
Approaches to harmonization

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There are at least four approaches to harmonization that may be useful to you:

1. Thinking in terms of prolongational and cadential progressions.
2. Using a transition table.
3. Preferring certain favored root progressions.
4. Using your ears!

The first of these approaches we have already seen elsewhere. The last is perhaps the more important. But, like all forms of intuition, it can't be explicitly taught, and instead must be developed over time through exposure. This handout will introduce the remaining approaches, numbers 2 and 3.

Transition tables

A transition table summarizes the transition tendencies of individual chords. For example, a simple transition table for major key harmonies could be:

From	To
IV	V, I
ii	V
V	I
I	V, ii*, IV

This table tells us that V tends to be followed by I, IV tends to be followed by V or by I, and so on. The rows are arranged in approximate order of frequency, with the most commonly occurring at the bottom. The possible transitions are likewise listed in order of frequency, with the most common transitions listed first. (For example, IV most often goes to V, then to I.)

Note that I can be followed by any other chord in the table. This is characteristic of the tonic chord.

This table is, of course, quite incomplete, containing only four chords. It nevertheless summarizes a great deal of the chord progressions we find in tonal harmony! However, a more complete transition table for major keys might look like:

From	to
iii	vi
vi	ii, IV
IV	V, I
ii	V
V	I
I	V, IV, ii*, vi

(Note that this table now includes all seven diatonic scale degrees, except for vii. Why is vii omitted? How could it be assimilated to the above table?)

Chord motions in minor keys are harder to briefly encapsulate, because of the way minor-key music so often moves towards the relative major. Nevertheless, here is an attempt at a chord transition table for minor keys:

From	to
VI	III, ii, iv
VII	III, i
iv	V, i
ii	V
III	VI, VII, iv
V	i
I	V, iv, ii*, III, VI, VII

*: Note that I ordinarily only proceeds to ii6, not ii5/3. **When I goes to a chord with $\hat{2}$ in the bass, it is usually to vii6 or V4/3.**

Notes on transition tables

For those who are computationally inclined, observe that a transition table is like a context-free grammar, and could be readily translated into a Markov model.

Observe that you could potentially create a novel harmonic system by creating a transition table using unusual chords and/or transitions. That is not something we will be doing in this class, but I encourage you to try it on your own if it's the sort of thing that appeals to you.

Favored root progressions

In tonal harmony, certain root progressions occur again and again, while others occur but rarely. The favored progressions are, in rough order of preference,

- down a 5th
- down a 3rd
- up a 5th
- up a 2nd (mainly from I to ii6 or from IV to V)

There are many exceptions to the above scheme, but considering possible progressions in the above order can be a useful hack if you are stuck looking for a chord.

Note that

- a root interval is not the same thing as a bass interval. For example, in the progression V6–I, the root progression is down a 5th, but the bass interval is up a 2nd.
- when it comes to root progressions, we don't make a distinction between an interval and its inversion. So “down a 5th” is the same as “up a 4th,” “down a 3rd” is the same as “up a 6th,” and so on.