How To Chart a Song

Prerequisites (what you need to know to understand this course)

1. How to read music (general basics such as naming notes, counting, key signatures, etc.).
2. Basic theory. You need to know how to play a major scale. Ideally, you should be able to build simple chords such as major and minor triads. If you need help in this area, consider purchasing Theory For Church Pianists from GregHowlett.com.

Introduction

Practically all musicians that improvise use lead sheets (or chord charts) as a guide. While church pianists have traditionally improvised from four part harmony in a hymnal, lead sheets are starting to become popular in the church as well.

A lead sheet is a printed notation of a piece of music that provides the most important elements: melody, harmony, and lyrics (usually). Lead sheets are fairly new; they have only become popular over the last century.

On the other hand, chord charts (sometimes just called charts) do not have melody and lyrics. They only contain the chords. Excellent musicians can accompany a melody using just a chord chart (because they don’t want to play the melody anyway when they are accompanying).

Here is a typical lead sheet.

Jesus Saves
Here is a chord chart.

Lead sheets/chord charts make perfect sense for church music for several reasons:

- They provide an easy-to-read road map that musicians playing any instrument can follow.
- They provide just the necessary information and allow the musician the freedom to improvise.
- They identify chords rather than forcing musicians to analyze vocal harmony (as is necessary when improvising from a hymnal).

Understanding how to play lead sheets/chord charts is foundational to mastering many of the topics covered in the courses at GregHowlett.com. Topics such as accompaniment, transposing, and arranging are taught from this perspective.

When working on a piece of church music such as a hymn from the hymnal, it is often extremely helpful to build a lead sheet or chord chart from it. This process (also called charting) is what is taught in this course.

Musicians can chart in two ways:

- By visually analyzing a piece of music to identify the chords.
- By listening to a song to identify the chords.

All musicians can learn to chart in both ways, but for most, the first way is far easier. We are going to focus primarily on the first way in this course.

Understanding how to build chords is a prerequisite for this course. There are numerous chords that are possible, and they are covered thoroughly in other courses from GregHowlett.com such as Theory For Church Pianists. However, we will briefly review the triad, which will be the chord you most often see in the music you play.
Reviewing triads

Triads are three note chords that are the mainstay of most church music. Each triad consists of 3 notes and each note is an interval of a third apart.

Thirds can be either major or minor. A major third consists of 4 half steps and a minor third consists of 3 half steps. Because there are two intervals of a third in a triad and either can be major or minor, there are four possible types of triads.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Triad</th>
<th>1st interval</th>
<th>2nd interval</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>Major Third</td>
<td>Minor Third</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Major Triad" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minor</td>
<td>Minor Third</td>
<td>Major Third</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Minor Triad" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Diminished</td>
<td>Minor Third</td>
<td>Minor Third</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Diminished Triad" /></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Augmented</td>
<td>Major Third</td>
<td>Major Third</td>
<td><img src="image" alt="Augmented Triad" /></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

In each key, there are seven special triads that are called diatonic. These chords are built starting on each note in the scale and use the notes that belong to the key. We often label these chords with numbers based on the position of the root (bottom note) within the scale of the key.

Note: When labeling chords with numbers, we usually use the Roman numeral system. Major and augmented chords are notated in upper case while minor and diminished chords are notated in lower case. At other times, you may see all of the chords written in upper case, but minor chords will be notated like this: \( \text{II}^{\text{min}} \).
The dominant chord (V7)

You will see one chord that contains four notes quite often in church music. Normally, it is the V chord, and it has a minor 7th added. The minor 7th is the note that is one whole step down from the root. This kind of chord is called a dominant.

Charting a song by analyzing printed music

If you understand the chords we just reviewed, you are ready to start charting. Charting is simply looking at the harmony, identifying the chords that are used, and labeling them.

You can label chords in one of two ways:

- By number (in the key of C, a C chord would be called a I chord, a D chord would be called ii, etc.)
- By letter

You will see chord charts and lead sheets that represent chords as either numbers or letters. Letters are easier for beginners to read, but numbers are helpful because they allow musicians to transpose easily. Theoretically, if a musician knows the chords by number in every key, they can easily play a lead sheet in every key.

Tips to identify chords in a four-part song (such as you would see in a hymnal)

- Do not try to identify every chord you see. Focus on the first beat of the measure and wherever you see the bass note change within a measure. Often, passing tones overly complicate the analysis.
- Look at all of the notes in a chord and unscramble them into a chord where you have 3 or 4 notes separated by intervals of thirds.
- Sometimes a note might be missing from the triad (usually the 5th).
- Almost all the chords you see will be I, IV, or V chords.
- The bottom note you see (bass note) normally identifies the chord for you. However, inversions are very common in this kind of music.
- Do not worry if you find chords you cannot identify.
Jesus Saves
It is Well

How To Chart a Song
Checkpoint: Analyze these hymns. The answers start at page 13.

Trust and Obey
How to chart a song by listening to it

Charting by listening is an advanced but learnable skill. Here are some tips to get you started.

- Use a player that allows you to loop a section of the song over and over.
- Do the song a phrase at a time. If the phrase is too long, do only a portion of the phrase at a time.
- Play the phrase over and over while sitting at the piano. Experiment by playing chords along with the music until you know the chords for that phrase. Then go on to the next phrase.
Trust and Obey
Like a River Glorious

I  V  I  I7  IV  V  I  I  V  I

V  II7  V  I  V7  I  IV  I  IImin7  I  V

I  #Vdim  VImin  II  I  V  V7  I  I  V  I  IV  I

IImin7  I  V  I  #Vdim  VImin  II  I  V  V7  I

1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10  11  12  13  14  15  16  17  18  19  20  21  22  23  24