Good Chords

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If you are already writing songs, then it is probable you know what chords are, but just in case, here's a quick theory recap:

Usually a song is in a key and in popular western music that will usually be either a major or minor key. This will impact which chords are played.

Chords in the Major Key

In a major key the notes we play are determined by the major scale. Therefore, the chords played will generally be those whose root (bass note) is a note in the major scale.

For example: In the key of 'C', we will only play notes from the scale of C and we will only play chords whose root note is in the scale of C.

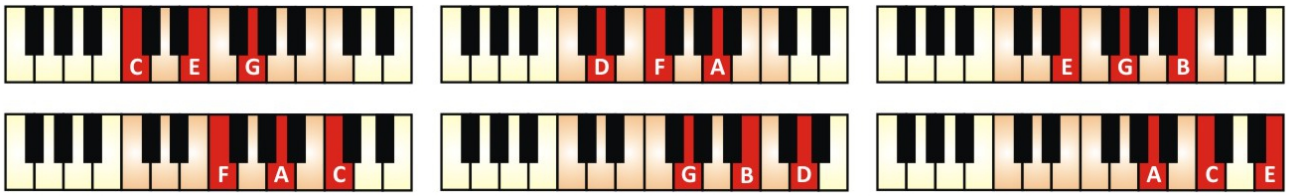
This gives us a useful framework and all we have to do is look at what chords can be made from the notes we are 'allowed'.

As an example let us look at the key of C (although the pattern will be the same in any major key).



If we create chords, one for each note in the scale, we find we can make six regular chords: three major and three minor. The seventh note of the scale produces neither a major nor minor, but rather a diminished chord. It is unusual to use this chord.

In the key of C these chords are: 1) Cmaj, 2) Dm, 3) Em, 4) Fmaj, 5) Gmaj, and 6) Am.



Normally you do not signify a major chord with “maj” unless it is not expected in that key. Minor chords are always signified by “m”. Using numbers to represent each note of the scale, the available chords in a major key can be presented thus:

| 1 | 2m | 3m | 4 | 5 | 6m | 5/7* |

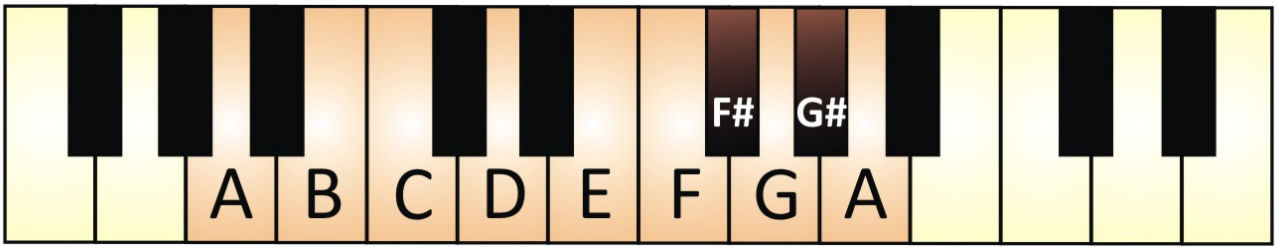
*Because the chord of the seventh note would be diminished it is usual to replace it with a chord of the fifth note over a seventh notes on the bass.

These chords will be the same in every major key.

Chords in the Minor Key

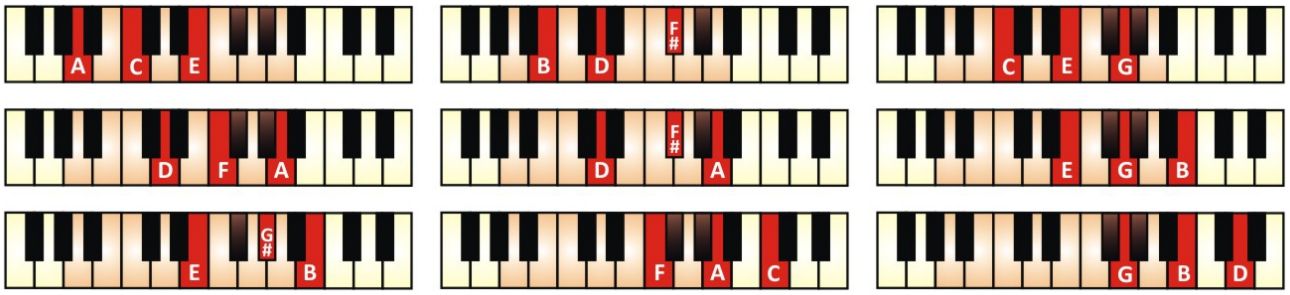
There are more chords available when we play in the minor key because of the two ways we play the 6th and 7th notes in the melodic minor scale (raised on the ascending scale and lowered on the descending).

As an example let us look at the key of Am (although the pattern will be the same in any minor key).



If we create chords, one for each note in the A minor scale, we find we can make nine regular triads, five major and four minor.

In the key of A minor these chords are: 1) Am, 2) Bm, 3) Cmaj, 4) Dm & Dmaj, 5) Em & Emaj, 6) Fmaj, and 7) Gmaj. NB: due to the 6th and 7th notes in the scale being either sharp or natural, the chords rooted on the 4th and 5th can be either major or minor. It would be unusual to use chords rooted on the sharpened 6^{th} or 7^{th}.



Using numbers to represent each note of the scale the available chords in any minor key can be presented thus:
| 1m | 2m | 3 | 4 or 4m | 5 or 5m | 6 | 7 |

These nine chords will be the same in every minor key.

Modulation

Sometimes composers deliberately use notes not found in the key they are in. When this happens it is called modulation. This is particularly common in Jazz and Blues music, but is also found in classical and popular music.

Modulation is best used sparingly. Remember, chord sequence with modulation can make a tune more difficult to sing. However, when used well, modulation can really lift a song by providing an interesting twist in the music.

Getting Creative

The Chords of your song are the one part of the song that can afford to be a little complex. Whereas the words and tune need to be sung by people with no musical training, the chords are usually played by those with at least some musical experience.

While the tune needs to be simple and a little repetitive, you can have a lot more fun with the chords. You probably want to keep the musical complexity to a medium grade, given that many church musicians are self taught, but there is still lots of scope to be really creative with chord structure.