

# Theory of Chord Progressions

Ted Greene - 1974-02-17

In different time periods, composers have favored certain root progressions more than others. A man named Allen McHose has done research on the tendencies of the 18th century along these lines and has come up with the following information:

- 1) Tonic chords are most often preceded by V (or vii°); in minor – V, (vii°). These chords that precede the tonic are all given the label *Dominant Function* or *1st Classification*.
- 2) 1st Classification chords are most often preceded by ii or IV (ii, ii° (♭II), iv and IV in minor). These chords are labeled *Subdominants* or *2nd Classification*.
- 3) 2nd Classification chords are most often preceded by vi or I (♭VI, i in minor). These chords are labeled *3rd Classification*.
- 4) 3rd Classification chords are most often preceded by iii (♭III in minor). These chords are called *4th Classification*.

Summing up these observations of McHose the following would be typical root movements (given in major keys):

- |              |                  |
|--------------|------------------|
| 1) V I       | 5) vi IV V I     |
| 2) ii V I    | 6) I IV V I      |
| 3) IV V I    | 7) iii vi ii V I |
| 4) vi ii V I |                  |

Any progressions such as the above, McHose calls Normal Progressions, and justly so since he found them used so frequently.

Also important:

## Tonic Chord Movements:

- 1) The tonic chord may progress to any chord in its key and
- 2) the tonic chord may be used between two chords which form a normal progression without disturbing their classification.

## The Circle of 4ths:

An often used long progression is I - IV - vii° - iii - vi - ii - V - I etc. It may start on other degrees than I. Example: IV - vii° - iii - vi - ii - V - I.

Some other types of chord progressions:

- 1) Elision – the skipping of a classification.  
Some of the more common ones are: iii - IV, IV - I, ii - I, and vi - V.
- 2) Retgression – movement in reverse of the normal progressions, such as from a 1st classification chord to a 2nd classification chord. Some common examples: vi - iii, V - IV, ii - vi.
- 3) Repetition – the chords which are most commonly repeated (almost always with a change of position at least, if not change of inversion) are the I, V, IV, and ii.

Some startling specific facts relating to the above: after analyzing thousands of chord progressions of Bach and Handel, the two most highly respected masters of the early 18th century, it was found that they used approximately 80% normal progressions, and approximately 90 to 95% tonic, 1st classification, and 2nd classification chords!

## Theory of Chord Progression

In different time periods, composers have favored certain root progressions more than others. A man named Allen McHose has done research on the tendencies of the 18th century along these lines and has come up with the following information:

① Tonic chords are most often preceded by **V** (or **vii°**); in minor - **V**, (**vii°**) (that precedes the tonic) These chords are all given the label **DOMINANT FUNCTION** or **1st CLASSIFICATION**.

② 1st CLASSIFICATION chords are most often preceded by **ii** or **IV** (**ii**, **ii°**, **bII**, **iv** + **IV** in minor). These chords are labeled **SUBDOMINANTS** or **2nd CLASSIF.**

③ 2nd CLASSIFICATION chords are most often preceded by **vi** or **I** (**bVI**, **i** in minor). These chords are labeled **3rd CLASSIFICATION**.

④ 3rd CLASSIFICATION chords are most often preceded by **iii** (**III** in minor). These chords are called **4th CLASSIFICATION**.

Summing up these observations of McHose the following would be typical root movements (given in major keys): ① **V I** ② **ii VI** ③ **IV VI** ④ **vi II VI** ⑤ **vi IV VI** ⑥ **I IV VI** ⑦ **iii vi II VI**

Any progressions such as the above, McHose calls **NORMAL PROGRESSIONS**, and justly so since he found them used so frequently. Also important →

**TONIC CHORD MOVEMENTS:** ① The tonic chord may progress to any chord in its key and ② The tonic chord may be used between two chords which form a normal progression without disturbing their classification.

**THE CIRCLE OF FIFTHS:** An often used long progression is **I IV vii° iii vi II V I** etc. It may start on other degrees than **I**. Example: **IV vii° iii vi II V I**.

Some other types of chord progressions: ① **Elsion** - the skipping of a classification - some of the more common ones are **iii IV, IV I, II I** and **vi V**. ② **Retrogression** - movement in reverse of the normal progressions, such as from a 1st classif. chord to a 2nd classif. chord. Some common examples: **vi iii, V IV, II vi**. ③ **Repetition** - the chords which are most commonly repeated (almost always with a change of position at least if not change of inversion) are the **I, V, IV** and **ii**.

Some startling specific facts relating to the above: After analyzing thousands of chord progressions of Bach + Handel, the two most highly respected masters of the early 18th century, it was found that they used approximately 80% normal progressions, and approximately 90 to 95% tonic, 1st classif, and 2nd classification chords!