

Ed Mascari Piano Studio

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How to Arrange a Song in 12 Easy Steps

1. **Determine the key of the song according to its key signature.**
This information will identify the **tonic key** of the song as well as to provide you with the harmonic building blocks that form the foundation of the song's tonal structure.
2. **Set up the list of the seven chords of the tonic key** (determined by the key signature). (If you have difficulty remembering how to do this, see the lesson *Analysis of a Major (or Minor) Key* on the Free Stuff page of the Ed Mascari Piano Studio website: www.edmascari pianostudio.com/p/free_stuff.php) You will need to transpose each of the chords to the **tonic key** of the particular song. However, the **chord function** and **chord quality** of each chord will remain the same.
3. **Set up the list of the tonic key's chord substitutes.**
The substitute chords are the ones which may be interchanged in order to create harmonic variety. The common substitutes which are found in every major key are as follows:
 - a. **I = vi = iii**
 - b. **ii = IV**
4. **Set up a chart which has three columns. The headings will be ii – V – I.**
At the top of the list, put the **ii-V-I** chords of the song's tonic key. Once this is done, find and list all of the dominant 7th (or 9th) chords that are in the song and put them in the center column of the chart. Remember, all dominant 7th chords are **V**.
Here's how your chart should look:

| | | |
|--------------|----------|----------|
| a. ii | V | I |
| b. Dm7 | G7 | Cmaj7 |
| c. ___ | F7 | ___ |
| d. ___ | Ab7 | ___ |
5. **Next, figure out and list all of the tonic chords (I) that should follow the V chords that are listed in the middle column.** Remember to count backwards 5 letter names to do this. For example: for F7, count F, E, D, C, Bb. Bbmaj7 is the **tonic chord (I)** that follows F7.
6. **Next, figure out and list all of the minor 7th (ii) chords that precede the dominant 7ths (V).** Remember to count up 2 letter names from the tonic to do this. For example: for Bbmaj7, count Bb, C. Cm7 is the **supertonic chord (ii)** that precedes F7 which leads to Bbmaj7. Here's how your chart should look:

| | | |
|--------------|----------|----------|
| a. ii | V | I |
| b. Dm7 | G7 | Cmaj7 |

- | | | | |
|----|------|-----|--------|
| c. | Cm7 | F7 | Bbmaj7 |
| d. | Ebm7 | Ab7 | Dbmaj7 |

7. **There are also chords from the parallel minor keys which may be needed.**

For example, Dm7b5 –G7(b9)-Cm6 is a **ii-V-i** progression in the key of Cminor (the parallel minor of Cmajor).

Here's how your chart should look:

- | | | | |
|----|-----------|----------|----------|
| a. | ii | V | I |
| b. | Dm7 | G7 | Cmaj7 |
| c. | Dm7b5 | G7 (b9) | Cm6 |
| d. | Cm7 | F7 | Bbmaj7 |
| e. | Cm7b5 | F7(b9) | Bbm6 |

8. **Go through the song and add 7ths and 6ths to all of the major and minor chords.**

If you look at the chord quality of each of the chords in the *Analysis of a Key* lesson you will see which chords take which 7ths and 6ths.

9. **Next, go to each dominant 7th chord.**

- If it occurs on the **1st beat** of the measure, move it to the **3rd beat** of the measure.
- Place the appropriate minor 7th or minor7b5 chord on the **1st beat** of the measure. (Your chart will provide you with the correct chords to use.)
- If the dominant 7th is on the **3rd beat**, you may leave it there. However, if an **important chord** (such as a major7th) appears on the **1st beat** of the measure do the following:
 - Keep the important chord on the **1st beat**
 - Move the **dominant 7th** chord to the **4th beat** of the measure
 - Put the **minor 7th (ii)** chord on the **3rd beat** of the measure

10. **Be on the look out for opportunities to use the *handi variation*** (commonly known as the *minor line cliché*). In case you need a reminder, see Lesson 3 in Part 2: *The Handi Variation Comes in Handy*. Basically, if the same minor chord is played for two or more measures, you can use this method to vary the harmony by lowering the bottom note of the chord by half steps.

11. **Look for Diminished 7th chords which may be inverted (and/or added) to make transitions smoother.** Usually, it works best to invert the diminished 7th chord so that its bottom note will lead smoothly to the chord that follows it or from the chord that precedes it.

12. **Final Reminders:**

- If you get stuck on a measure** (this happens to everyone) **skip it and keep going.** Usually the arranging steps will work for about 75% of the song. The remaining 25% will need to be done by experimenting with different combinations of chords as well as by listening to your choices.
- Musical taste is a very important element to successful arranging.** You need to please your own musical ear. Musical taste can be developed with time, but when all is said and done, you want to enjoy the musical sounds of the song that you have arranged.

- c. As the old adage goes: “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?.....Practice, practice, practice....”. **The ability to create successful arrangements will be developed over time.** It may mean your doing as many as 25 song arrangements before you start to feel comfortable with the process. Keep at it!

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