

SUBSTITUTING CHORDS

By Karen Daniels

Simply put, chord substitution is the use of one chord in place of another chord and using them is one way to give your music interest and a change in sound. Many chord substitutions are available (suspended, diminished 7th, etc.). This lesson, however, will focus on *substitution of minor and major chords*.

The **CHORD SUBSTITUTION CHART** is charted for the keys of **C, G, D, A, and F** and are the more common keys played on the autoharp. The chart is set up to help you understand how the major and minor chords are related and connected by common notes to each other, which chords work for another chord and why it may or may not work. I've detailed as much as possible into each of the charts for those keys.

Let's take the 1st part of the **key of G** chart and dissect it.

Key of G Tonic Note of Chords	M	m	m	M	M	m	Row 1	
	I	ii_m	iii_m	IV	V	vi_m	Row 2	Key of G: one # (F#)
	G	A_m	B_m	C	D	E_m	Row 3	
	B	C	D	E	F#	G	Row 4	
	D	E	F#	G	A	B	Row 5	

Row 3: “**Tonic Notes of Chords**” -- The first note of every scale, **G** in this case, is the tonic note and also the **I** chord. This row lists the scale notes (across) which are also chord names for the key of G. Reading on across, the G scale reads: G – A – B – C – D – E – F#** – G

Row 1: Defines each note/chord as **Majors** or **minors (M m m M M m)**. In every key, there are 3 major and 3 minor chords. One way to remember: the I, IV and V chords are major chords. The ones left, the ii, iii and the vi chords, are the minor chords. This goes for any key.

Row 2: Above each of the scale notes are **Roman numerals**. Each note is assigned a number in the order of their progression in the scale. The numbers are then converted to Roman numerals. Large Roman numerals are the major chords and the little Roman numerals are minor chords.

Rows 4 and 5: List the notes in the note/chord name under Row 3.

EX:

The first **column:** Row 1 is **M**, a major chord. Row 2 is Roman numeral **I** which is the tonic note and the **I** chord of the key of G. Row 3: **G** is the first note in the scale and tonic note of the chord. Rows 4 and 5 list **B** and **D**, the other notes in the **G** chord. Thus, the notes in a **G** chord are **G-B-D**.

The second **column:** Row 1 is **m**, a minor chord. Row 2 is Roman numeral **ii** meaning the second note and chord of the **G** scale, again a minor chord. The Row 3 is **A**, the second note in the G scale, and an **A minor** chord followed in rows 4 and 5, underneath, by **C** and **E**. The notes in the chord of **A_m**, then, are **A-C-E**.

(Each of the charts for the different keys on the *CHORD SUBSTITUTION CHART* are read in this manner.)

How notes get their “numbers”: You have heard of chords being referred to as I, IV, and V. Simplified, there are 7 notes in any given key (scale) with the eighth note of the scale being the same as the first. As mentioned above, each note in any key is numbered in the order of their progression in the scale and which are also chords. (See the Chord Substitution Chart for 5 different keys.)

For example, in the **Key of G:**

Scale/Chord Notes:	G	A	B	C	D	E	F#**	G
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Those numbers are converted to Roman numerals so that they become:

I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	VII	I
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** (The **seventh note/chord** is usually used as a diminished chord and can be used as a minor or a major chord. Use of the seventh chord is another topic.)

ABOUT SUBSTITUTING CHORDS

A chord can be substituted for another chord but should *support* the melody.

Looking at chord substitution in terms of *supporting the melody*, notice how, in the chart below (taken from the CHORD SUBSTITUTION CHART -- Key of G), the **iii / B** minor chord (**B-D-F#**) and the **vi / E** minor chord (**E-G-B**) each share two notes that are the same as the **I / G** chord of **G-B-D**. If either the B minor or E minor chord have a shared note in common with the G chord, then the minor chord can be used in place of the G chord.

2nd part of the Key of G chart

Substitutions:

Tonic Note of Chords

iiim	I	vim
Bm	G	Em
D	B	G
F#	D	B

Substituting the appropriate chord will *support* the melody where a **I** chord was used because it keeps the melody “flowing.” The common melody note of the two chords continue to be sustained by the different but *related* chord giving it another sound.

Keep in mind that not all substitutions will sound musically appropriate to the song or tune. This is where “trial and error” and practicing the substituting of chords will come into play. Let your ear be your guide. One chord might sound right in one place but wrong in another. Consider the context, how the alternate chord works with or depends upon the other chords around it and how they fit together.

If it sounds right or “out of kilter,” so to speak, you’ll hear it. Since you are experimenting, play your piece through, each time using a different substituted chord. One way to hear how it actually sounds is to record your tune on a tape recorder, play it back then decide which chord change is most pleasing to you.

On the CHORD SUBSTITUTION CHART under “Substitutions” are listed each of the I, IV and V chords that have notes in common with the ii, iii and vi chords.

Using “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” as a simple example of chord changes, the substituted minor chords are above the major chords in () parenthesis. On the first line, first measure, a G chord is given. However, the last two notes of that measure are a D note, the D note also being in a B minor chord (iii chord on the chart). Notice how they are “connected.” Therefore, the B minor can be used in place of the major G chord. It works **and** it keeps the D melody note sustaining though using a different chord.

