Intro to the “Fundamental Progression”

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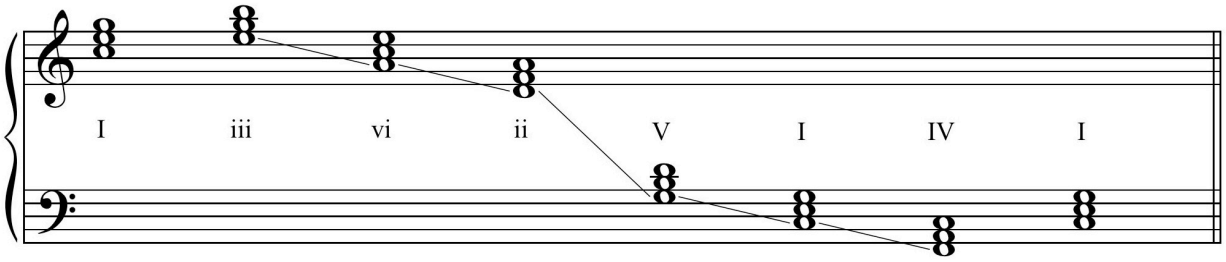
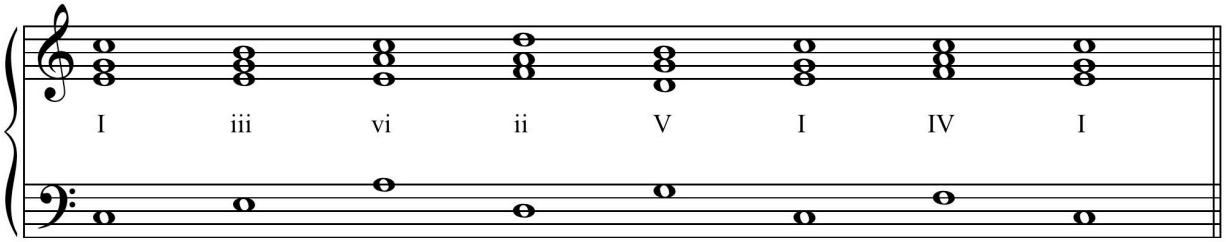
The Fundamental Progression by Fifth of Primary Root to Tonic, or simply “Fundamental Progression,” is a tool that helps composers to create powerful harmonic progressions. The Progression is based on the satisfying pull of the V chord to the I chord (known as the “dominant relationship”).

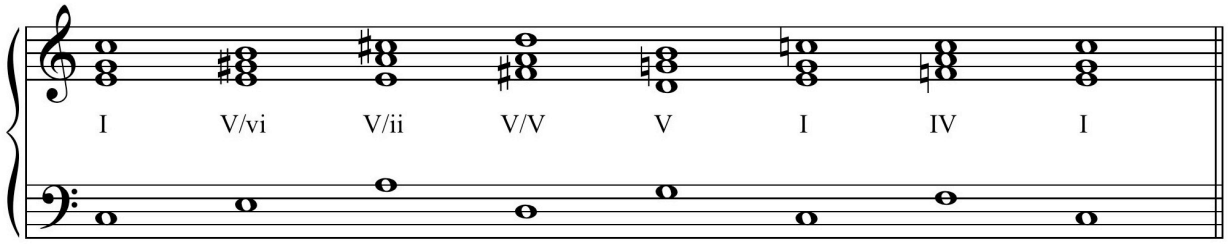
In its simplest form, then, the FP jumps from the I chord up to the iii, then falls downward by fifth until it reaches the plagal IV chord below the root, and ascends back to I:

