

CHAPTER 5

ASCENDING / DESCENDING ELEMENTS



This chapter will focus on ascending and descending elements in the melody line and harmony, and how these elements highlight a song's chorus or song title. We will hear several examples where the linear direction of these elements helps focus our attention, pointing towards the hook.



Many songs feature a series of **ascending pitches in the melody**, leading up to the focal point. With the gradual rise in pitch, these melodic phrases create some excitement and tension. On the following song by George Strait, there is a long melodic climb at the end of the verse, highlighting the entrance of the refrain. Also note some focal point devices mentioned in previous chapters, such as the V to I cadence from verse to refrain, and the avoidance of the I chord leading up to the cadence.

"West Texas Town" — George Strait — 2008

C major



For AUDIO, see the "Song Examples" playlist in the right sidebar, and click on track 1 song title. To navigate within the audio track, slide the progress bar to the desired starting point.

0:09 VERSE

I C bIII dim7 Eb dim7 II m Dm V7 G7

Friday comes, it's time to roll

I C (V/V) D7 IV7 F7

ASCENDING PITCHES TENSION

II m Dm III m Em IV F V G Im/5 Cm/G (V/II m) A7/G V7 G7

I've got my eyes on the hor - i - zon

0:33 REFRAIN

I C bIII dim7 Eb dim7 II m Dm V7 G7 I C

RESOLUTION

The pre-chorus of “Pink Pony Club” by Chappell Roan offers another example of a melodic climb. However, this time the melody is based on a repeated melodic sequence. A short, one-bar pattern ascends step-wise, as shown in the score below. You will recall that the repetition of short melodic phrases (discussed in Chapter Four) only adds to the tension as the pitch rises. Note that the climb is repeated once, then peaks on the song’s highest note at the entrance of the next section.

I Gb IIIm Abm VIIm Ebm

I'm having wicked dreams

0:27 PRE-CHORUS ASCENDING SHORT PHRASES

IV Cb I Gb IIIm Abm

. God, what have you done? etc.

TENSION

0:46 CHORUS 1

RESOLUTION

Katy Perry's "Firework" has a similar pre-chorus with a series of short, repeated phrases, but the climb is much longer, continuing for eight bars. Start listening at **1:48**.

"Firework" — Katy Perry — 2010

ver - Ab mixo,
chor - Ab major



I Ab IIIm Bbm VIIm Fm IV Db

Like a lighting bolt

1:48 END OF VERSE

I Ab IIIm Bbm VIIm Fm IV Db

ignite the light_ and let_ it shine_ Just own

1:56 PRE-CHORUS REPEATED SHORT PHRASES with RISING PITCHES

Chord progressions for the first line:

- I Ab
- IIIm Bbm
- VIIm Fm
- IV Db

Vocal line: — the night — like the fourth — of — Ju-ly — Ba-by you're a

TENSION

Chord progressions for the second line:

- I Ab
- IIIm Bbm
- VIIm Fm
- IV Db

Vocal line: Fi — re — work — etc.

2:11 CHORUS

RESOLUTION

Here's a Beatles tune with ascending pitches at the end of the release. In this song, the entire release section essentially functions as a V7 chord (B7) — anchored throughout with a prominent B bass drone. On the second line, the vocal triads could be thought of as color variations of the overall B7 sound. The triads ascend stepwise, helping to create a strong focal point with great anticipation. In addition, there is repetition of one note length (also discussed in Chapter Four), with a long series of repeated 8th notes in the bass.

When the song resolves back to the verse, we hear the return of the song's signature guitar riff. This may not seem such a powerful resolution compared to a big chorus, but in this song the guitar riff is probably more important than the vocal chorus. Start listening at **1:21**.

"Day Tripper" — The Beatles — 1966

E blues



(V7)
(B7) signature guitar riff

1:21 RELEASE

vocal triads over **B** bass

REPEATED 8ths in BASS

TENSION

(I7)
(E7) signature guitar riff

RESOLUTION

1:42 VERSE

Some pop melodies may not have a specific linear sequence of ascending pitches, but the **overall pitch level** continues to rise from verse to pre-chorus to chorus. This can be heard on the next song by Christina Perri. The verse has the lowest pitches, followed by mid-range notes in the pre-chorus, and the highest notes are saved for the chorus. Start listening at **0:21**.

