

5 Powerful Chord Progression Ideas To Enhance Your Songwriting

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By Ryan Buckner

Songwriters are always looking for new and interesting chords to use to enhance their music. Although it is easy to simply do a quick search online to find many chord progressions that you can try in your music, there do not exist many sources that actually explain WHY certain chord progressions work the way they do.

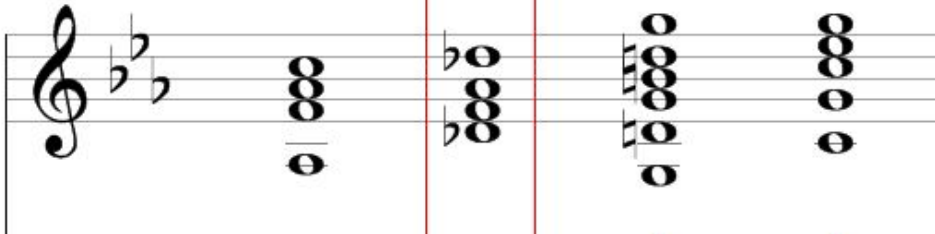
With this eBook, my intention is to not only give you some interesting chords to try out in your music, but to also educate you on how they are generally used in music so that you can get a better perspective for understanding how to use them in your own songs.

All of the ideas discussed in this book can be used for any instrument and for any musical style. In order to get the most out of the chord progression ideas I will be discussing, I recommend that you use your instrument or writing software to playback each one several times. This will allow you to get a better feel for how each progression sounds. After you have done this, think of different ways that you can tie in the 'feeling' of each chord progression with thoughts, ideas or emotions that you can use in your songwriting.

Once you are able to use these chord progressions in your music, you will drastically increase your options for creating highly self expressive music.

To understand some of the ideas discussed in this eBook it will be helpful to understand the concept of "roman numerals." In case you have not read it already, check out this article on [songwriting chord progressions](#).

Progression Idea #1: Using The Neapolitan Chord

	Fm	Db	G	Cm
				
T A B	1 1 3 4	2 1 3 4	3 3 4 5 5 3	3 4 5 5 3
	iv	bII	V	i

The Neapolitan chord became popular when it was used frequently by 17th century opera composers in the Italian city of Naples.

The Neapolitan chord is a major chord that is built off of the note that is a half step above the first note of the key. For example, if you are in the key of C major (notes: C D E F G A B), the Neapolitan chord would be "Db." In roman numerals, this is written as "bII." Due to the way it sounds when used together with the diatonic chords of the key, the Neapolitan chord is used popularly in progressions to create a sense of surprise in the listener.

Chord progressions using the Neapolitan chord commonly use a specific formula to "set up" a **cadence**. A cadence is a musical resting point. To explain a cadence, think of music like a sentence in grammar. Each letter in the words of the sentence is a note, then each phrase of the sentence could be thought of as part of a melody or chord progression. The cadence would be the feeling of resolution you get after the "period."

Here is the common formula that is used with the Neapolitan chord:

1st chord: Neapolitan (predominant) - bII

2nd chord: Dominant - V

Last chord: Tonic - I or i

This chord can also be used directly after the I or i chord at the end of a song section to create a very distinct and surprising ending.

Example:

bII - V - I (Db - G - C)

bII - V - I (Db - G - Cm)

i - bII (Cm - Db)

To add more depth to the progression, you can use additional chord before the Neapolitan:

Example:

iv - bII - V7 - i (Fm - Db - G7 - Cm)

bVI - bII - V7 - I (Ab - Db - G7 - C)

Also, the Neapolitan chord is used often in 1st inversion. Try out these chord progressions to see how this sounds:

Example:

Db/F - G7 - Cm

Fm - Db/F - Cm/G - G7 - Cm

Example:

