

Chord theory

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1 Introduction

This document is my attempt to write the brief introduction to music theory I wish I had. I try to motivate from first principles why music has the structure it has and what the palette of options are.

The initial goal is to introduce the concept of a mode in music theory, and to focus on the major and minor modes as examples. The final target is to introduce chord progressions. What does it take to make a song?

2 Modes

In *diatonic* music there are seven notes in a scale before coming to the *octave* which has double the frequency of the original root note.

Example C-major and A-minor scales are:



where 1 and 2 denote that a note is a half step (1 semitone) or a whole step (2 semitones) above the previous note.

The sequence 2212221 defines the *major mode*. The major mode notes naturally occur on the white keys of a piano (no accents) in the key of C major (*i.e.* when C is the root). The sequence 2122122 defines the *minor mode*. The minor mode notes naturally occur on the white keys in the key of A minor. There are seven modes in total in diatonic music that all use the same seven notes, just starting from different positions for the root note.

Table 1: All the diatonic modes in 12-tone music.

Mode	Interval pattern	Root for all white	Notes for C root	Character
Ionian (major)	2212221	C	C D E F G A B	Bright, happy
Dorian	2122212	D	C D E \flat F G A B \flat	Minor, raised 6th
Phrygian	1222122	E	C D \flat E \flat F G A \flat B \flat	Dark, Spanish sound
Lydian	2221221	F	C D E F \sharp G A B	Dreamy, raised 4th
Mixolydian	2212212	G	C D E F G A B \flat	Major, flat 7th
Aeolian (minor)	2122122	A	C D E \flat F G A \flat B \flat	Sad, melancholic
Locrian	1221222	B	C D \flat E \flat F G \flat A \flat B \flat	Unstable, diminished

Western music tends to focus on using the major and minor modes, but there are exceptions.

3 Intervals

Now we introduce *polyphony*, playing more than one note at a time. An *interval* is the gap in pitch (frequency) between two notes. Each interval has a name as listed in Table 2. We will use notes of different intervals together to build chords.



Table 2: All the two-note intervals in 12-tone music.

Interval	Name	Semitones	Frequency ratio (pure tuning)	Frequency ratio (equal temperament)
m2	Minor second	1	16:15	$2^{1/12} \approx 1.0595$
M2	Major second	2	9:8	$2^{2/12} \approx 1.1225$
m3	Minor third	3	6:5	$2^{3/12} \approx 1.1892$
M3	Major third	4	5:4	$2^{4/12} \approx 1.2599$
P4	Perfect fourth	5	4:3	$2^{5/12} \approx 1.3348$
A4/d5	Tritone	6	45:32 or 64:45 or $\sqrt{2}$:1	$2^{6/12} \approx 1.4142$
P5	Perfect fifth	7	3:2	$2^{7/12} \approx 1.4983$
m6	Minor sixth	8	8:5	$2^{8/12} \approx 1.5874$
M6	Major sixth	9	5:3	$2^{9/12} \approx 1.6818$
m7	Minor seventh	10	16:9 or 9:5	$2^{10/12} \approx 1.7818$
M7	Major seventh	11	15:8	$2^{11/12} \approx 1.8877$
O	Octave	12	2:1	$2^{12/12} = 2.0000$

The tritone is also called an augmented fourth or a diminished fifth (A4/d5).

That certain intervals have simple mathematical ratios for the ratios of their frequencies is a rough start at the answer to: Why does music sound like that? Why certain tunings? Why 12 in 12-tone music?

In *just intonation* (or *pure tuning*), intervals use simple integer frequency ratios like 3:2 for a perfect fifth. These ratios produce the most consonant, pure-sounding intervals because the overtones align perfectly. However, just intonation creates problems when changing keys or playing complex harmony. *Equal temperament* solves this by dividing the octave into 12 equal semitones, where each semitone has a frequency ratio of $2^{1/12} \approx 1.0595$. This means a perfect fifth has a ratio of $2^{7/12} \approx 1.4983$ instead of exactly $3:2 = 1.5$. While equal temperament makes most intervals slightly out of tune compared to their pure versions, it allows music to be played in any key with the same relative tuning, making it the standard tuning system for Western music since the 18th century.