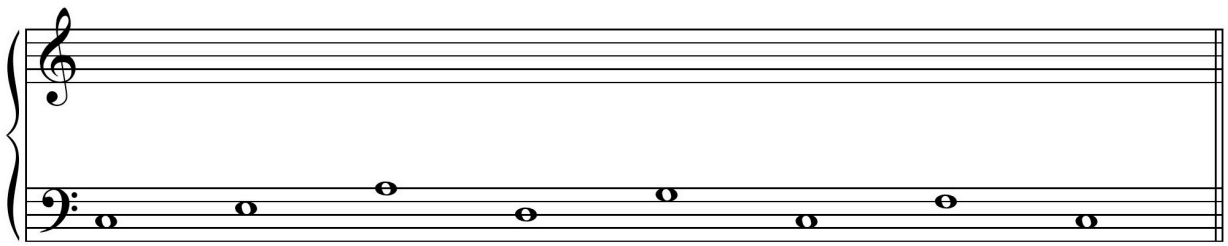
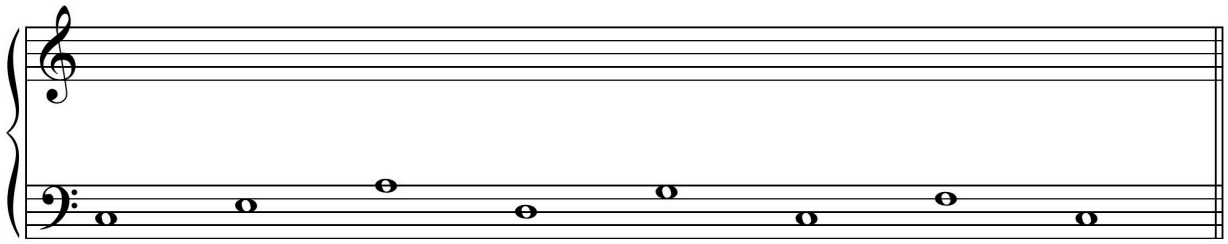
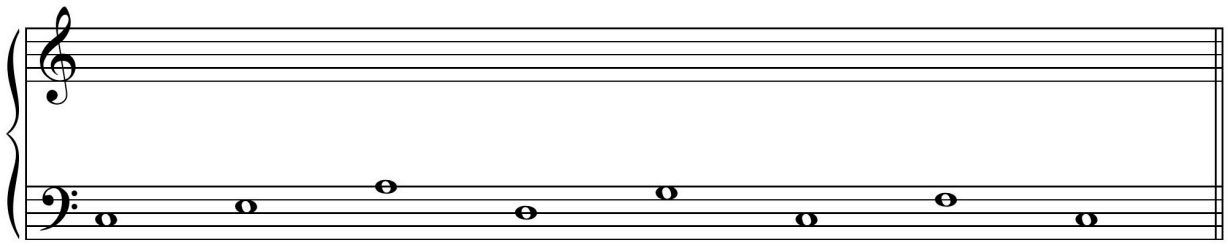
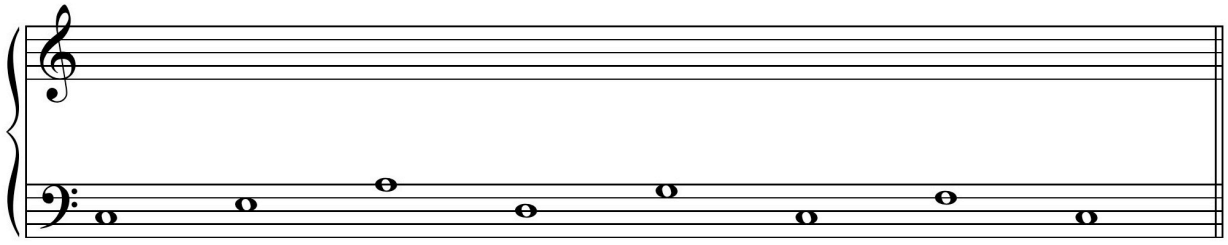
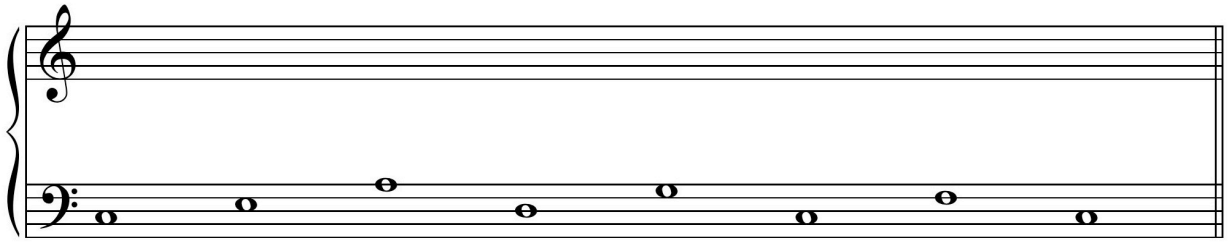


But because this progression is difficult to play (and not particularly satisfying to listen to), we generally revoice the progression using voice leading like this:



To “juice up” the FP, we can also raise the 3rd degree of any of those minor triads, creating what’s called a “secondary dominant” to the chord that follows and adding additional leading-tone relationships to the harmony:



And of course, composers often mix and match the major and minor versions of these triads to create different harmonic contexts—and there are other ways to modify the basic progression. (Jazz players often add 7ths, for instance.) The important concept illustrated by the FP is that particular harmonies “want” to resolve in particular ways.

What harmonies can you discover based on the Fundamental Progression? Notate a few examples on the staves below: