

Learning Cadences

Cadences are progressions of two or more chords that signal the end of a musical phrase, section, or composition. The last chord of a cadence almost always falls on an accented beat. Guitarists talk about chord progressions all the time, but classical pianists don't as often. They just play the notes that are on the page, and rarely think about the underlying chord progressions. But it can be useful to understand the common cadence progressions, and to be fluent in playing them. Having these patterns in your musical vocabulary will make sight reading easier and will help you if you ever play by ear. For beginners, playing a simple five-note pattern followed by a chord progression (as shown below) can help you master the 'feel' of the distance between notes or chord shapes on the keys, so you don't have to look at your fingers. It will also help you plant in your memory which notes get sharped or flatted in each key.

A cadence is called *perfect* if the last chord is the tonic chord (I) with the root of the chord as both the highest and lowest notes, preceded either by the dominant (V) or subdominant (IV). The term *imperfect* denotes an otherwise perfect cadence where the root of the chord does not appear in the top part.

There are four main types of cadences: Authentic, Plagal, Half, and Deceptive.

The formula V-I or V7-I is called an *authentic* cadence. The authentic cadence usually occurs as a part of longer formulas.

The diagram illustrates three types of authentic cadences with their respective chord progressions and fingerings:

- perfect authentic:** V (chord) | I (chord). Fingerings: 4 2 1 (V), 5 2 1 (I).
- perfect authentic:** I (chord) | IV (chord) | ⁶IV (chord) | V7 (chord) | I (chord). Fingerings: 5 2 1 (I), 5 3 1 (IV), 5 2 1 (⁶IV), 4 2 1 (V7), 5 2 1 (I).
- imperfect authentic:** I (chord) | vi (chord) | IV (chord) | V7 (chord) | I (chord). Fingerings: 4 2 1 (I), 5 2 1 (vi), 5 3 1 (IV), 4 3 1 (V7), 5 3 1 (I).

The V7 chord has a stronger "pull" toward the I chord because of the tritone in the chord which wants to resolve. For example, in the key of C, the V7 chord is G7. The tritone in this chord is B-F, which wants to resolve to C-E (each just a half tone away).

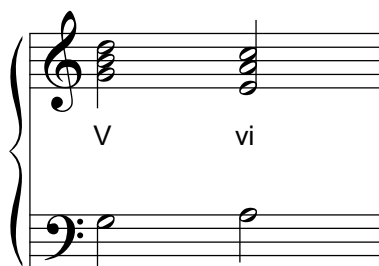
The IV-I progression is called a plagal cadence. It is commonly known as the "Amen" cadence, as a "coda" at the end of a hymn. Notice that for this example, we have moved to the key of F. See how the tonic note (F) is at the top of both chords? This emphasis of the tonic makes cadence particularly smooth.

The diagram shows the IV-I plagal cadence in the key of F major, commonly known as the "Amen" cadence. The progression is IV (chord) | I (chord). The lyrics are: Fa - ther, Son and Ho - ly Ghost. A - - - men. The tonic note (F) is at the top of both chords.

A half cadence uses the same formula as plagal or authentic, transposed to the dominant. The most common is the I-V progression:



Finally, a cadence is called deceptive if the tonic chord is “deceptively” replaced by some other chord, such as VI. Notice that the vi chord has two notes in common with the I chord, making it very close but not quite satisfying. You think you are going to hear the tonic chord after the V chord, but that not where it goes - hence the term “deceptive.”



The following exercise will help you gain familiarity with a basic cadential chord progression in all inversions. Practice it in all keys. C and G are given as examples. You can use the same fingering in all keys, or you can try to find another fingering that is more comfortable for you. Just always try to keep from switching fingers when the note repeats. Alternate fingerings are given in parentheses.

Key of C Major

Key of G Major