"Burning Gold" — Christina Perri — 2014

G major



— **0:21** (verse 2) **LOWER pitches** in melody.

— **0:41** (pre-chorus) **MID-RANGE pitches** Also brief suspension of rhythm, like a soft stop time, adds **TENSION**

— **1:00** (chorus) **RESOLUTION** **HIGHER pitches** announce the entrance of the chorus.

You will recall listening to Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline" in Chapter Three, when we discussed harmonic tension / resolution. In the measures leading up to the chorus, the avoidance of the I chord and the V to I cadence both contribute to the strength of the chorus entrance.

This song is also a great example of both rising pitch levels from section to section, and ascending pitches in a linear sequence (the pre-chorus climb is very similar to "Firework," heard earlier). Listen again for these new elements, starting at **0:29**.

"Sweet Caroline" - Neil Diamond - 1969

B major



Chord progression for the first line of the verse:

I B IV E I B V F#

Was in the spring

0:29 VERSE with OVERALL LOWEST PITCHES

Chord progression for the pre-chorus:

I B VIIm G#m V F#

Hands touch-in hands reachin out—

0:44 PRE-CHORUS RISING PITCHES

Chord progression for the pre-chorus:

IV E V F#

touch-in me touch-in you

TENSION

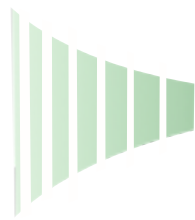
Chord progression for the chorus:

I B IV E V F#

Sweet Car-o-line— good times etc.

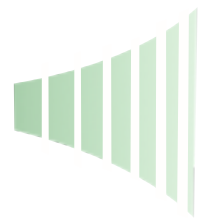
1:03 CHORUS with HIGHEST PITCHES

RESOLUTION



HARMONY device #6

ASCENDING CHORD PROGRESSION



We can now turn our attention to ascending elements in the harmony, specifically **rising chord progressions**. In this case, we are referring to how the root or lowest bass notes in each chord continue to rise in pitch.

Here's an example from 1963 that features a very common diatonic sequence in the major key, rising from II^m, III^m, IV, to the tension V chord at the end of the pre-chorus. On this song, the ascending chords highlight repetition of the song's title during a short interlude / chorus that is heard before returning to the verse. Also notice other tension devices, such as the drum fill, and avoidance of the I chord leading up to the focal point.