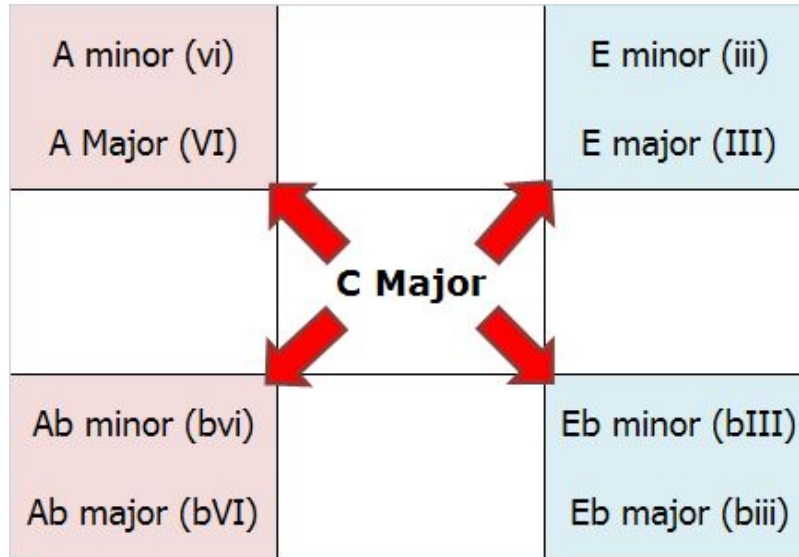
Cm - **Db/F** - F#dim - G7 - C

CMaj7 - Fmaj7 - Cmaj7 - **DbMaj7**

Dm7b5 - G7#11 - Cm9 - Gb7#11 - F13 - **Db9** - Cm9

Progression Idea #2:

Movement By Thirds



Third related chord progressions became a staple during Romantic era music. These types of progressions were used commonly by great composers and musicians of the time such as Liszt, Chopin and Brahms. Later they would be seen in a different light by famous jazz musician John Coltrane.

Building chord progressions that advance from one chord to the next by thirds is a way to create an interesting feel in your music. By "moving by thirds", this refers to a third (either major or minor) away from the root of the chord you are starting on. For example:

If you are beginning on the C major chord, the root note of this chord is "C". If you want to move a third away from C you have 4 options to choose from: A, Ab, E and Eb. Once you have established these notes, you can turn them into either major or minor chords, giving you a total of 8 chords to choose from.

You will find that each chord choice will give a very different 'feel'. As you move on from one chord to the next, you can continually cycle through different sets of chords depending on which ones you choose. This gives you a nearly endless amount of options to work with.

bVI and bIII

Try beginning or ending a song section by alternating between the Tonic chord in the key and either a bVI or a bIII. Here are some examples in C major, notice the almost "dream-like" feeling of these progressions:

Example:

I - bVI (C - Ab)

I - bIII (C - Eb)

I - bVI (Cmaj7 - Abmaj7)

A creative idea you can try using movement by thirds is to spell out the name of a chord as you move from one chord to the next. For example: If you are in the key of C major, you can move (starting on "C") from C major up to B major/minor to spell a major 7 chord (C E G B). Here are some ways that such a progression could be created:

Example:

C major - **E** major - **G** major - **B** major

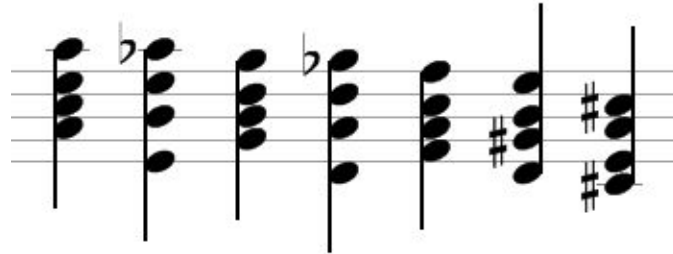
C major - **E** minor - **G** minor - **B** major

Cmaj7 - **E**m7 - **G**m7 - **B**m7

Try spelling other chords as well such as a dominant 7 chord (C7 = C E G Bb) or a minor 7 chord (Cm7 = C Eb G Bb) to come up with even more possibilities.

