

Recognizing Chord Patterns

by N. Jane Tan

If a C major cadence were played without completing the final chord, most pianists would recognize the unfinished progression and could complete the sequence. Although an experienced pianist would skip past the interim steps in doing this, the separate components are recognizing each chord in the progression, identifying the missing chord, imagining the chord on the page, and sensing how the fingers would play it. Most pianists recognize not only what they hear but also anticipate with ears, eyes, mind, and hands what has not yet been played.

As teachers develop performance skills in students, it is important to work on chords in the keys of C, G, D, and F, the most common keys in the standard piano repertoire. This should include exercises on chord patterns and compositions that use chord patterns imaginatively and stylistically. As a student plays chords using only white keys, check the alignment of hands and wrists, which should be perpendicular to the fallboard. For chord inversions in the key of C the hands change shape from one chord to the next, but the hands should remain perpendicular to the fallboard because each chord uses only white keys.

On chords that combine white and black keys the hands cope with an uneven topography be-

cause the black keys are shorter. However on a D major triad chord, the middle finger is long enough to reach so the hands face the fallboard.

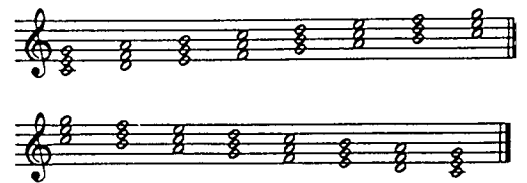
To play the first inversion chord with the F# at the bottom of the chord, angle wrists slightly toward the black key. The second finger of the right hand and the third finger of the left hand should be played closer to the fallboard to avoid a cramped hand position.



In a second inversion chord F# is at the top of the chord. The wrists angle slightly toward the top black keys. Bringing the middle fingers of the right and left hands closer to the fallboard creates a relaxed hand position. The hands angle slightly to the left.



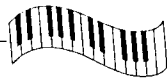
Start with chords that have only white keys and assign chordal scales to help students mold their hands to chord shapes. This strategy also helps students refine wrist technique.



Beginning students learn wrist techniques to phrase and move about the keyboard. Their repertoire is simpler and their wrist motions are slower and larger. As they advance, repertoire should include wrist movement within a smaller time span. To refine wrist technique lightly release the keys by rolling the wrists upwards slightly and then place the hand down on the next chord. Play with the balls of the fingers and roll to the tips of the fingers. The wrists should follow and float up just enough to go down on the next chord.



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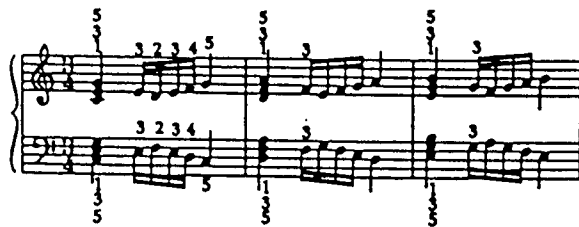
First Inversion Chordal Scale



Second Inversion Chordal Scale



Once students master hand position and technique, introduce chord pattern exercises.



Unless hands anticipate the shape and topography of the next chord, the sound will be uneven as the hands grope for each position. In the G major triadic scale the hand position changes from chord to chord according to each triad's combination of keys.



The first two triads are played with the hands perpendicular to the fallboard because they contain all white keys. The hands can adjust to the uneven position of triad three by angling the wrists slightly towards the F#. Guide the middle fingers slightly towards the fallboard to avoid cramped positions. Triads four, five, and six require normal hand positions perpendicular to the fallboard in spite of the F# in triad 5. Similar to the third triad, triad seven contains an F# so the wrists need to ad-

just by angling the hand slightly towards the F# at the bottom of the chord. Like triad three, the middle fingers play closer to the fallboard. The hands should face forward in anticipation of the all-white key triad at the end.

Performance Repertoire

Introducing repertoire with sharps and flats leads to uneven finger passages. Ask students to move between white and black keys as economically as possible. Performing repertoire and exercises in keys of up to one flat or two sharps allows students to internalize the position of these keys.

