

# MUSIC THEORY.aargh®

## Harmony - 2 (Session 21) “Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant”

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The three chords tonic, dominant and subdominant function as stabilizing harmony in a composition. In Session 20 we examined the strength of the tonic chord as a major or minor chord. In a Major key both subdominant and dominant are Major chords. In a Minor key most often subdominant is a minor chord and dominant is major. These two chords have all of the stabilizing intervals that are present in the tonic chord: Perfect Octaves, Perfect Fifths and, in the case of the major chord, the Major third.

The image shows a musical staff with two systems of chords. The first system shows the Tonic chord (C Major) with the label 'C' above and 'Tonic' below. The second system shows the Subdominant chord (F Major) with the label 'F' above and 'Subdominant' below. The third system shows the Dominant chord (G Major) with the label 'G' above and 'Dominant' below. Below the staff, the Roman numerals 'C Major: I', 'IV', and 'V' are aligned with their respective chords.

In the above example in the key of C Major there are two different symbols identifying the harmony. Above the score are “popular” chord symbols, those used in popular music (C, F, G; a capital letter indicates a Major chord quality). Below the score are “functional” chord symbols, those used since the time of Hugo Riemann (1849-1919), German music theorist and composer (I, IV, V; again, capital Roman numerals indicate Major chord quality).

The image shows a musical staff with two systems of chords. The first system shows the Authentic Cadence: G Major (V) and C Major (I). The second system shows the Plagal Cadence: F Major (IV) and C Major (I). The labels 'G', 'C', 'F', and 'C' are placed above the respective chords.

C Major: V    I                  IV    I  
**Authentic**                      **Plagal**  
**Cadence**                              **Cadence**

Besides the strength of these chords the dominant chord has another special relationship with the tonic chord. The dominant chord is built on the fifth scale degree, a Perfect Fifth above tonic. As we saw in Session 20 Perfect Fifths have a “strong root.” The root of the dominant chord, being a fifth above tonic, has a natural tendency to move to the root of the tonic chord. In a composition this attraction gives “forward motion” of harmony, an urgency to move, to “resolve” to a resting place. Often this progression of harmony ends a composition in a motion called “Authentic Cadence”.

The subdominant has a different relationship with tonic in that the fourth and first scale degrees form a Perfect fourth. The Perfect fourth is a “strong root” interval, but the root of the interval is the upper note, in this case 4 is stronger than 1. This progression can end

a composition, but is used most often as the “Amen” after the end of a hymn tune. The motion really “holds back” rather than pushing forward the harmony because the first chord is attracting the second one to it.

Until next time,  
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