Progression Idea #3:

Using Chords To Create Descending Bass Lines



Descending bass lines have been used for hundreds of years to create strong direction in music. Although there are many, some popular modern examples that use descending bass lines include the intro to “Stairway To Heaven” by Led Zeppelin, “No Woman No Cry” by Bob Marley and the bridge in “And Your Bird Can Sing” by the Beatles.

Descending bass lines are the most powerful way to create a sense of “falling” in music. By the nature of the way the notes descend, this chord progression technique is also very useful for emphasizing sad feelings or the idea of feeling “down” emotionally. Additionally, it is very easy for our brains to process “linear” moving notes. As a result of being easier to follow, the music then becomes more easily accessible (we can “get into it” faster).

One way to create chord progressions with descending bass lines is to begin with the notes for the scale of the key you are writing in. For example, the A major scale contains the notes:

A, B, C#, D, E, F#, G#

To begin creating your descending bass line, all you need to do is arrange these notes to where they descend by letter name. Here is an example:

E, D, C#, B, A

Next to make your chord progression, you will need to find the chords in the key (in this case A major) that contain these notes. After you do this, assign each chord to one note. In order to give yourself many different options, you will need to consider using chords in inversions. For example, you may decide to use the C# note from above as the bass note for an A major chord (making

it A major in 1st inversion or A/C#) Here is one way to build your descending bass chord progression using the notes from above:

Chords in the key of A major:

A major (A C# E)

B minor (B D F#)

C# minor (C# E G#)

D major (D F# A)

E major (E G# B)

F# minor (F# A C#)

G# diminished (G# B D)

Example:

Note: E

Chord: A/E

Note: D

Chord: Bm/D

Note: C#

Chord: A/C#

Note: B

Chord: E/B

Note: A

Chord: F#m/A

Overall Progression:

A/E - Bm/D - A/C# - E/B - F#m/A

In addition, you are not limited to a “linear” descending bass line like the one shown above. Many bass lines will alternate descending and ascending, but overall maintain a descending nature.

For example, you might start off with a bass line like this:

E, B, D, A, C#, G#, B, A

Your bass lines do not always have to be “in key” as well. Although explaining the process for creating these types of bass lines is outside the scope of this eBook, here is an example to try out. Notice that this progression contains the chords from the picture at the beginning of this section:

Example:

Am - E - G - D - F - E/D - A/C#

For guitarists, here is the guitar tablature to match this example:

The image shows a musical staff with six chords: Am, E, G, D, F, and E/D. The notes are: Am (A, C, E), E (E, G, B), G (B, D, F), D (D, F, A), F (F, A, C), and E/D (D, E, G). Below the staff is a guitar tablature with six lines labeled T, A, B from top to bottom. The fret numbers for each chord are: Am (5, 5, 5, 7), E (4, 5, 4, 7), G (3, 3, 4, 5), D (2, 3, 2, 5), F (1, 2, 3, 0), and E/D (0, 1, 0, 2, 2, 4).

	5	4	3	2	1	0	
T	5	5	3	3	1	0	2
A	5	4	4	2	2	1	2
B	7	7	5	5	3	0	2
		7		5			4

Progression Idea #4:

Modal Progressions



Modal progressions (“modes”) have been used in western music since medieval times when 4 modes were used. Later during the Renaissance 2 more were added. Today we use a total of 7 modes in our music (1 of them, Locrian almost exclusively for jazz).

The 7 Common Modes

1. Ionian
2. Dorian
3. Phrygian
4. Lydian
5. Mixolydian
6. Aeolian
7. Locrian

Modal progressions are a great tool to use in order to create a plethora of different moods in your music. The term “mode” essentially refers to “key” (like major or minor). In fact, when we create a song in a major key, we are using Ionian mode. When we create a song in a minor key, we are using Aeolian mode.