"Monkey Time" – Major Lance – 1963

F major



4/4

I	II ^m	III ^m	I	II ^m	III ^m	II ^m	4 x
F	G ^m	A ^m	F	G ^m	A ^m	G ^m	

0:08 VERSE

VI ^m	III ^m	II ^m	VI ^m	III ^m	II ^m
D ^m	A ^m	G ^m	D ^m	A ^m	G ^m

0:23 PRE-CHORUS

III ^m	IV	V
A ^m	B ^b	C

ASCENDING CHORD PROGRESSION DRUM FILL

TENSION

I	II ^m	III ^m	I	II ^m	III ^m	II ^m
F	G ^m	A ^m	F	G ^m	A ^m	G ^m

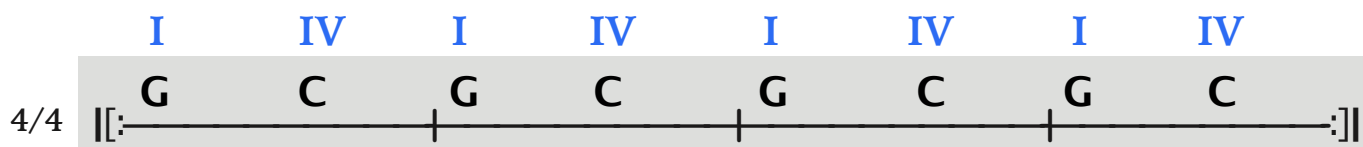
RESOLUTION

0:38 INTERLUDE / CHORUS w song title

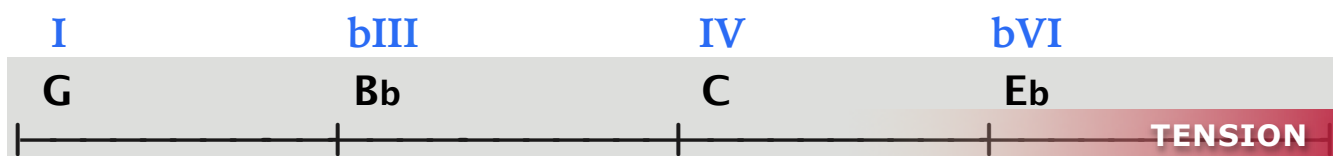
This Spencer Davis song also features an ascending 4-chord sequence in the pre-chorus, but the chords are much different, reflecting a blues tonality. Start at **0:29**.

"Gimmie Some Lovin'" — Spencer Davis Group — 1967

G blues rk

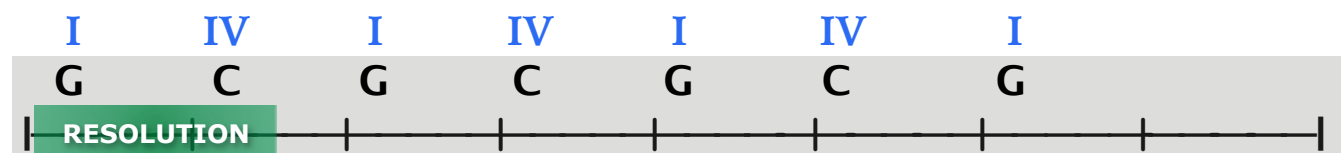


0:29 VERSE



ASCENDING CHORD PROGRESSION

0:42 PRE-CHORUS



0:48 CHORUS w title

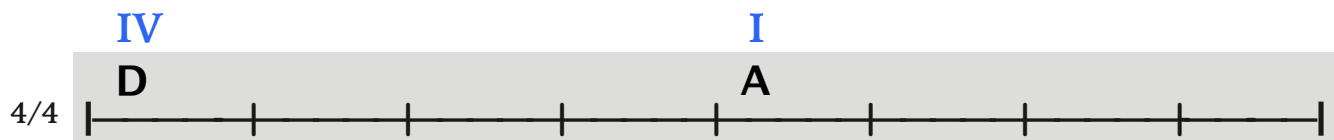
In the next example, some chord inversions create a strong chromatic bass line leading to the chorus. This song also has 3 devices mentioned previously —

- **STOP TIME**
- **V to I CADENCE** at the chorus entrance. Notice that the V chord is in first inversion (V/3), with the leading tone in the bass. This creates extra tension before the resolution in the chorus.
- **I CHORD IS AVOIDED** for 8 bars leading up to the chorus.

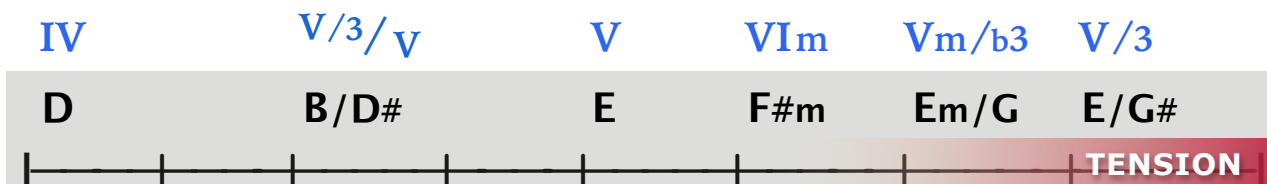
Start listening at **0:35**.

