

Techniques: Chord Cycles

National Standards: 1-9

Chord cycles are short sets of chords that repeat throughout a piece of music, providing the harmonic backdrop for the melody and lyrics of a song. Although chords are typically triads (sometimes including extensions like 7ths and 9ths), any group of pitches played simultaneously qualifies as a chord. Songwriters and composers can create an endless variety of atmospheres in their songs depending on the strategies they use to create their chord cycles, all driven by the underlying meaning of the song and how they wish to express it.

Prepare

Begin the lesson by introducing (or reviewing) the number system in chord progressions, since the article references I-V-vi-IV and I-ii-vi-IV progressions. Once students can comfortably apply a number to each chord in a key, they are ready to continue. Then, watch Axis of Awesome's "4 chord song" video and ask for students' reactions. Were they aware that so many popular songs use the same groupings of chords? If so, how do they feel about it? Do they embrace the evergreen nature of these chord cycles, or do they actively try to stray from them in their listening and/or writing?

Key points in the article:

- The most common chord cycles in popular music move through a series of chords that exist diatonically in one key. These progressions have a strong forward sense of motion and satisfying resolution, making them great choices for pop and rock songs. Because there are only seven diatonic chords in each key, choices for these types of chord cycles are more limited. However, their appeal allows songwriters to use them over and over without losing their music impact.
- Chord cycles can be made more ambiguous by adding a few chords from outside the song's parent key. Doing so will introduce unexpected notes and harmonies into a song and make it less clear where the chord cycle will resolve. This also provides more melodic options for singers, who can either avoid or embrace the chromatic notes of the chords depending on the effect they wish to achieve.
- To create wild, unpredictable sounds, chord cycles can be made up of seemingly unrelated chords, anchored only by the rhythm of the song. Players can make these changes as smooth or sharp as they want depending on the chord voicing and voice leading choices they make. As long as the atmosphere created by the chord cycle supports the meaning of the song, these experimental sounds can be perfectly usable.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Chord Cycle:** a short set of chords that repeat over and over within a piece of music
- **Ambiguity:** the quality of being open to more than one interpretation; inexactness
- **Chromatic:** notes in a composition that are outside the seven-note diatonic (i.e., major and minor) scales and modes
- **Atmosphere:** the mood, emotion, and ambiance of a piece of music
- **Untethered:** not tied to or leading to an identifiable harmonic center

Discuss

After reading the article, listen to Adele's "Hello" and Radiohead's "Creep." Ask students to compare and contrast the feel and atmosphere of those songs with Beyonce's "Halo" and the songs from the Axis of Awesome video. Do they feel more or less resolved? What emotions do both sets of songs evoke? How do the lyrical themes of the songs from example 1 contrast with the lyrical themes from example 2, and do the chord cycles of each song reflect those themes? How do the selected chord cycles of the songs contribute to the atmosphere and ambiance, and could the song carry the same meaning with a different chord cycle?

Q&A

1. What is the definition of a chord in music?
2. Which popular song mentioned in the article features a I-ii-vi-IV progression?
3. What is the fundamental goal of any chord cycle?
4. Although the song is in F minor, which other tonal center is implied by the chord cycles of Adele's "Hello?"
5. How can experimental chord progressions be made to feel smoother or sharper?

Answers

1. Any set of pitches that are played simultaneously or almost simultaneously.
2. "Halo" by Beyonce
3. To create a harmonic atmosphere that supports the sonic message of a song.
4. Ab major
5. By emphasizing tones that are closer together (smoother) or farther apart (sharper)

Expand

Select a set of lyrics from any song (preferably one that students will not already know, perhaps an older or less famous song). Leaving out the artist's name and title of the song, print out the lyrics to distribute to students. Split students into small groups or allow them to work individually. Have students read the lyrics and discuss the themes present and emotions evoked

by the lyrics. Using that information, assign each student/group to compose their own chord cycle to match the meaning of the lyrics. Present these chords cycles in class and have students explain how they composed their chord cycle and how they think it supports the meaning of the song. Once each student group has presented, play the song that the lyrics were taken from. Did the chord cycles created by students resemble the chord cycle of the original song? How did they differ? Why do students think the artist chose the chord cycle present in the song to support their lyrics?

On Becoming a Modern Musician

National Standards: 1-9

As with many professions in the modern world, musicians are finding it more necessary than ever to diversify their skill sets and knowledge bases in order to develop successful, sustainable careers. A glance at the offerings of major college music programs confirms this reality and offers insight into the many areas of the music industry that students are preparing themselves to enter. Some lifelong musicians even leverage their skills to enhance their careers completely outside the world of music. Regardless of how you plan to make a living, having a wide range of experience and abilities is a plus.

