

chords and progressions for jazz and popular keyboard

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Chords and Progressions for Jazz and Popular Keyboard: A Comprehensive Guide

Whether you're a budding pianist, a seasoned session musician, or simply a music lover eager to deepen your understanding of harmony, mastering chords and progressions is essential. In this article we'll explore the building blocks of jazz harmony, examine the most common progressions used in both jazz and popular music, and show you how to apply these ideas on the keyboard. By the end, you'll have a toolbox of chords and progressions that will elevate your playing, inspire your improvisations, and give you confidence in any musical setting.

1. Understanding Jazz Harmony

1.1 The Foundations of Jazz Chords

Jazz harmony is built on a foundation of triads and seventh chords, but it quickly expands to include extensions (9th, 11th, 13th) and alterations (&m9, #9, &m5, #5). A typical jazz chord might be written as Cmaj7&m13, which signals that the root, major third, perfect fifth, major seventh, and flat thirteenth are all present. When you first encounter these symbols, it can feel like a foreign language, but once you internalize the intervallic structure, they become a natural part of your musical vocabulary.

1.2 Extensions and Alterations

Extensions add color beyond the basic triad. The 9th is simply the major or minor third an octave higher; the 11th is the perfect fourth an octave higher, and the 13th is the major or minor sixth an octave higher. Alterations—such as a flat nine or sharp eleven—create tension that resolves when the chord moves to a more stable harmony.

- Major 7th chords (e.g., Cmaj7): Root, major third, perfect fifth, major seventh.
- Dominant 7th chords (e.g., G7): Root, major third, perfect fifth, minor seventh.
- Minor 7th chords (e.g., Am7): Root, minor third, perfect fifth, minor seventh.
- Half diminished 7th chords (e.g., Bm7&m5): Root, minor third, diminished fifth, minor seventh.
- Diminished 7th chords (e.g., B°7): Root, minor third, diminished fifth, diminished seventh.

Jazz musicians often use chord symbols that include extensions and alterations to convey the exact harmonic texture they intend. For example, a chord symbol like D13&m9 tells you to play a dominant thirteenth chord with a flattened ninth.

2. Core Progressions in Jazz

2.1 The Classic ii–V–I

The ii–V–I progression is the backbone of jazz harmony. In the key of C major, it would be Dm7 (ii), G7 (V), and Cmaj7 (I). This sequence creates a strong sense of resolution because the V chord naturally wants to resolve to the I chord, thanks to the tritone between the third and seventh of the dominant chord.

1. Dm7 !' G7 !' Cmaj7 – The most common example in C major.
2. Em7&m5 !' A7&m9 !' Dm7 – In a minor key, the progression often starts on a half diminished chord.
3. Fmaj7 !' Bb7 !' Ebmaj7 – A ii–V–I in the key of Eb.

When mastering the ii–V–I, pay attention to voice leading: each note in the chord should move by the smallest interval possible to the next chord. This smooth motion is a hallmark of jazz harmony.

2.2 The iii–vi–ii–V Turnaround

Turnarounds are short progressions that bring you back to the tonic. A common turnaround in jazz is iii–vi–ii–V, which in C major would be Em7–Am7–Dm7–G7. This progression adds variety to the basic ii–V–I by starting on the mediant and submediant chords before returning to the tonic.

Because the iii–vi–ii–V sequence always ends on the dominant chord, it naturally leads back into another ii–V–I cycle, creating a continuous loop that's perfect for improvisation.

2.3 Modal Progressions

Modal jazz often eschews functional harmony in favor of modal scales. Progressions in modal jazz are usually built on static chords that support a single mode. For example, a piece in D Dorian might use the chords Dm7, G7, and Em7 repeatedly, creating a sense of modal flavor without traditional key centers.

To keep things interesting, musicians may introduce a “pivot” chord—a chord that temporarily shifts the mode—before returning to the original mode. This technique allows for subtle harmonic shifts without a full modulation.

2.4 Turnarounds in Pop and Jazz

While the ii–V–I is jazz's signature turnaround, pop music often uses simpler progressions like I–V–vi–IV. In the key of C, that's C–G–Am–F. The similarity lies in the use of the V chord to create tension, but pop turnarounds tend to resolve more quickly and often rely on diatonic chords rather than extensions.

3. Popular Keyboard Progressions

3.1 Pop Ballad Progressions

Ballads frequently use lush, extended chords that create a romantic atmosphere. A classic ballad progression might be Am9–D13–Gmaj7–Cmaj7. These chords provide a rich harmonic palette while maintaining a smooth voice leading that is easy for keyboardists to play.

Another popular ballad sequence is Em7–A7–Dmaj7–Gmaj7. Notice how the dominant A7 resolves to the Dmaj7, creating a satisfying cadence that can be repeated throughout the verse and chorus.

3.2 Pop Rock Progressions

Pop rock often relies on power chords and simple diatonic progressions. However, keyboard players can add depth by using extended chords. For example, a progression like Cmaj7–G7–Am7–Fmaj7 can be used in a pop-rock context to provide a sophisticated harmonic backdrop.

In many rock songs, the I–IV–V progression (e.g., C–F–G) is expanded by adding a vi chord (Am) to create a I–vi–IV–V sequence, which gives the progression a more emotional feel.

3.3 Contemporary Pop Progressions

Modern pop music frequently uses repetitive, loopable progressions. A popular example is the I–V–vi–IV progression (C–G–Am–F). Keyboardists can enrich this sequence by incorporating seventh and ninth chords: Cmaj7–G13–Am9–Fmaj7.

Another trend in contemporary pop is the use of modal interchange, where chords are borrowed from parallel keys. For instance, in the key of C major, you might use a Bb major chord (borrowed from C minor) to add color to the

progression: C–Bb–F–G.

4. Voice Leading & Pedal Points

4.1 Smooth Voice Leading

Voice leading is the art of moving each voice (or note) in a chord to the next chord with the smallest possible interval. In jazz, this technique is essential for creating a cohesive sound. For example, moving from Dm7 to G7, you can voice the chords as follows:

- Dm7: D–F–A–C
- G7: G–B–D–F

Notice that the A and F notes stay the same, while the D and B move by a step. This approach keeps the harmony flowing naturally.

4.2 Pedal Points

A pedal point is a sustained note—often the tonic or dominant—over which chords change. Pedal points add tension and release, especially in jazz ballads or pop ballads. For example, in the progression Cmaj7–Fmaj7–G7, you might hold the G pedal note throughout, creating a sense of continuity.

Keyboardists can use pedal points by playing a sustained bass note with one hand while the other hand moves through the chords. This technique is common in organ and electric piano playing.

5. Substitutions & Chromaticism

5.1 Tritone Substitution

The tritone substitution replaces a dominant chord with another dominant chord a tritone away. For instance, in the key of C major, instead of playing G7, you can use D7b9. Both chords contain the same tritone (B–F), which resolves to the tonic in a similar way.

Using tritone substitutions adds harmonic interest and a jazzier feel to progressions. A common example is Dm7–G7–Cmaj7 being replaced by Dm7–D7b9–Cmaj7.

5.2 Secondary Dominants

Secondary dominants are dominant chords that resolve to a chord other than the tonic. They are written as V/ii, V/iii, etc. For example, in

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