

# Add Interest to Your Chord Progressions.

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*Sometimes we spend hours, days, even months, struggling to find the perfect chord progression to suit the lyrics we've written. And then we find it, only to get bored sick of the same chords being repeated over, and over, and over again.*

*If you listen to some of the great songwriters, you'll notice that the chorus progressions, if not all progressions in the song, are constantly being varied in both subtle and obvious ways. This tutorial will take you through a bunch of ways to vary up your chord progressions to retain not only your own interest, but your listeners' interest as well.*

### Step 1

The first thing to do is get an initial chorus chord progression going. I've whipped something up here; nothing too fancy, just a few simple chords, but enough for the purposes of this tutorial. I added some bass and drums just so you don't fall asleep listening!

This is a standard C – F – C – G progression.

 1 Main Progression.wav

## Step 2

Try an inversion on a repeating chord. In this progression, C major is played twice, so we use a 1st inversion by switching the order of the notes played from C – E – G to E – G – C. You can hear the added interest in the clip below.

 2 Added 1<sup>st</sup> Inversion C.wav

## Step 3

Adding a 7th to one of the chords can add interest. Frequently, musicians add a seventh to the final chord in the progression so that the transition back to the root chord is smoother. In this example, however, I added a 7th to the second chord, the F.

 3 Add a 7<sup>th</sup>.wav

## Step 4

You can extend the chords beyond the intervals within the octave in order to add some higher pitches to the mix. Those intervals that sound terrible when played as a harmony, like the root note and the second, can often sound good when the minor second is lifted by an octave.

I've added some ninths; pay attention to the difference between the first C maj chord and the second. Because the second is a 1st inversion, the extension isn't so far away from the rest of the chord and sits in better. There's also an extended note in the F maj.

 *4 Extending Chords Beyond the Octave.wav*

## **Step 5**

Altering the bass note can add some interest. When you're using keys, it can be the bass note of the chord on the piano itself along with the bass guitar, though in guitar-driven music it tends to be just the bass guitar.

In this example I'm going to use both. You can hear it on the G maj at the end of the progression where I've used the major 3rd, a B, as the bass note.

 *5 Shift Bass Note.wav*

## **Step 6**

Use a pad to fill out the progression, in this case, strings, since this allows you to build on the notes in the chord progression without adding even more to the piano, which is getting crowded. The root notes of the

piano chords are really only used in the bassy bottom notes of the triads, so we can counter-act this emphasis this by using thirds on bottom and the root on top in the strings to fill out the higher frequencies.

However, because the second C maj is an inversion, the root note is actually on top, so I've used the root note on bottom with a third on top in the violin arrangement.

When I say “bottom” I’m talking about duplicates around C3 and C4 and the “top” is around C5, so we’re really focusing on the higher pitches that have largely been neglected until now.

 6 *Pad the Top End.wav*

## **Step 7**

A fairly common method of shaking up a repetitive chord progression is to throw in a suspended chord. A suspended chord is one where the third has been lowered to a major second, or pushed up to a perfect fourth.

In our example, I’ve suspended the thirds in our G chord to become perfect fourths.

 7 *Suspend a Third.wav*

## Step 8

What I hope you've noticed is that the example file is now sounding pretty busy and over-the-top. The trick to making a chord progression interesting is to use a couple of these tricks here and there and changing them up each time the progression repeats. If you make the same adjustments the whole way through the progression each time it plays, not only does it sound terribly busy, it's just as boring because these tricks work by creating variations.

Always remember that these tricks are to be used only to add interest, not to become the foundation of the chord progression.

I'll leave you with the before and after: our plain, vanilla progression that we started with followed by the combination of our modifications.

 8 *Before & After.wav*