"Footloose" — Kenny Loggins — 1984

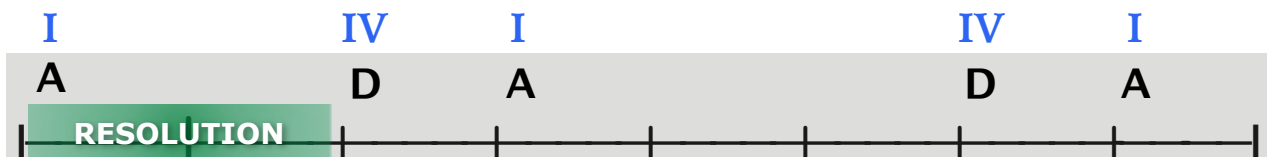
A major



0:35 partial VERSE



ASCENDING CHORD PROGRESSION STOP TIME



0:57 CHORUS

Additional songs with ASCENDING CHORD PROGRESSION

1964	<i>Just Like Romeo and Juliet</i>	The Reflections
1965	<i>You've Lost That Lovin' Feeling</i>	Righteous Brothers
1989	<i>The Deeper the Love</i>	Whitesnake
1994	<i>Ain't That Just Like a Dream</i>	Tim McGraw
2009	<i>Fallin' For You</i>	Colbie Caillat



While **descending chord sequences** might not build up quite the same amount of emotional excitement as ascending progressions, they still can highlight the focal point, due mainly to the fact that they are linear, directing us toward the hook.

Our first example comes from Cat Stevens on his 1971 song “Wild World.” As you can see below, the last bar of the verse features a chord sequence with a descending bass line that resolves at the chorus entrance. These could be thought of as pivot chords, functioning in two keys — A minor and C major. If we focus on the analysis for the upcoming C major key, then these chords represent a descent from the tension V. This is fairly common in a major key. In fact, on many songs the progression simply descends diatonically from V, IV, III^m, II^m, to I (G, F, E^m, D^m, C), producing the exact same bass line.

You will also notice that the descending bass is accentuated by a series of twelve 16th notes, once again using repetition of one note length to highlight the focal point.

“Wild World” — Cat Stevens — 1971



key
A min

Im	IV	bVII	bIII	bVI	IV^m	V		Im	IV
Am	D	G	C	F	D ^m	E		Am	D

0:14 VERSE

bVII	bIII	bVI	IV^m	V	bVII	bVII/7	V^m	bVII/5
G	C	F	D ^m	E	G	G7/F	E ^m	G/D

DESCENDING CHORDS . . TENSION

V V7/b7 III^m V/5

new key C maj:

0:40 CHORUS

The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef. Above the staff, the notes C, G, F, G, F, C are written. Below the staff, the Roman numerals I, V, IV, V, IV, I are written. A green box labeled 'RESOLUTION' is placed over the first two measures (C and G). A purple box labeled 'new key C maj:' is placed to the left of the staff. The time signature is 0:40 and the section is labeled CHORUS.

Sheryl Crow's 2002 song "C'mon C'mon" features a dramatic descent through seven chords at the end of the verse. You will note that this descent ends at the tension V chord rather than resolving to the I chord. However, this still serves to highlight the overall focal point. Start listening at **0:40**.

"C'mon C'mon" — Sheryl Crow — 2002

D major



0:40 VERSE

The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef. Above the staff, the Roman numerals IV, V, I, IV, V, IV, V, IV, V are written. Below the staff, the chords G, A, D, G, A, G, A, G, A are written. The time signature is 0:40 and the section is labeled VERSE.

DESCENDING CHORD PROGRESSION

The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef. Above the staff, the Roman numerals IV, I/3, II_m7, I, V/3, II_m/5, V7 are written. Below the staff, the chords G, D/F#, Em7, D, A/C#, Em/B, A7 are written. A red box labeled 'TENSION' is placed at the end of the progression. The section is labeled DESCENDING CHORD PROGRESSION

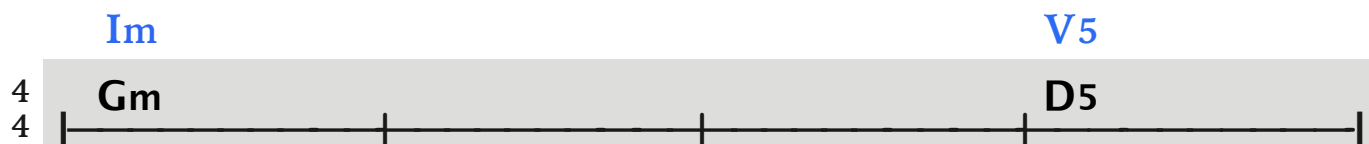
1:06 CHORUS

The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef. Above the staff, the Roman numerals I, IV, V, IV, I, IV, V are written. Below the staff, the chords D, G, A, G, D, G, A are written. A green box labeled 'RESOLUTION' is placed over the first two measures (D and G). The time signature is 1:06 and the section is labeled CHORUS.

