

-A Brief Overview of Harmonic Progressions-

Harmonic progressions are all about tension and release, or the departure from tonic (the “home” key or harmony) and the return the tonic by means of the dominant (the furthest from “home” that you can get; the tensest harmony, thus providing the most release). In a typical harmonic progression, we have three main parts:

Tonic	Predominant	Dominant
(T)	(PD)	(D)

All of the classification of Tonic, Predominant, and Dominant chords comes from the chord qualities of the major scale (on the hand written sheet from last lesson). They are:

Chord:	I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii ^o
Classification:	T	PD	T/PD	PD	D	PD	D

(lowercase roman numeral means minor, uppercase means major)

TONIC

So, tonic is the “home.” It’s usually the first chord you hear, and it’s usually the main key of the music - it doesn’t feel like it wants to go anywhere at all.

PREDOMINANT

Predominant chords are sort of an in-between ground when it comes to their tension – they don’t feel like they really need to go somewhere, but they definitely don’t feel stable enough to be the tonic. These chords provide more “meat” to a progression and make it more interesting. After all, if you just played I to V (for example, C to G) it would be pretty boring.

The iii chord, labeled “T/PD”, is a bit of a different case, because this chord has the most of the tonic triad contained in it’s own triad. For example, if we are in the key of C, the tonic triad is C-E-G. The iii chord, being E minor, has the note E-G-B, so it sounds like a C major 7 chord starting on the E.

DOMINANT

The dominant is the final step before coming back to tonic, and is the most tense and dissonant harmony. This is because of voice leading, which is how single notes move between chords. For example, if we go from V to I in C major, we go from a G chord to a C chord. The main voice leading between these two chords is the B in the G chord moving up by a half step to C in the C chord. If we have a G⁷ chord, it will also have an F – now the voice leading has two half steps, one going up from B to C and another going down from F to E. This motion also resolves a tritone (B and F), a very dissonant interval.

Tonic	Predominant	Dominant
I, (iii)	ii, IV, vi	V, vii ^o

The basic formula is that you can have as many pre-dominant chords in between the tonic and dominant as you'd like. Let's look at the "People Get Ready" progression, because it's a good, simple example of this method of making a progression.

C A min F G C A min G^{7sus4} C
 I vi IV V I vi V^{7sus4} I
 T----PD-----D → T-----PD-----D → T

C A min F G E min D min G^{7sus4} C
 I vi IV V iii ii V^{7sus4} I
 T-----PD-----D → T/PD----PD-----D → T

Exercises for Harmony

Now that we know all major scales very well on each of the 6 strings, let's try and do some harmony exercises. For these preliminary exercises, we will be playing 3 notes simultaneously, each of these notes being the root, 3rd, and 5th of a chord. We will start very simply, in C major.

1. Find the C major triad on all strings, one string at a time. Then, play through a chord progression (like the one mentioned above) on one string, arpeggiating the chords. Try it going strictly up and down, and then try to link the chords, changing on notes that are very close or the same.

2. Play a C chord using strings 1, 2, and 3 in open position. You'll have open E, C on fret 1, and open G. This is a **2nd inversion** C major chord. Now find the next C major chord on these same strings – now it's in root position. When you get back to the starting point, take the top note (the open high E) and drop it down an octave. Rinse and repeat.

-Continued: Starting with the same C major in 2nd inversion as above, imagine that from highest to lowest, we numbered each note; E-1, C-2, G-3. (This can be done for any chord, as long as all of the notes are in the same octave). Now, try dropping 2 down an octave – we have open high E, open G, and C on the 5th string. This is known as a **drop-2 voicing**. Now do the same exercise as above. Try it again dropping the 3 down an octave – a **drop-3 voicing**.

3. Play the C on the 5th string (fret 3), and build a C major triad from that. The notes should not be spread to different octaves – they should be stacked on top of each other. Now, move up the C major scale for each of these notes (C on the 5th string, E on the 4th string, G on the 3rd string) simultaneously. You will find yourself going through 7 different chords, arriving back at C major at the 15th fret. Here are the chords:

C maj D minor E minor F major G major A minor B diminished