

HARMONY 2: FIRST INVERSIONS

Placing anything other than the root in the bass makes an inverted chord. A triad therefore has a root position and two possible inversions. The commonest is the "1st inversion" i.e. the 3rd of the chord is in the bass. Unlike root positions, all 1st inversions sound good, though you still need a bit of care. Of course, one still doubles the root of the chord normally. The Roman numeral for the chord has "b" added, e.g. Ibv. You can add "a" to root position chords also from now on, if it helps to make things clearer in your mind.

The reason for using inversions is that constant root positions produce a lead-footed effect. Every chord is "grounded" and firm, finished. Moreover the bass is condemned to leap about a lot of the time, and is denied the smooth flow of the upper parts. By the same token an inversion sounds unfinished and ready to move on. A judicious mixture of roots and 1st inversions allows a much more melodic bass. The best rule to follow is this: "You can approach a 1st inversion by step or any leap but always quit it by step, or leap of a 3rd." Certainly don't have two 1st inversions a 4th/5th apart.

One good type of progression is a row of consecutive 1st inversions (Ib IIb IIIb IVb etc.) The only limit to the number is good taste. Now for the secret:

1. Put all the roots in the treble. 2. Put all the 5ths in the alto. Obviously all the 3rds are in the bass. 3. The tenor should double the root and 5th alternately, to avoid consecutives. Example:

But more usually a 1st inversion is followed by a root position or vice versa. Here the trick is (considering the outside parts only) 3rd going to 6th, or 6th going to 3rd. ALL SUCH PROGRESSIONS ARE GOOD. Examples:

One can transpose these two templates into any degree of the scale. Filling in the inner parts is a doddle. Get the outside parts right first. Of course one is not confined to these formulae but they are very useful.

The special case of VIIb. This chord is infinitely more useful than VIIa, which is virtually never used. Its chief function is to lie between Ia and Ib:

or between IV and I

IVa VIIb Ia

(There's an error above; the last tenor note should be E)

but it can also be used in a curious sequence IV VIIb VI

IVa VIIb VIa

This is one time that a 1st inversion can leap a 5th. It is effectively used by Handel in his hymn tune "Rejoice, the Lord is king", in the 3rd phrase "Mortals, give thanks and sing".

Looking ahead to Dominant 7th, of which VIIb is an incomplete form, we might think the "7th" (F) has to fall, but it can rise if the bass rises in thirds with it. (You will remember always to double the 3rd of VIIb, won't you? Normally between tenor and bass.)

Another very common progression is IIb - V - (I). Here IIb replaces IV and is not only more effective but easier to manage -

IIb V

Double the 3rd of IIb if need be:

IIb V

Finally let's not forget that we can always put a 1st inversion next to a root position of the same chord (strong to weak, not weak to strong). Remember you can overlap the parts to your heart's content whilst on the same chord-root.

MINOR KEY PROBLEMS

We have two rogue chords partly due to the harmonic minor scale:

- a) Supertonic (II) is diminished. It is far more useful as IIb (and even more so as II7b when we get there). Remember to double the 3rd, usually in the tenor part. It is followed by V of course.
- b) Mediant (III) also doubles the 3rd as the other two notes make an augmented 5th. The 5th must be prepared and resolved, so the use of this chord in root position is practically confined to V - III - VI.



However in 1st inversion there are few possibilities for effective use.

TIP

Progressions such as Vb-Ia or Va-Ib or Ivb-I and so on are known as Inverted Cadences (one of the chords is an inversion.) These are useful during a phrase, or at a *lesser* phrase-ending, but for important cadences (i.e. half-way and final points) use full cadences, i.e. both chords in root position (more finality).