



# FOUR CHORD COMPOSING

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# LESSON 1 - LEARNING MAJ/MIN CHORDS

1. Time to demonstrate a chord progression! Eg. Play C G Am F in pop style: Chords in RH, octave bass notes in LH. Play with pedal and rhythm to demonstrate how cool it sounds! (See Lesson 2 if unsure).
2. **PRO TIP:** You might also like to ask you student what pop songs they like and prepare to play a progression/pop song they already know!
3. Intro to white-note triads in C:
  - a. How to play stacked thirds
  - b. Play moving up C scale (**TECH: iReal Pro or SuperMetronome Groove Box for beat**)
  - c. Fingering: aim for 1-3-5 but don't worry too much about this now
  - d. Aural: notice that some chords sound different to others
4. Get students used to always playing chords in the middle of the piano *around middle C or a bit lower* - this works best for a rich, thick sound.
5. **Teach the Big/Small (BS) Method** for major/minor. [Click here for more information.](#)
  - a. Realise and discuss that only one note changes going from Major > Minor and vice versa
  - b. Listen to the sound difference between Maj/Min. Challenge student to tell the difference with eyes shut while you play the chords. This is an important aural skill.
  - c. Play major and minor chords around the piano. Ask students to play major and minor chords using BS method, starting on any note of the chromatic scale. Start with easy chords on white notes and progress to black notes (eg. F# minor, Bb major). They'll soon realise that with the BS method, these are just as easy to find as white-note chords.

**TEACHING TIP:** It's good to start getting students to remember the shape and 'feel' of these chords and to notice *visual patterns*. I.e. Most chords starting on a black note will always have 5th finger on a black note too (Bb is the exception). This is the reverse of white-note chords.

Get students to realise that playing Eb major feels the same as Ab major, Db major, etc. These are things that come naturally to us, but won't be obvious immediately for students. It's about the kinaesthetic "feel" of chords on the keyboard.

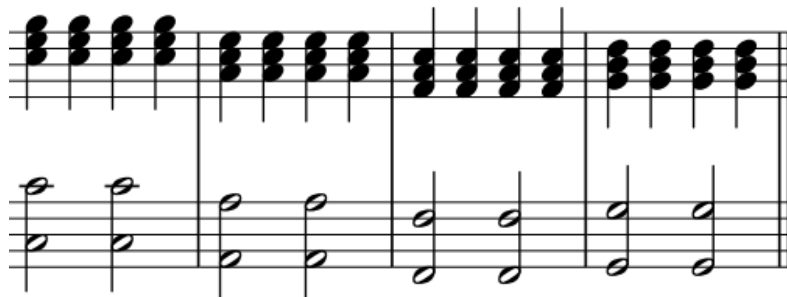
Practice Tasks	Extension Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get used to playing white note chords with LH and RH (separately) moving up and down the scale of C sequentially.</li> <li>• Practice jumping between chords while keeping the hand shape the same.</li> <li>• They could download the DecideNow! app for iPhone/iPad (around \$4) and enter in all the possible starting notes of the chromatic scale (eg. C, C#, D, D#, etc.). Then they spin the wheel and play major and minor chords on that note with both hands sep (TECH: Decide Now!)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• C Dm Em F G Am Bdim C in the LH holding for 4 beats each while RH improvises using C major scale notes.</li> <li>• Student explores chords with beats on an app at home (TECH: iReal Pro or SuperMetronome Groove Box or their own digital piano/keyboard)</li> <li>• Give student a some drills to practice chords eg. major chords chromatically or pentascales around the Circle of 5ths. For live teaching demonstration of this, <a href="#">click here if you're an Inner Circle member</a> (TECH: iReal Pro)</li> </ul>
Progression to Explore	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• C Dm Em F G Am Bdim C holding for 4 beats each. One of these chords sounds a little weird. Can students work out which one and why?</li> </ul>	

## LESSON 2 - POP PIANO PLAYING

### Check Practice Tasks

- Quiz the student on their understanding of the BS method for major and minor chords starting on any note of the scale.
- Remind them to be looking for similarities: Eg. ask them to play a D major chord and then play the other two major chords with the same shape.
- Put on a beat and ask to hear them play white note chords C > C along with the beat (LH and RH separately).
- Check any extension activities
- Check aural discrimination between major/minor

1. Today we're introducing "Pop Style" of chord playing: RH chords around middle C or lower, LH single notes (small hands), 5ths (medium hands) or octaves (bigger hands). LH holds while RH repeats x 4 chord for each measure. Demonstrate with pedal. **You can add a beat with your Clavinova/Digital Piano or an app like iReal Pro or SuperMetronome Groove Box.** Here's how it looks (RH plays 1 octave lower):



2. Show students how to repeat four chords in RH while holding down LH octaves on the root note of the chord to add rhythm to chord playing (ie playing and keeping a simple, steady beat). Demonstrate this to check understanding.
3. **Add pedalling and especially syncopated pedalling** (chords are a great way to introduce this). Demonstrate bad and good pedalling and explain that if you want a connected sound between chords, you need to change the pedal after the next chord is played.
4. Discuss that while playing single chords is fun, *playing a sequence of them* is much more musical. Ask them to come up with a series of chords that they can play in a row, finishing on the

**TEACHING TIP:** Now that students are beginning to jump about to different chords, make sure they plan ahead so that they can get to the next chord quickly rather than moving at the end of the bar and interrupting the flow. This takes considerable practice and will be the focus of this week's work. Practice moving both hands from one chord position to the next in the lesson so students know how to practice. Go as slowly as necessary to keep a steady beat.

starting chord. This is called a **Chord Progression**. They can play any chords in their first progression.

5. Teach about **Roman Numerals and Number Systems** for notating chords so that chord progressions can be shared and played in any key. Students should know each way of writing chord progressions: Scale degrees in either Roman numerals or numbers or chord names. You can teach this by laying out the chords in C on paper and showing the different ways of numbering.
6. Test their understanding of scale degrees by asking them to play the first progression (8a) below as an example.
7. Now enjoy exploring the three most common 4-chord pop progressions in C with your student. I believe all students should know and be able to recognise these progressions:
  - a. **i vi IV V - 1 6 4 5 - C Am F G** (aka Heart and Soul, also play in 12/8 for 50s feel)
  - b. **1 5 6 4 - C G Am F** (*THE* 4 chord progression, still used in lots of music)
  - c. **6 4 1 5 - Am F C G** (Very 90s to today sound)

Practice Tasks	Extension Activities																				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students explore the 3 main pop chord progressions, ready to play for next week. Play in pop style. Think ahead, move early and use pedal. Ensure that the beat is consistent throughout.</li> <li>• Students may like to record themselves playing these progressions on their phone and then use the C scale to improvise while playing along with the recording.</li> <li>• Can they find any music that uses these progressions on YouTube?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Try playing the above progressions in G major or F major instead of C major, or</li> <li>• Introduce your student to the idea of inversions to move more seamlessly between chords in these progressions.</li> </ul>																				
Progression to Explore	Song to Play																				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• They can also try playing this progression in Am which features an E major chord (they'll need their Big/Small Method):</li> </ul>	<p><b>1. LET IT BE - THE BEATLES (ORIGINAL KEY)</b></p> <table border="1" data-bbox="855 1384 1490 1563"> <thead> <tr> <th>VERSE</th> <th>C</th> <th>G</th> <th>Am</th> <th>F</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td>C</td> <td>G</td> <td>F</td> <td>C</td> </tr> <tr> <th>CHORUS</th> <th>Am</th> <th>G</th> <th>F</th> <th>C</th> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td>C</td> <td>G</td> <td>F</td> <td>C</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>Because this is in the original key, students are encouraged to play this along with the YouTube recording.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Watch the <a href="#">Axis of Awesome YouTube clip</a>. It's a brilliant and fun demonstration of just how powerful chord progressions are in modern music.</li> </ul>	VERSE	C	G	Am	F		C	G	F	C	CHORUS	Am	G	F	C		C	G	F	C
VERSE	C	G	Am	F																	
	C	G	F	C																	
CHORUS	Am	G	F	C																	
	C	G	F	C																	

**CHORD PROGRESSION 3**

Am      Dm      Am

E          F          Dm

E          Am

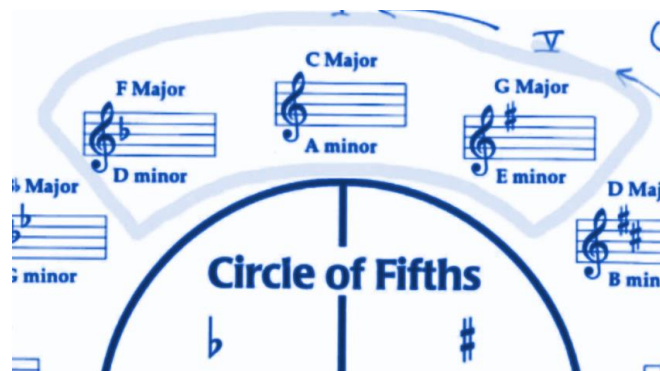


## LESSON 3 - COMPOSING WITH 4 CHORDS

### Check Practice Tasks

- Quiz the student on major and minor chords starting on any note of the scale. Are they getting faster? Did they find any songs that used any of the common progressions? Can they play/sing them?
- Listen to the three main chord progressions (use a beat to play along with).
- Make sure students are playing chords in the middle of the piano for a rich sound and that their LH is moving to the new chords in sync with the RH. The most important thing is preparation, thinking ahead and moving before the music so that there is no interruption in the pulse of the song. **If there are issues with this, practice it more before proceeding.**