Prepare

Have students journal about their career goals, musical or otherwise. What specific job do they want, and how do they plan to reach that position? Encourage them to list the skills and knowledge they want to cultivate to do so. Are there any other secondary careers they could see themselves pursuing if their primary is unattainable? After the allotted journaling time is finished, play the video of Secretary of State Anthony Blinken performing at the State Department's "music diplomacy" event. Then read the article.

Key points in the article:

- Very few musicians go their whole career without changing lanes. Performers often become producers, composers, managers, or other behind-the-scenes positions as their career progresses. The more abilities a musician has, the more fruitful their career is likely to be.
- Many college music programs have expanded to incorporate music industry studies. This arose from popular demand and the increasing difficulties of making a living solely by playing music. Musicians increase their prospects of finding work in their desired field by studying subjects outside of (or parallel to) music and are therefore encouraged to do so from a young age.
- Musical knowledge can even be beneficial to career paths in entirely unrelated industries. The correlation between studying music and finding career success, regardless of whether the career involves music, is difficult to ignore. Even if it only provides you a common interest to bond over with others in your field, music is a valuable asset and a strong predictor of future success.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Utility:** the state of being useful, profitable, or beneficial
- **Multifaceted:** having many different parts or sides

- **Culminate:** reach a climax or point of highest development
- **Coincidence:** a remarkable concurrence of events or circumstances without apparent causal connection
- **Realm:** a field or domain of activity or interest

Discuss

Are students aware of any other famous musicians with diverse careers in the industry? What about notable figures in culture or business who have a musical background? Why do students think it is important to have multiple areas of study to supplement their careers? Can students identify any factors in the modern music industry that might make it necessary for artists to have multiple skill sets and streams of income? Why do we see fewer notable figures who only specialize in one subject?

Q&A

1. Before becoming a film composer, what band did Trent Reznor front?
2. What instrument did former president Bill Clinton play?
3. After his professional clarinet and saxophone career, what notable position did Alan Greenspan go on to achieve?
4. What major university in the article features a music publishing school?
5. Under which moniker did Secretary of State Anthony Blinken release music between 2018-2020?

Answers

1. Nine Inch Nails
2. Saxophone
3. Chairman of the Federal Reserve
4. Syracuse University
5. Ablinken

Expand

Assign students a research project and report/presentation on a musician who has a diverse career path, or a successful figure with a musical background who works outside the field of music. Explore their early musical interests and how they branched out from their original musical path. What did they study that led them to areas outside performance? Did they attend a college program, or did they learn through real world experience and on-the-job training? How were their careers aided by their multidisciplinary skill sets?

How to Play “Put Your Records On”

National Standards: 1-9

When listing songs that could be considered anthems, many of the classic options will be loud and in-your-face. However, Corinne Bailey Rae’s “Put Your Records On” defies these expectations with its sparse arrangement, sweet and mellow atmosphere, and cheerful lyrics. Though it might be counterintuitive, these elements combine to make a chorus primed for stadium-sized singalongs. By analyzing the song’s clever dynamics and instrumentation, your ensemble can create the same effect at your performances.

Prepare

Ask students if they are familiar with “Put Your Records On” and have them share their impressions of the song. Have students listen to the song and take notes on what instruments and voices they hear, including when they first appear in the song. Compare notes to see if the class collectively identified each part of the arrangement. Then, read the article as a class.

Key points in the article:

- Although the song’s arrangement and production are right at home on pop radio (and are punchy enough to stand up next to high-energy Top 40 hits), there is plenty of room left for the vocal. Nothing feels crowded, and every instrument has its own space. By starting out with only an acoustic guitar playing a single note, the song can then build dynamically.
- The song’s clever arrangement brings in (or drops out) new instruments with every section of the song and includes plenty of dynamic changes. One way the song disrupts or enhances the energy is through strategic breaks, where some or all of the instruments drop out for a few beats. Although they are easy to over-use, deploying them at key moments is very effective.
- Background vocals (BGVs) play a large part in the studio recording of the song. There are two types of BGVs on the track: what would be considered the more traditional type that fill out the space of the song and raise the dynamics, and “ear candy” vocals that provide more of an effect and rely less on traditional choral techniques. Both enhance the song, but the “ear candy” parts are more of a studio creation and can be left out of live performances.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Bombastic:** high-sounding but with little meaning; inflated
- **Tremolo:** a pulsating effect that raises and lowers volume at a set rate
- **Texture:** how the tempo, melodic, and harmonic materials are combined in a musical composition, determining the overall quality of the sound
- **Doubling:** when the bass guitar and kick drum play the same rhythmic accents
- **Lick:** "a stock pattern or phrase" consisting of a short series of notes used in solos and melodic lines and accompaniment

Discuss

The dynamic structure of the song and clever instrumentation provide a perfect backdrop to the iconic vocal. Ask students why they think the producers of the song left so much open space, particularly in the beginning of the song. Can they think of any other famous songs that start out quiet and sparse, but grow steadily to the climax? Which instruments do they think are the most important to the arrangement, and which play more of a supporting role? If the class or ensemble will be playing the song live, which ones would they emphasize, and which ones could potentially be left out or changed?

