A summarized review of music theory…

Diatonic Chords

Chords (*triads* and *seventh chords*) are musical units and are formed by stacking (combining from the bottom-up) major and/or minor thirds). However, the chords do not need to literally have their notes stacked on top of one and other–we only need to hear that group of notes sounding together as a singly entity or unit.

This can be done contextually within a single key by taking the notes from a major or minor scale and combining them in thirds (every other note). When specifically that is done, *diatonic* chords (belonging to that key) are formed. These chords are labeled with Roman numerals (I-vii^{o}, i-vii^{o}) that relate to one of the seven scale degrees off of which the chord is built. Upper- or lower-case numerals are used to reflect the major or minor quality of the chord. The diminished chord uses a lower-case numeral plus a superscripted circle (vii^{o})

The diatonic chords in major keys are:

I ii iii IV $V^{(7)}$ vi vii^{o}

The diatonic chords in minor keys are:

i ii^{o} III iv *$V^{(7)}$ VI *vii^{o}

*The V and vii^{o} chords in the minor mode typically use a raised 7th scale degree (the leading tone) that comes from the harmonic minor mode.

Also, of all the diatonic chords, it is the V chord that is the most likely to be a 7th (dominant 7th) chord.

Chord Inversions

When the root of the chord is on the bottom of the chord ("in the bass position"), the chord is in *root position*. When a note other than the root of the chord is on the bottom of the chord, the chord is *inverted*.

Inversions are useful for varying the sound of a given chord, or for allowing the bass notes of a chord to be smoothly connected (part of the practice known as *voice leading*).

Slash notation "C/E" is a typical way to indicate the inversion of a chord. *Figured bass* is a more formal way of identifying a chord's inversion (used along with the Roman numeral system: I^{6}, for example).

Chord Progressions

When chords are placed in a series or sequence, they are in a *progression*. Typically, a chord progression progresses towards a goal (like the tonic). Different styles of music will have chords progressing in different ways (following different paths or routs). In traditional styles, the strongest progression is $V^{(7)}$ (the dominant) followed by I (or i) (the tonic). This pattern of the roots of the chord moving up a 4^{th} or down a 5^{th} can be applied to other chord relationships: I-IV-vii^{o}-ii-vi-ii-V-I, which represents one standard sequence (progression) that the chords can follow which ultimately lead to V and then to I.

Melody

On the flipside of harmony and harmonic motion (progressions) is melodic motion: one pitch to the next. Most melodies are comprised of a few elements that relate to a theme or motif (aka motive). Most melodies will have a clear shape, moments of relaxation and will have a predominantly scalar texture mixed in with some leaps and arpeggios. An excellent way to reuse material in a melody is through the *sequence*, or the *modified sequence*, where melodic fragments are restated at higher or lower pitch levels. This maintains a *balance* of *continuity* (through repetition) and *variety* (by repeating something in a different way).

Melodies will mostly have *chord tones*, but will definitely have *non chord tones* too (NCTs). Examples of non chord tones include *passing tones*, *neighbor tones*, *suspensions* and *appoggiaturas*. NCTs add some spice and dissonance to the intermingling of melody and harmony because they don't quite fit in with the simultaneously sounding chord. But since NCTs subsequently resolve, they don't stick out too long or too much. Just like the right amount of spice in a recipe.

Structure: Phrases and Cadences

As mentioned above, melodies (and music in general) have their moments of relaxation, where the performer literally or figuratively breaths, and where our ears take a moment to process what was just heard before more information is delivered. Our speech and writing works the same way, which is why we have punctuation in the form of periods and commas.

A musical phrase (like our spoken/written sentence) is a larger structural unit that represents a complete musical thought that is finished (punctuated) by a cadence. Phrases are usually in groups of two or four and their lengths will more or less be similar. The endings of a phrases vary, so there are different kinds of cadences to qualify the type of ending a phrase has, much like a spoken/written statement will end in a comma, semicolon or period.

Structure: Cadences

There are two main types of cadences that help articulate the type of ending a phrase will have. An *authentic cadence* is a phrase-ending that feels complete; it is supported by a dominant chord (usually $V^{(7)}$) going to the tonic chord. It acts like a period.

The other type of cadence is the *half cadence* that feels incomplete or unfinished (like a comma). It is characterized by one of many chords that leads to a dominant

($V^{(7)}$) chord. A phrase that ends in a half cadence will usually be followed-up (resolved, completed) by a phrase that ends in an authentic cadence. This two-phrase pairing is referred to as an *antecedent/consequent* (or question/answer) relationship (also called a *period*). Phrases are usually labeled with lower-case letters (a, b, c) or with their variants (a', a'', a''').

Structure: Form

Phrases are often grouped into larger units called *sections*. In popular music, one set of phrases might be grouped into a verse, and another set of contrasting phrases might be grouped into a chorus. These sections can also be labeled with upper-case letters (A, B, C) or with their variants (A, A', A'').

Binary (two parts) Form:

This is one of two common forms. It consists of two sections: A and B. Each section will be comprised of a group of phrases, and each section will have different sounding material, so that there is a nice contrast between the two.

Ternary (three parts) Form:

This form also uses two sections, but the first section (the A section) will be reprised after the B section, like so: A B A. This format rounds things off nicely as the original material returns after some intervening contrasting material.

Many, many pieces and songs are in some version of binary or ternary form.

Modulation:

Modulation is when the key of a piece changes. Almost all common practice pieces modulate. Sometimes the change in key goes along with the change in section (The A section being in one key and the B section being in another key).

Pieces may modulate many times. But almost always, there is a return to the original key by the piece or section's end–even if it is ending in the B section. We always return to the original (home) key. This rounds things off nicely on a harmonic level.

Many modulations follow the pattern of the circle of fifths. A modulation might go up a 4^{th} (down a 5^{th}), i.e. to the right on the circle (adding/subtracting one flat/sharp), or a major key might modulate to its relative minor, or a minor key might modulate to its relative major (not changing the key signature at all).

In these cases, the transition to a new key is usually smooth because there will be notes and/or chords that are common to both keys. The transition will have an overlapping area (a pivot area) where the notes or chords in question fit into the old and new keys simultaneously (like in the movies when the screen dissolves from one scene into a new scene and there is a moment of visual overlap).

Usually when a modulation of this kind takes place, the key signature does not change to reflect the new key. Instead, the necessary accidentals are used wherever needed. While this seems more cumbersome, it supports the notion that the original key is the most important and one that will return by the end.