1. Now that students understand basic chord notation (eg. C = play a C chord), you can **introduce chord charts** written above pop music in notation. Show them examples of pop music and show them where the chords are written above the music. You can just Google for any pop song (ask them what they like) if you don't have any pop music on hand. Show the students how easy it is to play pop songs when you know the chords and can feel the rhythm. This is a HUGE advantage for students understanding what chords are all about! (See "Song to Play" below for another practical demonstration). **TECH: Ultimate Guitar App for quick access to pop song lyrics and chord charts.**
2. Introduce the **Circle of 5ths** to the student. I always have a copy on-hand when teaching (see below).
3. Highlight the chords around the key of C:



4. Explain that when working in the key of C, the chords on either side: **F and G are the Primary Triads**. Demonstrate a simple progression that only uses these three chords. Eg. "Lion Sleeps Tonight": C F C G. The minor chords are the **Secondary Triads**. Together, the 3 major and 3 minor chords work really well together in the key of C (it's why all of last week's progressions used them) and will be basis of our composing. **REMEMBER: If you're working in a minor key, the minor chords become the primary and the majors become secondary.**



5. **Play them a demonstration 4-chord progression in C using primary and secondary triads.** Go on, just make one up :)
6. Introduce the idea that most progressions (and most music for that matter) are built on 4 and 8-measure (or 4 and 8 chord) blocks that start and finish on the tonic and **repeat lots**.
7. Let the student know they're about to compose their own pop progression! On paper write this out:

**C**      \_\_\_\_\_

5. Ask the student to fill in the blanks with any of the primary or secondary triads without playing (ie do this by random). Eg they might choose:

**C**    **F**    **Dm**    **G**

\_\_\_\_\_

6. **PRO TIP:** You can also randomise the choice of chords further by rolling a die, throwing a beach ball which has chords written around it or **using an app like DecideNow!** [Watch this video for more.](#)

#### TEACHER TIPS:

At some stage students will probably choose a chord progression like: C Dm E F and you can discuss that it's not as interesting because it moves up the scale. Jumping around is often more interesting.

Similarly, this exercise is great for discussing **Cadences**. In a C major progression, the chord F or G will generally be the best chord at the end. Why is that? It's about primary triads and the importance of subdominant and dominant chords leading back to the tonic. This opens up great discussions around cadences and primary triads in a practical context.

#### TEACHER REMINDER NOTES:

- 1) Every piece of music is in a "key" - ie. there is a set selection of notes that make up a composition. Eg. pieces in C use the white notes from C - C.
- 2) The "Tonic" is the root note of the key - eg. in A minor, the tonic chord/note is A.
- 3) For a piece of music to sound complete and finished, it needs to start and end with the tonic chord.
- 5) What happens between the start and finish chords is up to the composer (ie. the student!).

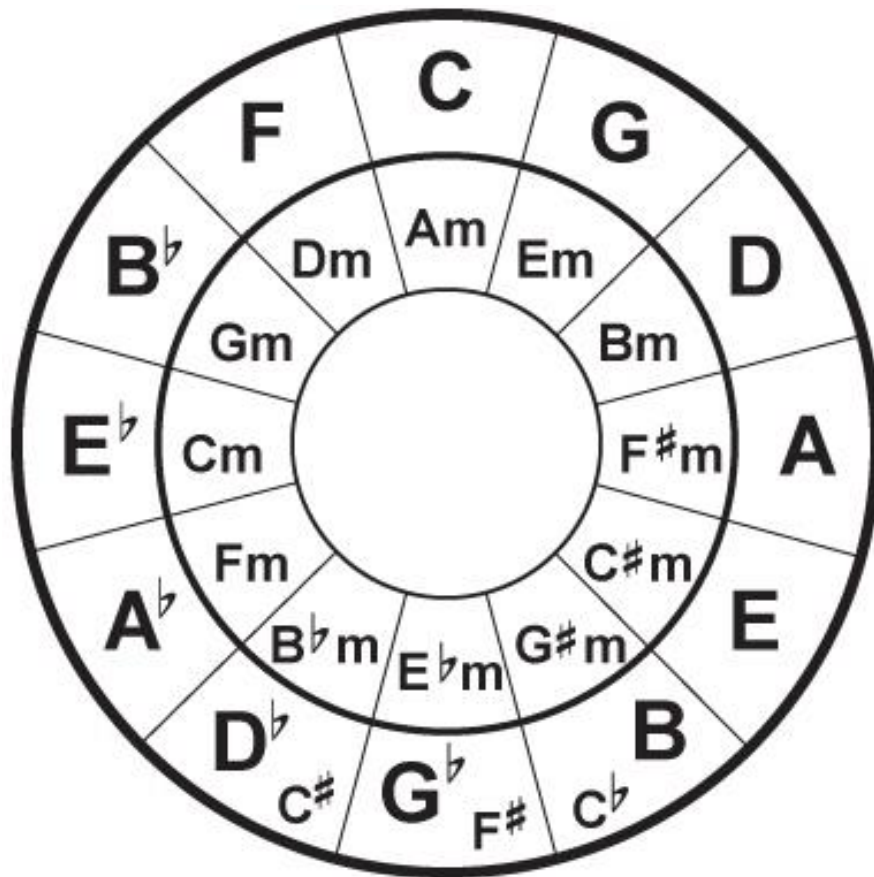
7. Play the progression together with your student, finishing back on C (eg. in the above: C F Dm G C) and explore what worked and what didn't. Always play in a pop style, in root position for now. Try the process again with a new progression. Which one is better? Try a third and see how it goes. Put on a backing beat and play the best one again.

