension", just for fun!

**OOOOR**, let's get really crazy and take ALL 3 notes of the triad played together, and alternate with... uh-oh, we're all out of notes to choose from. (a triad only has 3 notes). No problem! Just use the top note of the triad an octave lower.

11 Dm Bb F C(sus4) C

#### Alternating Pattern Rule-of-Thumb:

- The pattern can start with as many notes as you want (on the downbeats), but should alternate with a \*single\* note (on the off-beats).
- For the single note, pick the next note down (in the triad) that you haven't played yet.

E.g. for Dm, don't take the top note (A) and alternate it with the bottom 2 notes grouped together (D&F). It doesn't sound as nice as playing A&F together on the top and alternating with the single D note on the bottom.

Notice that we followed this rule in all 3 lines above.

Finally, just for fun, lets break up both hands.

13      Dm                      B $\flat$                       F                      C

Notice the hands start far apart, come together, and move back apart. It's almost like the right hand is mirroring the left hand. This is just one idea for a pattern.

We don't have to stick to only the 3 notes that define the chord triad. We can make up our own melodies based on a few notes from the chord. And we don't always have to be playing a pattern; we can take a break once in a while and hold some notes.

15      Dm                      B $\flat$ (add2)                      F                      C(add2)

Just for fun, I added a "2nd" to the B $\flat$  and C chords above. This can make chords sound prettier or "smoother". To find the 2nd, just go up a whole-step from the root (i.e. the letter-name of the chord). So for the B $\flat$  chord, the 2nd in that chord is the note C. For the C chord, the 2nd is the note D.

Let's go back to our very first example and add some syncopation.

Syncopation just means playing off of the regular beat.

The simplest and most common form you'll come across in pop music is just playing the second chord in the bar an 8th note earlier than normal.

We'll do this with the "C" chord. You'll hear this being done often in the youtube link for the song.

17      Dm                      B $\flat$                       F                      C

I'm just doing something in the left-hand to help me not lose the beat from playing that last chord early.



Now let's add that C chord syncopation into the more complicated example we had earlier. This is going to be tricky...

19      Dm                      Bb                      F                      C/E

... wasn't too bad, but it messed up my left-hand pattern I had going, so I had to make something up that fit. Notice on the early "C" chord, I chose to play "E" in the bass for a change. I could have still hit C, and used the same pattern that ends the measure (C G E) or made up a different ending pattern (e.g. E G C). Either way, it's nice to "hang" on the syncopated chord for a second before continuing with a pattern.

All this time we've been doing 2 chords per measure.  
But often you only have one chord change once per measure. Let's look at that...

21      Dm<sup>7</sup>                      Bb(add2)                      F(add2)                      C(sus4)                      C

Here's a nice upward-moving left-hand pattern that takes a break at the end.  
I'm just playing whole note chords in the right-hand. Doesn't it sound nice?

And yes, just for fun I changed the right-hand chord notes a bit. Notice that all I really did was add a constant "C" note at the top of every chord. It's still the same chord progression (with a nice suspension at the end again).  
Why does this work so well? Well... that's a topic for another day :)

For a more driving sound, let's use our very first left-hand pattern we learned, but now we have to stretch it out over a full measure.

25      Dm<sup>7</sup>                      Bb(add2)                      F                      C(sus4)                      C

Notice it starts out the same as the original pattern, but to stretch it out, we just keep alternating on the top 2 notes of the pattern.



Let's try another melody line we can pick out in the song -- it's just 4 notes (F E D C).

41 Dm B $\flat$ (add2) F C Dm B $\flat$ (add2) F C

We'll play the bass line (single notes) to help us keep time and feel the sound of the chord progression.

Like before, now we want to fill in the chords underneath this melody. We'll do a moving right-hand pattern this time (nothing fancy in the left-hand). The music below may look complex, but I'm just using 2 patterns \*exactly\* as we learned them earlier, placing them under the melody:

1. The pattern from the top of page 2 fits in nicely under the melody, for the 1st measure.
2. For the 2nd measure, we have a long rest in the melody, so we'll fill that with the syncopated pattern we learned at the bottom of page 3 (bar 18).

46 Dm B $\flat$ (add2) F C Dm B $\flat$ (add2) F C

This may not be very easy to \*play\* at first, but you can see how it's fairly easy to \*construct\* - you have a melody line on top, and you just fill in the chords underneath with common patterns.

Now let's reverse it -- we'll let the left-hand provide most of the movement, and just play block chords in the right-hand when the chords change. Also this time to make it more powerful, we'll play the melody as octaves in the right hand.

50 Dm B $\flat$ (add2) F C Dm B $\flat$ (add2) F C

Notice how I'm adding notes inside the octaves of the melody (e.g. while we're holding a low D and high D in the right-hand, we fill it in with an F and A when we hit beat 1 of the "Dm" measure.). For the B $\flat$  chord, notice the melody is a C note at that point, which is actually not even a note in a B $\flat$  triad (B $\flat$  D F); C is a "2nd" as mentioned earlier. Often the melody will land on notes that aren't even in the chord you're playing at that point -- this is fine. You still just want to try to add notes that will help define the chord. So while holding the low C and high C for the melody, I chose to add the notes F and B $\flat$ .

Isn't this crazy awesome?!!! From just 4 chords (Dm, Bb, F, C) and a simple 4-note melody (F E D C), we came up with that previous complex example which sounds incredibly cool. And it's all from just applying some basic patterns.

As a final example, I'll just put all of these ideas together in my own unique way (well, I'm trying to make it sound more like the youtube version). This is much harder to play, but it's just a demonstration of what you can do with the ideas we've learned. See if you can spot some of the patterns/concepts from before, and some new things I may have added.

The image shows two staves of musical notation for piano. The first staff begins at measure 55 and the second at measure 58. The music is in a key with one flat (B-flat major or D minor). The chords are labeled above the staff: Dm, Bb(add2), F, C/E, Dm, Bb(add2), F, C, and Dm(add2). The melody is written in the right hand, and the bass line is in the left hand. There are repeat signs and a final double bar line at the end of the second staff.