

Adding Chords to a Tune

Harmonization is the process of adding chords to a piece of music.

The easiest type of harmony uses just the three primary triads (chord I, IV and V) as well as V7 to harmonize the tune.

Steps to adding chords to a tune:

Step 1 - Determine the key.

Step 2 - Write out the primary chords for that key.

Step 3 - Work out the **harmonic rhythm** of the music, that is: How often the chords change.

Step 4 - Choose appropriate chords based on the notes in the melody.

Step 5 - Write an accompaniment pattern voicing the chords appropriately.

A worked example: "You Are My Sunshine"

Let's say we have the task of writing a piano part to the traditional song "You Are My Sunshine". We've been given the melody, and nothing else.

The melody looks like this:

You Are My Sunshine

1 5 7 9 11 13 14 15

Step 1: The key is G Major. We can see that from the key signature & the fact that the song ends on a "G".

Step 2: G major primary chords are:

I IV V V7

Step 3: This piece is quite fast, so it does not need to change chords very often. Even one chord per bar would be too fast for this piece.

Step 4:

The pick up notes do not need a chord at all, so the chords will start at measure 1, with a tonic chord G. The "B"s and "G"s" fit with that chord, and the A sharp is simply a passing inflection in the melody, that doesn't need a chord change.

The first change will come at measure 5, where the C and E in the melody suggest a C chord, chord IV.

Measure 7 has a B in the melody again, so chord I will work again.

Measure 9 goes back to an E, so a C chord will fit again.

Measure 11 goes back to G

The A's in measure 14 suggest a D or D7 chord, which would be a good perfect cadence finishing on G in bar 15.

Adding Chords to a Tune: A Worked Example

You Are My Sunshine

Musical notation for the first system of 'You Are My Sunshine'. The melody is written on a single treble clef staff in G major, 2/4 time. Chords G, C, G, C, G, D7, and G are indicated above the notes.

Step 5. Writing out the harmony in suitable piano style.

As this is in alla breve time, a “show 2” style would probably be appropriate, with the root and 5th bass notes, and off beat chords in the right hand. Notice how we have still kept the right hand chords moving as smoothly as possible, keeping common tones where we can.

You Are My Sunshine

Musical notation for the second system of 'You Are My Sunshine'. It shows the piano accompaniment for the first six measures. The right hand uses a 'show 2' style with off-beat chords, and the left hand plays the root and fifth notes. Chords G and C are indicated above the melody.

Musical notation for the third system of 'You Are My Sunshine'. It shows the piano accompaniment for measures 7 through 10. Chords G and C are indicated above the melody.

Musical notation for the fourth system of 'You Are My Sunshine'. It shows the piano accompaniment for measures 11 through 14. Chords G, G, D7, and G are indicated above the melody.

“Three Chord Tunes” for Harmonizing

Using separate manuscript paper, harmonize and write a piano accompaniment for the following traditional tunes using just chords I, IV, V and V7:

1. When the Saints:

This tune can be harmonized simply, or in a more complicated fashion. In this simplest version there is no chord change at all until you get to the “D” in bar 7.

When the Saints go Marching in

Musical notation for the first two staves of the tune 'When the Saints go Marching in'. The first staff contains the first seven bars, and the second staff contains bars 8 through 14. The music is written in 4/4 time and consists of a single melodic line.

2. Jingle Bells:

Hint: When harmonizing this tune don't get tricked in bar 6 by the fact that the first note isn't part of the chord for the whole bar. You still change chord on beat one of the bar, but the F is called a “suspension”. Bar 6 should be harmonized with a C chord, and the F simply resolves itself by falling to the E on beat 2, which is part of the chord for the bar. The same thing happens in bar 7 with a different chord, and then again in bar 14.

Jingle Bells

Musical notation for the first four staves of the tune 'Jingle Bells'. The first staff contains the first four bars, the second staff contains bars 5 through 8, the third staff contains bars 9 through 12, and the fourth staff contains bars 13 through 16. The music is written in 4/4 time and consists of a single melodic line.