

Section 4.2.2

II-V-I IN MAJOR KEYS

II-V-I progression

A **II-V-I progression** (say “2, 5, 1”) uses the second (II), fifth (V), and first (I) notes of the key as chord roots, creating a circle-of-fifths root motion (see 4.1.4 **Circle-of-fifths progressions**). In major keys, the II chord is a minor seventh chord, the V chord is a dominant seventh chord, and the I chord is a major seventh chord.

II-V-I voicings starting with stack-of-thirds Guide tones

Below is a II-V-I in C major, starting with a stack-of-thirds voicing. The seventh of each chord moves down a half step and the leading tone (the seventh step of the scale, here B) holds over. The seventh of the chord and the leading tone are called **guide tones** because of the way they connect the chords. Also notice that stack-of-thirds voicing alternates with pair-of-thirds voicing.

The diagram shows a II-V-I progression in C major in bass clef. The first measure is D-7 (II) with a stack-of-thirds voicing (F, A, C, E, G, B). The second measure is G7 (V) with a pair-of-thirds voicing (B, D, F, A, C, E). The third measure is CΔ7 (I) with a stack-of-thirds voicing (E, G, B, D, F, A). Arrows indicate the 7th of D-7 moving down a half step to become the 7th of G7, and the leading tone B holding over from D-7 to G7. Labels below the staff identify the chords as C MAJOR: II, V, and I.

II-V-I voicings starting with pair-of-thirds

The II-V-I can also start with a pair-of-thirds voicing. In this case, the V chord uses a “stack-of-thirds” that actually includes a fourth, because the dominant uses the thirteenth (here E), not the fifth.

The diagram shows a II-V-I progression in C major in treble clef. The first measure is D-7 (II) with a pair-of-thirds voicing (F, A, C, E, G, B). The second measure is G7 (V) with a stack-of-thirds voicing (B, D, F, A, C, E). The third measure is CΔ7 (I) with a pair-of-thirds voicing (E, G, B, D, F, A). Arrows indicate the 7th of D-7 moving down a half step to become the 7th of G7, and the leading tone B holding over from D-7 to G7. Labels below the staff identify the chords as C MAJOR: II, V, and I.

**II-V chains
around the circle-
of-fifths**

II-V chords can be chained together around the circle of fifths. The first line below shows two II-V-I progressions where the last chord of the first II-V-I (=C) changes to a minor seventh chord to become the first chord of the next II-V-I. The second line shows the same two progressions, but skips over the I chord to “chain” the II-V progressions together. The roots of the chords are not shown, but should be played underneath.

D-7 G7 CΔ7 C-7 F7 BbΔ7
 II V I II V I ETC.

D-7 G7 C-7 F7 Bb-7 Eb7
 II V II V II V ETC.

**V chords around
the circle-of-
fifths**

It is even possible to chain together only dominant chords around the circle-of-fifths. Again, the roots should be played underneath.

STARTING WITH THE SEVENTH ON THE BOTTOM:

D7 G7 C7 F7 Bb7 Eb7 Ab7
 Db7 F#7 B7 E7 A7

STARTING WITH THE THIRD ON THE BOTTOM:

Ab7 Db7 F#7 B7 E7 A7
 D7 G7 C7 F7 Bb7 Eb7