4 Trichords

The scaffolding on which we will build chords are trichords, consisting of scale degrees 1-3-5 (root, third, fifth). The minor or major quality of the chord is determined by the 3rd interval being major or minor. Here are C-major and C-minor chords, and their first and second inversions, derived by rotating the bottom

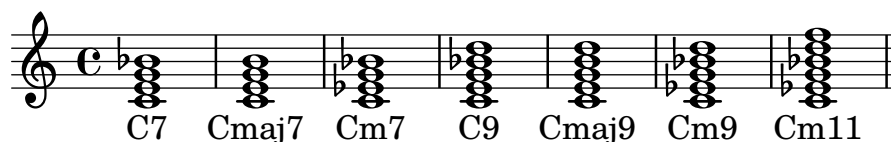
note to an octave higher. Following that are augmented and diminished versions of a C chord, where the 5th is raised or lowered a half step, respectively.



5 Seventh chords and beyond

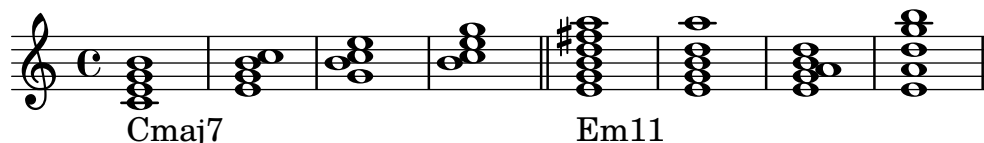
Adding a fourth note to a triad creates richer, more complex harmonies. The most common extension is adding a 7th above the root.

A dominant seventh chord (C7) is a major triad with an additional minor 7th interval added. A major seventh chord (CM7 or Cmaj7) is a major triad with an additional major 7th interval added. A minor seventh chord (Cm7) is a minor triad with an additional minor 7th interval added. There exist augmented and diminished versions of seventh chords that raise/lower the 5th and/or the 7th intervals.



Extensions can continue beyond the 7th to create 9th, 11th, and 13th chords, which are common in jazz.

These are Cmaj7 and its inversions, followed by variants of Em11:



6 Diatonic chords

Now we have introduced enough topics to ask a natural question:

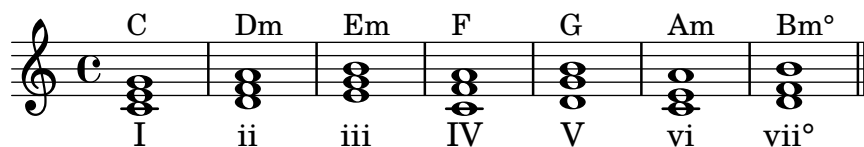
If one wants to stay within a certain key in given mode, what chords are allowed?

For the major and minor modes, the answer turns out to be, in roman numeral notation where major chords are written in capital letters and minor chords are written in lowercase letters

Major: I ii iii IV V vi vii°

Minor: i ii° III iv v VI VII

To step through why this is the case, consider the C-major key as an example. The 1st trichord is clearly a C-major chord: C-E-G. The 2nd trichord beginning with D as the root is D-F-A, where note that since D-F is a minor 3rd this trichord is minor. Therefore the second chord in the key of C major is Dm. The third chord is E-G-B, which is Em, and so on. One can tell which notes are allowed in each chord by remembering that we always pick only from the white piano keys in the key of C major.



The chords that are allowed naturally in each mode are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Diatonic chords: chords that are natural for each mode.

Mode \ Chord	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ionian (major)	I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii ^o
Aeolian (minor)	i	ii ^o	III	iv	v	VI	VII
Dorian	i	ii	III	IV	v	vi ^o	VII
Phrygian	i	II	III	iv	v ^o	VI	vii
Lydian	I	II	iii	iv ^o	V	vi	vii
Mixolydian	I	ii	iii ^o	IV	v	vi	VII
Locrian	i ^o	II	iii	iv	V	VI	vii

7 Chord progressions

Note that the major chords that are allowed in a major mode key are I, IV, and V. Many pop songs have been written that utilize or focus on only these chords, perhaps throwing in a vi chord.