Q&A

1. Which effect is tremolo often confused with?
2. Which two types of keyboard sounds are featured in the song?
3. Where was Corinne Bailey Rae born?
4. Which element of the song does Rae leave out in her live performances?
5. How many BAFTA nominations did "Put Your Records On" receive?

Answers

1. Vibrato
2. Hammond Organ and Rhodes electric piano
3. Leeds, Yorkshire in England
4. The "ear candy" background vocals
5. Three

Expand

Depending on the type of ensemble, decide how your class will bring the song to life. If working with a choir or other vocal ensemble without many instrumentalists at its disposal, talk with the class to decide how to simplify the arrangement of the record- which instruments carry the most weight? If working with a rock band or popular music ensemble that has plenty of

instrumentalists but fewer vocalists, decide which vocal parts can be left out. Additionally, listen to Rae's own live version of the song. How does her live arrangement differ from the studio version? Consider each of these factors and collaborate with your class to decide how they can bring their own unique twist to the classic.

Luke Combs

National Standards: 7-8, 10-11

In an era of artists who breakthrough via viral fame, or are “nepo babies,” using family connections, the arrival of a “grass roots” artist like Luke Combs is refreshing. After spending years performing on the North Carolina club circuit, Combs has ascended to country stardom and produced an unprecedented streak of hits. The years of hard work are evident not only in his songwriting and performance, but in his down-to-earth demeanor. Although Combs tries to lead a low-key life, his music demands attention.

Prepare

Ask if there are any Luke Combs fans in the class (the probability is fairly high), and if so, what they enjoy about his music. Even if there are no self-professed fans of his music, it is almost certain that students will know his name. Listen to his recent hit “Love You Anyway” and then his first hit “Hurricane” from 2016. What stylistic evolutions do students notice, if any? After getting acquainted with Combs’ music, read the article.

Key points in the article:

- Although he had been singing since he could talk, Combs never thought about the possibility of a career in music until after he had explored several other career tracks in college, including criminal justice and business. He began learning guitar and writing songs long after most musicians get their start, but quickly found himself performing regularly.
- While working as a bouncer in Boone, NC, Combs convinced his boss to let him perform at several of his clubs. He spent five years performing full time before he ever inked a record deal, and the hard work involved in those years is reflected in his humility and the authenticity of his songs. Though his success was certainly not overnight, his songs began making an impact immediately after releasing his first album in 2016.
- Because he was not bred for the spotlight (and never really believed he would get famous in the first place), adjusting to the spotlight was a bit of a struggle for Combs at first. He often avoided basic tasks that required him to go out in public. Now, he strives to maintain a low profile in order to give his children as normal a childhood as possible.

Begin

Review Vocabulary words from the article below:

- **Ascension:** the act of rising to an important position or a higher level

- **Consecutive:** following continuously in unbroken sequence
- **Revere:** feel deep respect or admiration for (something)
- **Humility:** a modest or low view of one's own importance; humbleness
- **Zeitgeist:** the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time

Discuss

Ask students why they think Combs' music has become so popular. What is it about his songs that connects so deeply to a country audience? How do they differ from songs by his contemporaries? Are there any artists who sound similar to him, or vice versa? Do students think his anti-star personality creates more relatable music?

Q&A

1. How many consecutive No.1 singles has Combs released?
2. Where did Combs attend college?
3. At which legendary New York venue did Combs perform a solo with the chorus?
4. Which club owner in Boone, NC gave Combs the chance to play regularly at his nightclubs?
5. After quitting guitar once (after only one lesson), when did Combs pick the instrument back up?

Answers

1. 15
2. Appalachian State University
3. Carnegie Hall
4. Justin Davis
5. During college, while working at a go-kart track

Expand

Assign students a short-written report on another famous musician who got a late start on their career. Famous examples include Emmylou Harris, Willie Nelson, and David Guetta, but there are many others in a wide variety of genres. Ask students to focus on how their artist's later start and years of working their way up affected their music and attitudes. If possible, draw parallels between the career track of their chosen artist and Luke Combs.