8. Students can also try the same exercise starting and ending on Am:

**Am**    —    —    —

9. You will likely encounter issues with students using an Em chord when an E major chord will often sound better. Why is that? Here you get the chance to explore the raising on the 7th in harmonic progressions (G# in this case) which turns the E chord: E G B into E G# B - ie. E major. This is another great talking point for students about the effect of raising the 7th in minor scales.

Practice Tasks	Extension Activities
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Get the student to compose 4 new progressions in C and 4 in Am and choose their favourite to play next lesson. <i>Make sure they <b>write them down</b></i> remembering to mark any minor chords appropriately.</li> <li>• Students should play these in pop style, with pedal and preferably along to a beat.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students can work in <math>\frac{3}{4}</math> feel instead of common time.</li> <li>• Students can explore composing a longer 8-bar progression.</li> <li>• In a longer progression, they could experiment with using a chord outside of the primary and secondary chords and see how it sounds.</li> </ul>
Progression to Explore	Song to Play
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Canon in D (in C!): C G Am Em F C F G.</b> You could play through this without letting student know what piece it is and seeing if they can guess it.</li> <li>• Play the progression with 2 beats on each chord. You could also add simple arpeggiation if your student is ready to make it sound more like the original.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students can now play the chords for the chorus of <b>Africa by Toto</b>. It's just a 6 4 1 5 progression. Try it in C major first. In the original key: F#m, D, A, E. Play and sing along to the original!</li> <li>• Alternatively, students may be more familiar with Apologise by One Republic which uses the same sequence in Eb major: Cm, Ab, Eb, Bb. Again, play along to the recording.</li> </ul>



*Above: basic Circle of 5ths - Google for other versions which include key signatures if you'd like.*

## EAGER TO LEARN MORE?

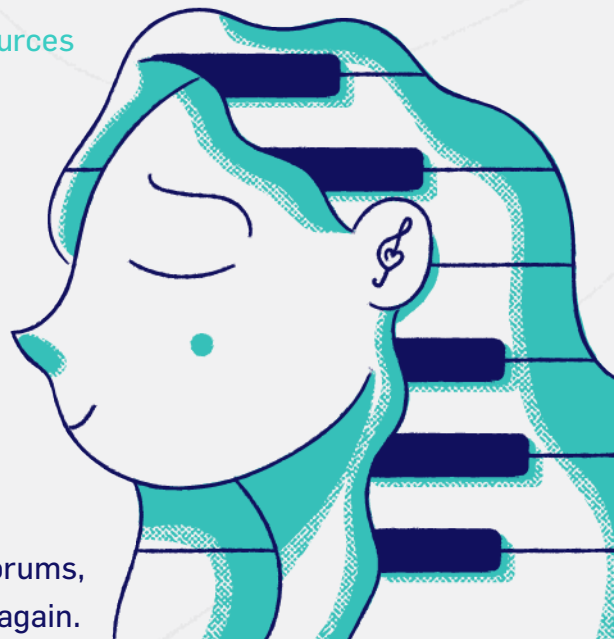
- If you've enjoyed the content of this lesson and want to know how to continue teaching in this way, then make sure you check out the rest of this course.
- This is just lesson 3 in my **10-part "4 Chord Composing"** course that is available right now in my [Inner Circle Community](https://tmtopham.com/community) (tmtopham.com/community).
- Here are the modules you'll be able to access straight away:
  - **Lesson 1 [Free]:** Learning Major and Minor Chords ✓
  - **Lesson 2 [Free]:** Pop-style Piano Playing ✓
  - **Lesson 3 [Free]:** Composing with 4 Chords ✓
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- You can **get access today and take 30% off an annual membership** by using the coupon code **4CCGETSTARTED** when you register. [Click here to find out more](#) and *make sure you select the Annual Plan to take advantage of this offer.*
- For more information and videos about teaching with chords, head to [tmtopham.com/chords](https://tmtopham.com/chords).

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