The topic of modes is a HUGE topic; however instead of just giving you a bunch of progressions without context, I will briefly explain the main idea of how modes work here:

C major scale:

C D E F G A B C

As mentioned above, we call this scale "C major." The reason for this is that the notes of this particular scale all revolve around the note "C"; this is why it is thought that "C" is the beginning for this scale (thus it is in the key of C major). This same idea applies as well to A minor, which contains all the same notes as C major, except that the scale begins with A instead.

That said, each mode corresponds with a specific starting point in the scale. For example, you are using Ionian mode (major) if you center your chord progressions around the first note of the scale. If you are using Aeolian mode (minor), that means you are centering your chords around the sixth note of the scale. Assuming you are using the C major scale, here is an example of which notes/chords to center your progressions around in order to be "in" a particular mode:

1. Ionian (major) - **C** major
2. Dorian - **D** minor
3. Phrygian - **E** minor
4. Lydian - **F** major
5. Mixolydian - **G** major
6. Aeolian (minor) - **A** minor
7. Locrian - **B** diminished

So as another example using the information above, you know that if you use the notes of the C major scale, then you are in Dorian mode if you center your chord progression around the D minor chord. This is called "D Dorian", after the note name. Here is how this applies to all of the modes:

C Ionian (C major):

Notes: C D E F G A B C

Chords: C Dm Em F G Am Bdim C

Overall feeling: Happy

D Dorian:

D E F G A B C D

Chords: Dm Em F G Am Bdim C Dm

Overall feeling: Sad

E Phrygian:

E F G A B C D E

Chords: Em F G Am Bdim C Dm Em

Overall feeling: Dark/mysterious

F Lydian:

F G A B C D E F

Chords: F G Am Bdim C Dm Em F

Overall feeling: Light and airy or "dreamy"

G Mixolydian:

G A B C D E F G

Chords: G Am Bdim C Dm Em F G

Overall feeling: Happy with a twist

A Aeolian (A minor):

A B C D E F G A

Chords: Am Bdim C Dm Em F G Am

Overall feeling: Sad

B Locrian:

B C D E F G A B

Chords: Bdim C Dm Em F G Am Bdim

Overall feeling: Dark

When putting together modal progressions it is important to note that because the "center" of your chord progressions changes for each mode, the chords will not function the same (except in Ionian and Aeolian where they are nearly the same). To understand this, listen to how the "IV V I" progression (common in Ionian and Aeolian) sounds in the different modes:

"IV - V - I" Progression in different modes

C Ionian (C - F - G - C)

D Dorian (Dm - G - Am - Dm)

E Phrygian (Em - Am - Bdim - Em)

F Lydian (F - Bdim - C - F)

G Mixolydian (G - C - Dm - G)

A Aeolian (Am - Dm - Em - Am)

B Locrian (Bdim - Em - F - Bdim)

By concentrating on the 4 most commonly used modes (excluding Ionian and Aeolian), you can bring out their "moods" by emphasizing the characteristic notes of their scale:

Dorian = This mode is often thought of as a minor scale with a #6.

Phrygian = Known as a minor mode that sticks out due to its b2. Most would recognize it as "Spanish" or "exotic" sounding.

Lydian = This mode is like Ionian except for the #4 note that makes it feel a bit ambiguous.

Mixolydian = Popular in blues and jazz, this mode is like the major scale except it contains a b7.

Note that the Locrian mode is rarely used since the diminished chord is a very unstable chord to center your chord progression

around.

A basic way to emphasize the notes for the notes mentioned above is to simply use the chords that contain them. For example, if you want to emphasize the #4 in the F Lydian scale you can use these chords:

Example:

F Lydian (F G A **B** C D E F)

Since "B" is the #4 note in F Lydian, you can use either G major (G **B** D) or E minor (E G **B**) along with the F major chord like so:

F - G - F - G

F - Em - G - F

The B diminished chord can also be used; however due to the way diminished chords are built, it will want to lead to the chord above it in pitch (in this case C). This will only weaken the feel of the mode. For this reason, it is generally avoided. Additionally, there is no "rule" against using the other chords in the key, so feel free to experiment with them as well.