TWINKLE, TWINKLE LITTLE STAR

G (Bm) (Am) (Bm) (Bm) (Am) (Em)
 G C G C G D⁷ G
 G C G D⁷ G C G D⁷
 G C G C G D⁷ G

1. Use the chart to see how the other minor substitutions on the first line are related to the major chords below them.
2. Play the first line using only the major chords. Play the tune again using only the Bm chord at the end of the 2nd measure and the Em at the end of the last measure. Then play the first line again but using all the minors shown. Notice the differences using all major chords first, a touch of minor chords the second time and almost all minors the third time.
3. See what substitutions can be made for the middle and last line of the tune on your own.

HINTS:

1. While minor chords can be substituted for the major chords, the reverse is true in that major chords can be used in place of minor chords. On the chart look at the common notes shared in major and minor chords.
2. A iii chord can be used in place of the V chord. This is known as a “fake V” chord.
3. The IV and V chord define the I chord. The iii and vi chords give options for resolutions.

It's a brave new musical world when you begin to use these chord choices in your playing. Good luck and beautiful music.

CHORD SUBSTITUTION CHART

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	M	m	m	M	M	m
KEY of C	I	ii_m	iii_m	IV	V	vi_m
Tonic Note of Chords	C	D_m	E_m	F	G	A_m
	E	F	G	A	B	C
	G	A	B	C	D	E

Key of C: no #'s / no b's

Substitutions:

	iii _m	I	vi _m
Tonic Note of Chords	E_m	C	A_m
	G	E	C
	B	G	E

	ii _m	IV	vi _m
Tonic Note of Chords	D_m	F	A_m
	F	A	C
	A	C	E

	V	iii _m
Tonic Note of Chords	G	E_m
	B	G
	D	B

	ii _m	V7	iii _m
Tonic Note of Chords	D_m	G	E_m
	F	B	G
	A	D	B
		F	

	M	m	m	M	M	m
Key of G	I	ii_m	iii_m	IV	V	vi_m
Tonic Note of Chords	G	A_m	B_m	C	D	E_m
	B	C	D	E	F#	G
	D	E	F#	G	A	B

Key of G: one # (F#)

Substitutions:

	iii _m	I	vi _m
Tonic Note of Chords	B_m	G	E_m
	D	B	G
	F#	D	B

	ii _m	IV	vi _m
Tonic Note of Chords	A_m	C	E_m
	C	E	G
	E	G	B

	V	iii _m
Tonic Note of Chords	D	B_m
	F#	D
	A	F#

	ii _m	V7	iii _m
Tonic Note of Chords	A_m	D	B_m
	C	F#	D
	E	A	F#
		C	

	M	m	m	M	M	m
Key of D	I	ii_m	iii_m	IV	V	vi_m
Tonic Note of Chords	D	E_m	F#_m	G	A	B_m
	F#	G	A	B	C#	D
	A	B	C#	D	E	F#

Key of D: two #'s (F# / C#)

Substitutions:

	iii _m	I	vi _m
Tonic Note of Chords	F#_m	D	B_m
	A	F#	D
	C#	A	F#

	ii _m	IV	vi _m
Tonic Note of Chords	E_m	G	B_m
	G	B	D
	B	D	F#

	V	iii _m
Tonic Note of Chords	A	F#_m
	C#	A
	E	C#

	ii _m	V7	iii _m
Tonic Note of Chords	E_m	A	F#_m
	G	C#	A
	B	E	C#
		G	

Key of A

M	m	m	M	M	m
I	ii_m	iii_m	IV	V	vi_m
Tonic Note of Chords					
A	B_m	C#_m	D	E	F#_m
C#	D	E	F#	G#	A
E	F#	G#	A	B	C#

Key of A: three #'s (F# / C# / G#)

Substitutions:

iii_m	I	vi_m	ii_m	IV	vi_m	V	iii_m	ii_m	V7	iii_m
Tonic Note of Chords										
C#_m	A	F#_m	B_m	D	F#_m	E	C#_m	B_m	E	C#_m
E	C#	A	D	F#	A	G#	E	D	G#	E
G#	E	C#	F#	A	C#	B	G#	F#	B	G#
									D	

KEY of F

M	m	m	M	M	m
I	ii_m	iii_m	IV	V	vi_m
Tonic Note of Chords					
F	G_m	A_m	Bb	C	D_m
A	Bb	C	D	E	F
C	D	E	F	G	A

Key of F: one b (Bb)

Substitutions:

iii_m	I	vi_m	ii_m	IV	vi_m	V	iii_m	ii_m	V7	iii_m
Tonic Note of Chords										
A_m	F	D_m	G_m	Bb	D_m	C	A_m	G_m	C	A_m
C	A	F	Bb	D	F	E	C	Bb	E	C
E	C	A	D	F	A	G	E	D	G	E
									Bb	

Major Chords: **I** **IV** **V**
(M)

M	m	m	M	M	m
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi

Minor Chords: **ii** **iii** **vi**
(m)

Relative minor chord:

- 1.) The **vi** chord is always the relative minor to the **I** chord.
- 2.) The **vi** chord always shares the same key signature (#'s / b's) as the **I** chord.

EX: In the key of C -- no #'s or b's

The **I** chord is the **C** chord / The **vi** chord is the **A_m**
They share the same key signature; therefore, the A_m scale has no #'s or b's (in the chord or its scale).

Dimished Chords: no VII or vii chords are given.

The 7th note of the scale in any key is considered a diminished chord. There are 3 diminished chords, each having 4 notes which are equal distance apart (three 1/2 steps). Each note get equal importance & can be called by any one of its four note names. Having 3 dim. chords gives every note in the chromatic scale.

C -- **D# (Eb)** -- **F# (Gb)** -- **A**
G -- **A# (Bb)** -- **C# (Db)** -- **E**
D -- **F** -- **G# (Ab)** -- **B**