

Answering Bedside Requests

Part 2: Chording a Melody

If you can find a melody on your harp, the next step is to add some harmony. To add a simple left hand, just play the same note as the melody from time to time at the starts and ends of phrases and let them ring.

You can harmonize the melody on down beats by choosing a note that is a third up or down from the melody – sometimes you'll have a note that isn't the "real" harmony, but it will mostly be at least nice sounding.

Bare Bones Chording

To add chords, the simplest way is to play the tonic chord and leave it ringing, then if you can hear where the new chord would be look at what note you are playing in the melody and that should give you a hint. For major keys, the three major chords should work for most songs for a "bare bones" arrangement.

The key of C major has C D E F G A B C in the scale. The three major chords are:

<u>chord</u>	<u>notes in the chord</u>
C	C E G
F	F A C
G	G B D

Four of the scale notes, D, E, A, and B, are included in only one of the major chords. Two notes, C and G, are found in two different major chords. F appears to be only in the F chord, but that melody note often works better with the G7 chord, because the F note is the 7 of the G7. You would use your sense of chord function in order to determine which chord to choose. for the C, F and G melody notes.

Chord Function

A ukulele presenter at the Namm show in 2014 gave a fun way to understand the function of chords. The three major chords in a major key are the I chord, which has the function of "home," the IV chord which has the function of "sunshine," and the V chord which has the function of "tension." Another way to describe these functions are:

Chord	Location	Feeling
I	home	comfortable place to hang out
IV	a different place	nice place to visit, but not stay forever
V	somewhere else	but I want to go home!

So, here's how it works:

If the melody note is C, either C or F will work, but if it feels like "home" use the C chord

If the melody note is D, use the G chord

If the melody note is E, use C

If the melody note is F, use F or G7 -- either "sunshine" or "tension"

If the melody note is G, either C or G will work, so if it feels like "home" use C

If the melody note is A, use F

If the melody note is B, use G

This can be easier for those who are note readers to recognize on paper, but we can still apply this if we are playing the melody by ear.

Let's find the bare bones chords for the following familiar tunes:

Old MacDonald

Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star

Nearer My God to Thee

Sometimes, the melody note on the downbeat (or first beat in the measure) is not the one you should think of harmonizing, but think about where it is leading.

Oh Christmas Tree

Brahms Lullaby

Fleshing Out the Bare Bones

You can get by with the three major chords in many major key songs, but there are also minor chords in the key, and these are often what the ear is expecting to hear rather than just the major chords.

The notes in the minor chords are:

<u>chord</u>	<u>notes in the chord</u>
Dm	D F A
Am	A C E
Em	E G B

This means that if the melody is C, it is not only part of the C and F chords, but also the Am chord. And if the note is D, rather than just the G chord, the Dm may be the more expected chord. And the E melody note might be needing an Em or an Am chord rather than C major. Each of these minor chords have function similar to the major chords.

Here is a chart of chord function of all chords within a major key:

Chord	Location	Feeling
I	home	comfortable place to hang out
IV	a different place	nice place to visit, but not stay forever
V	somewhere else	but I want to go home!
ii	somewhere else	but on my way somewhere
iii	a different place	unsettled – I want to move on
vi	a home away from home	okay to settle down here, or move on
vii ^o	somewhere very strange	I'm uncomfortable and I gotta go home!

The vii^o is not common in folk music, and is mostly used in more complex pop and jazz, so you can generally leave that one out of the possible chords to choose.

A common pop chord progression is I vi ii V. The vi and ii are minor, so in the key of C it would be C Am Dm G. This is used in several popular songs:

Heart and Soul
You Send Me
Today
Dream (All I Wanna Do)
and many more!

After experimenting with the bare bones, when you find you are on C then F and G, you can try substituting C Am Dm G. You'll find after a while, you'll anticipate this chord progression and will be able to go right to it rather than using the bare bones of major chords only.

Accidentals

A lot of popular songs have melodies that stay in the key, but harmonies that go outside the key. You might find that the minor chords are not quite right, but if you omit the third, it works fine. This is because it should be a major chord. The way that chord functions is the same as the V chord but in the key that it would be a V chord in... Too much info for this workshop. You can simply play the root and fifth and omit the third rather than flip levers back and forth. Here are a few examples of songs with major chords outside the key:

Love Me Tender
Tennessee Waltz
Hallelujah
Hotel California

In some modern songs, there is a chord built on the flat 7 of the key. In this case, you can preset the lowest flat 7 (Bb in the key of C major, or F natural in the key of G major).

All I Ask of You
Try to Remember

Modal tunes

For mixolydian mode, the main two chords will be the I and the VII, so in G mixolydian (which has no sharps or flats), G and F will be used primarily. The third major chord, C, will also work here and there, and also the v which is Dm. But for the “bare bones” version you can try using only G and F in G mixolydian.

For the minor keys you can find the “bare bones” chords by using the minor chords on i iv and v. So for the key of Am (Aeolian mode) it would be Am, Dm and Em.

For harmonic minor, you’d have your 7th degree raised, so the i iv and V chords in Am would be Am Dm and E major (with the G# lever set).

Another common chord pattern in Aeolian mode is i VII VI VII, or Am G F G. And a common chord pattern in harmonic minor is i VII VI V, or Am G F E (E is major because of the G#).

For Dorian mode, try using mostly the i and VII and then sometimes the IV. In D Dorian, that would be Dm and C, and the IV is G major.