SEAN WILSON PIANO

HARMONY FRAMEWORK

CONDENSED REFERENCE

TAB 01

HORIZONTAL HARMONY

"Where is the music going?"

APPROACH

SETUP / FORWARD MOTION

Approach chords create forward motion. They set up harmonic expectation without yet demanding resolution — they signal "we're going somewhere" and point toward the tension that follows.

- Half Diminished
- Sus4 / 13sus Family
- Passing Minor Movement
- Secondary Dominant
- Tritone Sub Setup

TENSION

THE ENGINE OF DRIVE — DOMINANT CHORD TYPES

Tension chords demand resolution. The more altered the chord, the stronger the pull toward the target. In gospel and R&B, almost all tension chords are some form of dominant.

- Tritone (A+Eb)
- V7
- 13(no5)
- 9
- 9#11
- 9(13)#11
- 7#9#5
- 7b9b5
- 7b9#9
- 7#9b5
- 7b9#9b5
- 13b9
- 7b9#5
- V7#9
- V713
- V7#11 (Lydian Dom)
- Inverted Dominant
- V7b9
- F7 Altered
- Dim7
- Modal Tension / Scales

TARGET

RESOLUTION / ARRIVAL

Target chords are the point of arrival. This is the primary site of reharmonization — almost all vertical substitution lives here, because the ear has already been satisfied by the release and can accept a surprising voicing.

- Major / Minor
- Maj7 / Min7
- Maj6 / Min6
- Maj6/9 / Min6/9
- Rootless 6/9 / Quartal Color
- Slash Target Chords
- The Gospel 1

KEY PRINCIPLES

- → The formula works in both directions — you can omit Approach and still have a strong cadence, or stack multiple Approach chords before resolving.
- → Tension chords typically do not receive vertical substitutions — their functional pull is too strong.
- → Vertical harmony (reharmonization) lives almost exclusively in the **Target** zone.
- → Backwards caveat: if a chord can be voiced as a Major Target, add a ♭7 to make it Dominant — then that Dominant can be played as Major/♭7 slash, creating a forward-compatible voicing.
- → Deceptive movement happens when the Tension chord resolves somewhere other than the expected Target — this creates surprise while maintaining emotional logic.
- → **4-3 Suspension** — this is why sus chords belong in Approach. The 4th resolves down to the 3rd, turning the suspended sound into a dominant tension chord. `C9sus4 → C9` is Approach → Tension.
- → **9-8 Suspension** — operates inside any horizontal role. The 9th resolves down to the root while the bass holds steady, creating motion inside a chord rather than between chords.

TAB 02

VERTICAL HARMONY

"Why did I change the chord?"

How Do I Classify This?

Ask one question. Find the category. Some moves use more than one — choose by what the listener hears first.

→ Did the actual song melody force the chord?	MELODY-BASED CHANGES
→ Did the bass note tell me what chord quality to use?	BASS SUBSTITUTION
→ Did I change where the music landed?	DIRECTION CHANGE
→ Did I create, hold, or choose a note and harmonize around it?	COLOR NOTE CHANGES
→ Did I briefly visit another key and come back?	KEY DETOUR

A reharm works because something stays clear while something else changes. The anchor is the thing that stays clear.

CATEGORY 1

Melody-Based Changes

The melody gives me the chord — Top Note Reharm · Harmonized Lines

The Melody Note Picks the Chord *Top Note Reharmonization*

PLAIN ENGLISH

The melody note you must keep on top tells you which chords are even possible. You start from the note, then find the chord underneath it.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The melody note is fixed and familiar — the listener is tracking the tune, not the chord underneath, so changes below it feel natural.

Harmonizing a Line You're Singing or Creating *Harmonized Countermelody*

PLAIN ENGLISH

You write or sing a secondary line, then build chords underneath that line instead of underneath the main melody.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The new line still moves in a singable, stepwise way — the ear follows the contour of the line and accepts the harmony that supports it.

CATEGORY 2

Bass Substitution

The bass note tells me my options — Slash Chords · Bottom Note Rules

The Bass Note Opens New Options *Sean's Slash Chord Rules*

PLAIN ENGLISH

The bass note tells me what the chord can become. This is NOT just putting the same chord over a different bass note — the chord quality itself may change.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The bottom note gives the harmony a clear foundation, so the ear accepts the new chord quality above it.

