

Functional Harmony in the General Music Classroom

Presented to the Wyoming Music Educators Association

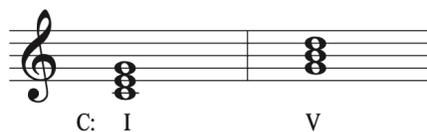
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For many music educators, functional harmony is one of the most challenging concepts to introduce to children. In my personal teaching experience, this was particularly true for children who, up to that point in their schooling, had only played over static accompaniments of drones and melodic ostinati. For me, I did not want my students to simply memorize a pattern of chords; instead, I wanted them to be able to understand the underlying reason certain notes went with certain chords, the role each chord played in a progression, and how to create their own melodies over a given chord progression.

For a student to be able to fully grasp the concept of functional harmony, they must be able to understand the relationship between the melody and the accompaniment. There are, in my experience two different ways of approaching this: through singing and through instrumental activities. Each has their merits, and the most effective learning takes place when both are incorporated. The example in today's session (Rakes of Mallow) comes from Volume III of Orff and Keetman's *Music for Children*. Keeping with Orff and Keetman's intention for the examples in the *Music for Children* volumes, this piece has been altered to meet the needs of today's session.

We started by discussing/reviewing triads with the tonic and dominant triads in C Major.



Next, we began to learn and sing a simple melody:



What triads would fit well with this melody?

C: I I I V V V I I I ? V I I

Note that there is not a “right” answer for the ‘F’ in measure 7. This is an excellent opportunity for discussion and exploration with the class. The IV (F), V⁷ (G7), ii (d), and vii^o (b dim) triads are all possible (though not equal) harmonizations for this pitch. The conversation is further enriched when taking the second beat of the measure (D) into consideration!

With this skeleton in place, I added a new challenge:

What does this mean for the rest of the piece? One possible solution might be:

C: I I I V V V I I I ? V I I

This is, of course, just the “tip of the iceberg!” There are a myriad of possibilities for developing this piece. Possible extensions might include:

- Transpose the piece to F or G to make it more comfortable for the singing voice.
- Explore voicings for accompaniments with 2 and 3 mallets.
- Improvise over the progression
- Continue to develop the melody as presented in *Music for Children*.
- Teach the B section.
- Learn the traditional dance to this tune.
- Create original movement for the music.