

What are “Short Chords”?

The “Short Chords” title is my shorthand for Short Chord Progressions, specifically typical progressions consisting of just 3 chords. These chord progressions, which are commonly used in all tonal music (not just in MacGAMUT exercises!), are long enough to provide real tonal context but short enough to recognize and remember as a cohesive “chunk” or unit. [If you’re curious, Bing or Google “memory chunking” for more info about the science behind grouping smaller bits of info into larger chunks that are easier to remember.] In MacGAMUT’s default Harmonic Dictation library, as well as in some of the alternative Harmonic Dictation libraries, the exercises in the 3-chord levels are based on the materials in these Short Chords handouts that I originally created for my own students. Beyond the 3-chord levels, exercises in the 6-chord levels typically consist of a 3-chord progression followed by a 3-chord cadence. MacGAMUT’s default setting for playing 6-chord progressions helps students focus on the 3-chord chunks they’ve learned by holding both the third and sixth chords twice as long as the other chords.

I don’t guarantee that every 3-chord progression in MacGAMUT’s Harmonic Dictation library will be found in the pages of these handouts, but most of them are. The one big difference is the voicing. MacGAMUT’s Harmonic Dictation component presents chords in “chorale style,” voiced as they would be for SATB chorus. In the Short Chords pages that follow, on the other hand, the voicing is “piano style,” with the top three voices all played by the right hand while the left hand plays only the bass note of the chord. This arrangement is no accident! The bass voice is THE single most important pitch because, if students learn to hear and identify the bass pitches in the context of the key, they have a much better chance of success in Harmonic Dictation. If they can also remember how the soprano (melody) moves in relation to the bass for each chord progression, success is practically guaranteed!

I give these handouts to my own students, one page at a time, asking them to focus initially on the first 10 progressions, and then add more as they gain proficiency. I encourage them to play these short progressions on keyboard themselves, again and again until they can easily recognize each different progression. Especially for non-keyboard players, it’s much easier to bring out or even double that bass voice an octave lower if it’s all by itself in the left hand. Unless you have changed the default settings for MacGAMUT, your students can also bring out the bass line (or any other voice) using Harmonic Dictation’s Sound menu to increase the volume of the voice and/or to change the instrument for the voice (reed organ cuts through anything!).

Additional pedagogical notes for instructors: I have found it very helpful to take a few minutes every day in class to play progressions from these handouts, randomly choosing progressions and transposing them to different keys, to help lodge the

progressions in my students' musical memories. I play a progression quickly, just once, and then call on a student to identify the progression. Early on, very few students get them right, but encouraging the class to think of this as a game (even if it's a guessing game at first) helps to counteract the inevitable frustration of mastering a new task. Soon, my students are at least giving "good wrong answers" (I IV V instead of I ii6 V, for example—bass line is the same, harmonic function is the same, just one pitch is different), which earns them almost as much praise as if the response had been exactly right. (Keep in mind that MacGAMUT also gives partial credit for this kind of good wrong answer.) If my students seem to be getting discouraged, I may play a progression that's NOT on the handout, and when some students (there are always some!) complain that the progression is NOT on the handout, that proves to the class that they're learning, even if they don't have the details quite right yet.

I know that many instructors have their own ways of teaching Harmonic Dictation, but this method has proven to be highly successful. After just 10 weeks of this combination of in-class and MacGAMUT work, my students often tell me the easiest part of the Final Exam is Harmonic Dictation, and I can see that it's true when I grade their exams. The first time this happened, I have to admit that both the students and I were surprised, but over the years, it's happened frequently enough that I have come to expect this result.

Why does it work? Playing the progressions quickly helps to encourage students to recognize 3-chord "chunks" as single units, which makes higher levels of MacGAMUT much easier for the students. If they instantly KNOW what the first three chords of a longer progression are, or what the last three chords are, that gives them more time to focus on the chords they're not quite sure about. But perhaps the thing that helps most is simply sharing with students the basic chord progressions tonal composers have traditionally assembled in creating "real" music. Once they're familiar with these 3-chord "building blocks," students find that Harmonic Dictation isn't all that scary. They just have to listen for basic chunks of harmonic movement and learn to recognize them when they hear them!

Enjoy your journey with Short Chords!

Ann K. Blombach

BASIC SHORT CHORDS: MAJOR

First system of musical notation for the Major Chords exercise. It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The time signature is 3/4. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays a simple bass line of quarter notes.

C: I VII^{o6} I⁶ I VII^{o6} I⁶ I V₄⁶ I⁶ I V₄⁶ I⁶ I V₃⁴ I⁶

Second system of musical notation for the Major Chords exercise. It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The time signature is 3/4. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays a simple bass line of quarter notes.

I V₃⁴ I⁶ I I⁶ IV I I⁶ IV I I⁶ V I I⁶ V

Third system of musical notation for the Major Chords exercise. It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The time signature is 3/4. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays a simple bass line of quarter notes.

I II⁶ V I II⁶ V I IV V I IV V I V VI

Fourth system of musical notation for the Major Chords exercise. It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The time signature is 3/4. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays a simple bass line of quarter notes.

I V VI I IV I⁶ I IV I⁶ I IV I⁶ I IV II

Fifth system of musical notation for the Major Chords exercise. It consists of a grand staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The time signature is 3/4. The right hand plays chords, and the left hand plays a simple bass line of quarter notes.

I IV II I VI II⁶ I VI II⁶ I VI IV I VI IV

BASIC SHORT CHORDS: MINOR

a: | VII^{o6} |⁶ | VII^{o6} |⁶ | V⁶₄ |⁶ | V⁶₄ |⁶ | V⁴₃ |⁶

| V⁴₃ |⁶ | |⁶ IV | |⁶ IV | |⁶ V | |⁶ V

| II^{o6} V | | II^{o6} V | | IV V | | IV V | | V VI

| V VI | | IV |⁶ | | IV |⁶ | | IV |⁶ | | IV II^{o6}

| IV II^{o6} | | VI II^{o6} | | VI II^{o6} | | VI IV | | VI IV

BASIC SHORT CHORDS: CADENCES

C: IV V I IV V I II⁶ V I II⁶ V I || V I

|| V I II⁶ VII^{o6} I II⁶ VII^{o6} I || VII^{o6} I I⁶₄ V I

|| V VI II⁶ V VI IV V VI I⁶₄ V VI VI IV I

a: IV V I IV V I II^{o6} V I II^{o6} V I I⁶₄ V I

II^{o6} V VI II^{o6} V VI IV V VI I⁶₄ V VI VI IV I