One of the most common chord progressions in Western pop music is I-V-vi-IV, sometimes called the pop-punk progression:

The image shows two staves of music in C major, illustrating the I-V-vi-IV progression. The first staff uses power chords (5ths and octaves): C5, G5, A5, F5. The second staff uses triads: C, G, Am, F. The chords are labeled above each measure.

C5 G5 A5 F5 || C G Am F

I V vi IV || I V vi IV

Here we have written it twice, the first time using *power chords*, which are commonly played on guitar in rock music. A power chord is a simplified trichord that does not include a 3rd interval, but includes a perfect 5th and an octave. In the second progression, we have included the 3rd intervals in the chords.

A common progression in the minor mode is the minor three-chord progression:

The image shows two staves of music in A minor, illustrating the minor three-chord progression. The first staff uses triads: Am, Dm, Em, Em. The second staff uses triads: i, iv, v, v. The chords are labeled above each measure.

Am Dm Em Em

i iv v v

Common chord progressions in Western pop music are listed in Table 4 and Table 5.

Table 4: Common chord progressions in Western pop music in major keys.

Name/Description	Progression	Example in C major	Notable songs
Pop-punk progression	I-V-vi-IV	C-G-Am-F	“Let It Be”, “Don’t Stop Believin”, “Someone Like You”, “Glycerine”, “What’s My Age Again?”
’50s, doo-wop progression	I-vi-IV-V	C-Am-F-G	“Stand By Me”, “Blue Moon”, “Every Breath You Take”
Sensitive female progression	vi-IV-I-V	Am-F-C-G	“Zombie”, “Apologize”
Three-chord rock	I-IV-V	C-F-G	“La Bamba”, “Twist and Shout”, “Wild Thing”
Jazz turnaround	ii-V-I	Dm-G-C	Jazz standard turnaround
Circle progression	I-vi-ii-V	C-Am-Dm-G	“Heart and Soul”, “Blue Moon”
Singer-songwriter	I-IV-vi-V	C-F-Am-G	“Self Esteem”, “What’s Up”
Rock ballad	vi-V-IV-V	Am-G-F-G	Common in rock music
Twelve-bar blues	I-I-I-I-IV-IV-I-I-V-IV-I-V	C-C-C-C-F-F-C-C-G-F-C-G	Boogie-woogie blues
Canon progression	I-V-vi-iii-IV-I-IV-V	C-G-Am-Em-F-C-F-G	“Pachelbel’s Canon” progression
Mixolydian vamp	I-VII \flat -IV	C-B \flat -F	“Sweet Child O’ Mine”, modal mixture

Table 5: Common chord progressions in Western pop music in minor keys.

Name/Description	Progression	Example in A minor	Notable songs
Aeolian vamp	i-VI-III-VII	Am-F-C-G	“All Along the Watchtower”, “Stairway to Heaven” intro
Minor three-chord	i-iv-v	Am-Dm-Em	“Summertime”, basic minor progression
Andalusian cadence	i-VI-VII	Am-F-G	“House of the Rising Sun”
Descending minor	i-VII-VI-V	Am-G-F-E	Descending progression, common in minor keys

8 Modal progressions

Breaking the constraints of relying heavily on just the major and minor modes is a movement called *modal music*.

Simplified sample from “So What” by Miles Davis and Bill Evans:

The first system of the musical score for 'The Sound of Silence' is shown. It consists of two staves, a treble staff and a bass staff, both in common time (C). The treble staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a half note chord of E4 and G4, then a half note chord of F#4 and A4, and finally a half note chord of G4 and B4. The bass staff begins with a whole rest, followed by a half note chord of E2 and G2, then a half note chord of F#2 and A2, and finally a half note chord of G2 and B2. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is common time (C).

Part of the beauty of the voicing of Evan's chords is that he builds them by stacking perfect 4ths and then adding a major 3rd on top. That makes a Em11 chord that includes a 7th and a 11th (4th), but drops the 9th (2nd). A focus on building chords from 4ths instead of 3rds and 5ths is called *quartal harmony* and it results in chords that sound harmonically ambiguous.