

Harmonic Quality and Function Part 1

By James Linderman

I would agree that the terms “quality” and “function” sound remarkably analytical and you may already be wondering if the concepts in this column will be too academic and theoretical for use in any real practical application in the writing of a song.

In this 2 part series I will attempt to prove that the understanding of chord quality and harmonic function can be practical cornerstones in real life songwriting and I would only ask that you give this article a good reading, give the concepts a decent try or, if you don't write the harmonic portions of your songs, pass it on to your collaborators who are “dealing” with chords.

Chords have two main features, they have a quality and they have a function and we will discuss quality here in part 1 and look at function in part 2.

The quality of a chord is based on whether it is major, minor, diminished or augmented and the quality of the chord has everything to do with the mood it helps create.

Major chords tend to sound happy while minor chords evoke a feeling of sadness. Diminished chords can help create a feeling of anticipation or a discontented mood depending on their application and augmented chords tend to sound anxious or sometimes remind me of what a hangover would sound like...if a hangover made a particular sound...and often it does, just as a side note.

If you are not sure how to apply all of these kinds of chords to the guitar or piano or whatever your *harmonic weapon of choice* happens to be and want to hear how they sound, I would recommend a (guitar or keyboard) chord dictionary which can be picked up at any self respecting music store or ordered from [HYPERLINK "http://www.musicbooksplus.com"](http://www.musicbooksplus.com) www.musicbooksplus.com .

If we look at the Transposition Chart below it is interesting to note that in any given key there are 3 major chords, in the first, fourth and fifth position, three minor chords featured in the second, third and sixth position and a diminished chord in the seventh position of the harmonized scale.

Once it has been determined that you are writing in a particular key you can begin to look at these seven chords as being like the primary colours a painter would use to paint the background if we also thought of the melody as being like the subject in the foreground of the painting.

The question you may be asking is, “what about augmented chords?”

Augmented chords are indigenous to minor scales and therefore are most prevalent in songs with a lot of other minor sounding harmony. To learn more about minor harmony seek some professional help...no not *that* kind of professional help, I mean book a few lessons with a music teacher with a reputation for being a theory brainer (there are more of us than it might seem).

If the quality of the chord has to do with the mood it evokes, then it stands to reason that the choice of chord quality could enhance the mood being conveyed by a certain note in a melody or a particular word in a lyric.

A great introduction to the application of this would be to take a song that already exists and, within the context of the key that it is in, alter all, or some of the harmony to a different quality. If it was in the key of “C” you could try changing “C” chords to “Am” , “Em” chords to “G” chords and replacing “F” chords with “Dm”. You would use the Transposition chart below as your guide for keys that are not “C”.

The theory behind this is that in any given key, the first and sixth chords, the second and fourth chords and the third and fifth chords are considered to be related harmony and so these pairs can be considered highly interchangeable with respect to altering the quality of the chord within the harmonic structure of a song while keeping most of the other stabilizing features of the piece intact.

The purpose of an exercise like this would be to determine if the song implies something different when the harmonic qualities are altered. For instance, in places where there was genuine sentiment there might be some irony now implied based completely on the relationship between the lyric and melody, and the chord that is being heard behind it.

No matter how you use this information, any deliberate or deliberately random use of harmonic quality will enhance your songs by making your chord choices every bit as evocative as your choice of notes to sing, and your choice of words being sung.

James Linderman: Bio

James Linderman lives and works at theharmonyhouse, a music lesson, songwriting and recording preproduction facility in Newmarket, Ontario. James teaches guitar, piano and music theory and coaches songwriting in studio and over Skype to students all over the world.

In 2006 James was selected for a 20 member, international, off campus, academic advisory board for Berkleemusic known as Berkleemusic Ambassadors which advises Berklee administrators and professors on issues such as learning management systems, online course strategies, and curriculum based technologies. In the summer of 2007 James was named Berkleemusic's Worship Music Advisor.

James presents and lectures at songwriting conferences and workshops all over the world and does annual songwriting presentation work for the Canada Film Centre's Slight Music Lab, Songstudio, Power Up Music Conference, The Humber College Summer Songwriting Workshop, Break Out West and more.

James has a Canadian University and American College education in music theory, composition, and journalism and is also pretty good at playing the guitar and making up songs.

Contact James at jlinderman@berkleemusic.com