Keeping these ideas in mind, here are some additional examples for the remaining 3 modes:

Example:

D Dorian:

Dm - Am - G

Dm - Am - C - G

E Phrygian:

Em - F - Em - Dm

Em - F - G - Dm

G Mixolydian:

G - Dm - G - F

G - F - C - F

Progression Idea #5:

The Deceptive Cadence

IV - V - I

IV - V - vi

There are many ways to resolve the end of a chord progression. One of the most interesting ways to do this is to surprise your listener by ending on a minor chord in a major key.

In most cases, a chord progression in a major key follows logically from Tonic (I) to Dominant (V) and back to Tonic again; however, sometimes instead of returning to the Tonic chord, a songwriter may choose to end on the minor Submediant (vi) chord. Known as a **deceptive cadence**, this songwriting technique is very surprising to the ear of the listener and has a feeling of being 'unresolved.' This type of cadence is highly effective for creating a sudden change in mood. It is very commonly used to either end a song or song section. In cases where the deceptive cadence is used to end a song section, the songwriter will many times continue into the next section using the key of the minor chord that was used.

Here are some examples of deceptive cadences in the key of C major:

Example:

I - IV - ii - V (C - F - Dm - G)

I - IV - **V7** - **vi** (C - F - **G7** - **Am**)

I - V - IV - vi - IV - V - vi (C - G - F - Am - F - **G** -

Am)

Imaj7 - IVmaj7 - Imaj7 - Vadd6 - vi (Cmaj7 - Fmaj7 -
Cmaj7 - Gadd6 - Am)

In addition to using the vi chord, you can also use an even much more surprising cadence by ending on a bVI chord (Ab in the key of C major). This cadence has a much different feel, and can serve as a powerful musical statement at the end of a section or a transition to a new song section. Of course, it can be used in the middle of a chord progression as well.

Example:

I - ii - IV - V - bVI (C - Dm/F - F - G - Ab)

I - iii - vi - V7 - bVI (C - Em - Am - G7 - Ab)

I - V - bVI - V7 - I (C - G - Ab -G7 - C)

Chord Progression Index

Chord Progression Idea #1: Using The Neapolitan Chord

1. **Db** - G - C
2. **Db** - G - Cm
3. Cm - **Db**
4. Fm - **Db** - G7 - Cm
5. Ab - **Db** - G7 - C
6. **Db/F** - G7 - Cm
7. Fm - Db/F - Cm/G - G7 - Cm
8. Cm - **Db/F** - F#dim - G7 - C
9. CMaj7 - Fmaj7 - Cmaj7 - **DbMaj7**
10. Dm7b5 - G7#11 - Cm9 - Gb7#11 - F13 - **Db9** - Cm9

Chord Progression Idea #2: Movement By Thirds

1. C - Ab
2. C - Eb
3. Cmaj7 - Abmaj7
4. **C** major - **E** major - **G** major - **B** major
5. **C** major - **E** minor - **G** minor - **B** major
6. **C**maj7 - **E**m7 - **G**m7 - **B**m7

Chord Progression Idea #3: Using Chords To Create Descending Bass Lines

1. A/**E** - Bm/**D** - A/**C#** - E/**B** - F#m/**A**
2. Am - E - G - D - F - E/D - A/C#

Chord Progression Idea #4: Modal Progressions

1. Dorian:

Dm - Am - G

Dm - Am - C - G

2. Phrygian:

Em - F - Em - Dm

Em - F - G - Dm

3. Lydian:

F - G - F - G

F - Em - G - F

4. Mixolydian:

G - Dm - G - F

G - F - C - F

Chord Progression Idea #5: The Deceptive Cadence

1. vi:

C - F - Dm - G - C - F - **G7** - **Am**

C - G - F - Am - F - **G** - **Am**

Cmaj7 - Fmaj7 - Cmaj7 - Gadd6 - Am

2. bVI:

C - Dm/F - F - G - Ab

C - Em - Am - G7 - Ab

C - G - Ab -G7 - C

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