Moving the Bass Underneath a Chord *Bottom Note Reharmonization*

PLAIN ENGLISH

Keep the upper chord shape the same, but move only the bass note. The new bass note reframes the function of the whole chord.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The upper voicing stays recognizable, so the ear treats the shifting bass as color rather than a totally new chord.

Deeper Example: What Can Db/F Become? *F as the Starting Point*

PLAIN ENGLISH

Starting from a single bass note (F), you can build multiple different chord qualities above it — major, minor, dominant, or altered.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The bass anchor stays constant while the upper structure changes, so each new version still feels grounded in the same place.

CATEGORY 3

Direction Change

I changed where the music landed — Function-Based Changes · Misplaced 5-1

Landing Somewhere Unexpected *Misplaced 5-1*

PLAIN ENGLISH

The ear expected one landing. You use a 5-1 motion to redirect it somewhere else. It still sounds right because the dominant-to-tonic pull is always recognizable — even when the "tonic" is a surprise.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

Surprise with logic. The 5-1 motion is so deeply familiar that the ear accepts the new destination. "Wrong but right."

Resolving Somewhere Surprising *Deceptive Cadence*

PLAIN ENGLISH

The tension chord resolves to an unexpected target instead of the predicted one. V7 → VIm instead of V7 → I is the classic form.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The unexpected target shares notes with the expected resolution, or sits in a functional neighbor position — familiar enough to feel intentional.

Inserting a Step Right Before Landing *Passing Chord Before Target*

PLAIN ENGLISH

A non-diatonic chord is inserted immediately before the target chord, usually a half-step above or below the destination.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The chromatic movement is so brief the ear hears it as approach motion rather than disruption — the target feels "earned."

CATEGORY 4 — PART 1 OF 2

Color Note Changes

I chose a note, then built the sound around it — Countermelody · Held Note · Created Line

Creating a New Line and Harmonizing It *Created / Countermelody Reharm*

PLAIN ENGLISH

You invent a new top-line note that isn't from the original melody, then build a chord that supports it.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The created line still moves logically in context, so the harmony underneath reads as intentional color rather than a mistake.

Holding a Top Note and Moving Underneath It *Held Note / Top Color Reharm*

PLAIN ENGLISH

A single note stays fixed on top while the chord underneath changes around it, generating a series of new colors from one held pitch.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The held note is the anchor the ear tracks — as long as it stays put, the shifting harmony underneath feels like color, not confusion.

Color Note Changes — Voicing Structures

Structural voicing approaches that often pair with held-note or created-line color changes

Stacking in 4ths *Quartal Voicing*

PLAIN ENGLISH

Instead of stacking the chord in 3rds, you stack notes in 4ths — giving an open, modern, ambiguous color.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The 4ths still relate to the underlying harmony, so the open sound is heard as a color choice rather than a wrong note.

Triad in the Right Hand Over a Shell *Upper Structure Triad*

PLAIN ENGLISH

The left hand plays a simple shell (root + 7th, or root + bass), while the right hand plays a clean triad that adds the color.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The shell keeps the harmonic function clear, so the ear has a stable reference point under the more colorful triad above it.

Leaving the Root Out *Rootless Voicing*

PLAIN ENGLISH

The root is implied rather than played, freeing up the hand to voice the more interesting upper notes of the chord.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

Context (bass instrument, prior chord, or harmonic motion) already implies the root, so the ear fills it in automatically.

Dominant Without the 5th *13 No 5*

PLAIN ENGLISH

Drop the 5th from a dominant 13 chord to make room for cleaner voice leading and a less cluttered upper structure.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The 5th is the least essential note for dominant identity — removing it doesn't change how the ear hears the chord's function.

CATEGORY 5

Key Detour

I stepped into another key for a moment, then came back — Temporary Key Shift · Chromatic Mediant

A 5-1 That Lands in Another Key *Misplaced 5-1 as Key Detour*

PLAIN ENGLISH

A 5-1 motion lands on an unexpected chord. When that chord is far from the home key, the moment feels like a brief visit to a new key rather than just a surprising chord.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

The 5-1 motion is universally recognizable — even in a foreign key, it feels intentional rather than lost.

Visiting a Distant Key and Coming Back *Chromatic Mediant Modulation*

PLAIN ENGLISH

The harmony shifts to a key a third away (rather than a closely related key), then returns home — a colorful, cinematic detour.

WHY THE EAR ACCEPTS IT

Chromatic mediant relationships share enough common tones that the shift sounds purposeful rather than random, even across a distant key.