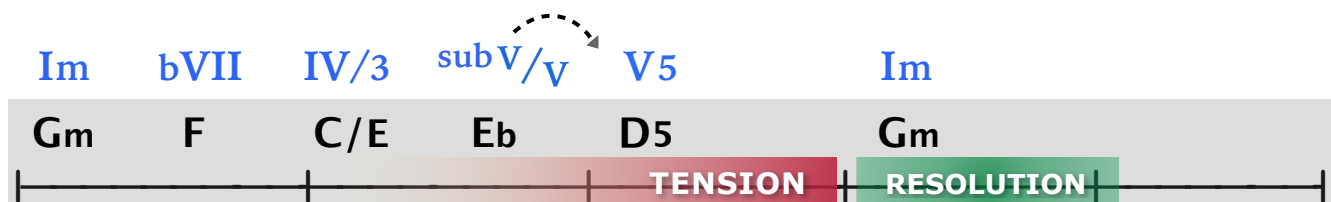
The descent on the next example also leads to the tension V chord, but this time the progression is somewhat different (the song is in a minor key) and the progression highlights the song title at the end of the chorus rather than the chorus entrance. Start listening at **0:54**.

"Bury Me In Georgia" — Kane Brown — 2022

G minor



0:54 CHORUS



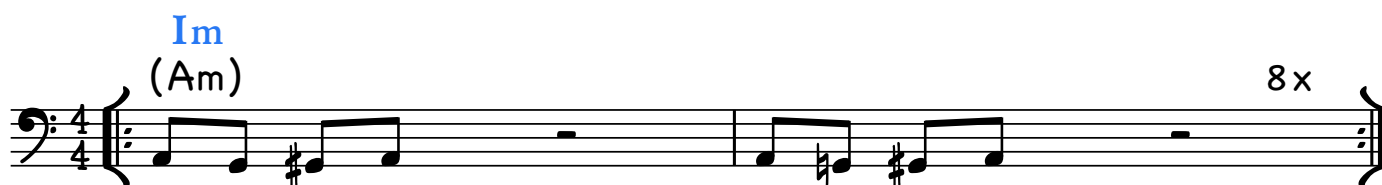
DESCENDING CHORDS STOP TIME SONG TITLE

The pre-chorus of the 1992 song "Free Your Mind" starts with a short descent from IVm to the Im chord (see line two below). Actually there is no Im chord (Am) per se - the resolution is to the signature A minor bass riff that was established in the opening verse. The descent is used again on the third line, but this time the progression is cut short, pausing on the Bb chord. The eventual resolution to the A minor riff is delayed for two long measures, and the music just seems to coast, building suspense and creating a strong focal point. As the chorus explodes with energy at the hook, we hear the song's title in the lyrics and the signature riff returns, resolving the harmony.

You may notice another factor that adds to the power of the resolution. During the verse and pre-chorus, the bass riff was heard in "abbreviated" form, lasting only half a measure. When the chorus enters, the full version of the signature riff is heard, lasting a complete measure. When we compare the two versions, the riff in the verse sounds like a car trying to start and the engine won't quite turn over. In the chorus the riff drives through to complete the measure and the engine is now running smoothly.

"Free Your Mind" — En Vogue — 1992

A minor



0:15 VERSE w Partial Signature Riff

IV^m bIII bVII/3 subV/Im Im
 D^m C G/B B^b (A^m)

TENSION

DESCENDING CHORDS Partial Signature Riff

0:53 PRE-CHORUS

RESOLUTION

IV^m bIII bVII/3 subV/Im

D^m C G/B B^b

TENSION

DESCENDING CHORDS

RESOLUTION DELAYED . . .

Im
 (A^m)

TENSION

1:13 CHORUS w FULL Signature Riff

RESOLUTION