In the first measure of this exercise the fifth finger of the left hand starts from its normal position on F. Anticipating the black key of Bb, the third and fourth fingers move closer to the black keys, positioning the second finger over the Bb.



In the first measure of the next exercise, the fifth finger of the right hand starts close to the black keys so the fourth finger can comfortably play the Bb. Fingers three and two then gradually move away from the black keys.



Aside from standard repertoire, students should play chordal studies that introduce a variety of styles and colors, explore the musical capabilities of the piano, expand a technical command of the keyboard, and encourage uninhibited performance skills. This last goal is the most difficult to achieve, yet it is the most important because comfort at the keyboard ensures continued interest and study.

To develop elementary-level students' confidence at the keyboard, assign daily mobility drills and different styles of music. Include a balance of chordal etudes and standard pieces with rich pedagogical contents that use the entire keyboard.

A lesson agenda might include an etude and a standard classic piece that are in the early stages of study as well as two or three others chosen from a pool of already-studied repertoire. Listen to these review pieces at lessons on a rotating basis at two,



three, or four week intervals so students continue to polish them. This system allows students time to internalize the music as each piece matures. It teaches students the discipline of retaining repertoire, and it develops a sense of pride and accomplishment because students accumulate several pieces that are ready for performance. Most students will have enough repertoire to give an informal recital at the end of each year.

To help students advance to reading chords, ask them questions about keyboard patterns and the musical structure of each new piece. This is an important step because investing lesson time in analysis ensures generous musical returns that go beyond students' ease in reading and learning repertoire. It conditions the mind to think ahead of the fingers, while the ears project tones moments before the fingers play. Furthermore, the mental outline produced from analysis eases memorization.

Ask students to identify chords and inversions, melodic intervals, rhythmic patterns, and to play broken chords and block chords. A good homework assignment is a series of such statements as "discover one triad" or "find two melodic intervals of a fifth." By doing this exercise away from the lesson, students have more time to think about the answers.

To analyze chord progressions, have students identify the number of sharps and flats in the key signature. Playing the left-hand parts will help students to identify it. When teaching chord inversions and cadences, include the related scales, which students' should play hands together. Contrary to common practice, one-octave major scales played hands-together are simple to learn when students imagine each scale as having one mirrored fingering pattern with its coordinating keyboard pattern, which allows students to think ahead of playing. Once this is learned, increasing the scale to two octaves is a simple matter of practicing and inserting the bridging pattern between the octaves.

The image shows four staves of musical notation for the F Major scale. The first two staves show the right hand with notes F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F and fingerings 3, 1, 2, 3 above and 3, 2, 1, 3 below. The third staff is labeled 'F Major' and shows the left hand with notes F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F and fingerings 2, 3, 4, 1, 2, 3 above and 4, 3, 2, 1, 3, 2 below. The fourth staff shows the right hand with notes F, G, A, B, C, D, E, F and fingerings 3, 2, 1, 4, 3, 2 above and 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 4 below.

Converting major scales to their parallel harmonic minors is the simplest method of introducing minor scales because the finger patterns are the same and they are spelled with the same letter names. This conversion introduces students to the sound and shape of each harmonic minor scale before teaching the theory behind its key signature and accidental, ensuring total participation of ears, eyes, and mind.

Confusing the fingering is a common problem for students when playing the same chord inversion in both hands. Focus attention on the middle fingers of each inverted chord and isolate each chord for practice. Establish fluency between the chords by practicing two chords at a time before playing the entire progression. Have students anticipate the shape and key combinations of each upcoming chord so that the hands do not grope on the keyboard in search of the correct keys.

Because cadences combine chords of different inversions that are rooted on related scale tones, introduce them after students learn the chord inversions of the keys of C, G, D, A, and E. A chord's relationship to the degrees of the scale then becomes easy to understand. Convert minor chord inversions and cadences in minor keys from their parallel majors.

Challenging students to recognize and predict chord progressions is not an easy task, but if students begin studying chord patterns in the early years, they can easily learn to move around the keyboard with confidence. Make chordal studies part of students' weekly assignments, being sure the materials are graded to fit individual needs. □

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