

A Happy Ending

Recognizing Different Types of Cadences

■ In written language, punctuation gives structure to sentences and phrases. In music, cadences have a similar function. A cadence is a chord progression that either breaks up or concludes a musical phrase or a piece. If we continue to use this writing analogy, strong cadences are like periods, and cadences that sound less resolute are like commas. The chorus from “Oh Susanna” is shown here (twice) to demonstrate various types of cadences.

Authentic Cadence: This is the strongest, most final sounding cadence. The chord progression is V (a chord with the fifth note of the scale as the root note) to I (a chord with the first note of the scale as the root note). Using a IV chord before the V chord makes the authentic cadence sound even more convincing.

Half Cadence: A half cadence appears halfway through a phrase (e.g., in measure eight in a 16-bar phrase), and always ends on a V chord. Because our ears are accustomed to phrases ending with V-I, the use of the V chord grabs the listener’s attention and marks the half cadence as a significant point in the phrase. However, it’s failure to resolve to I leaves the listener with a sense of incompleteness until the full cadence. Instead of feeling final, it feels like a momentary resting point.

Deceptive Cadence: Just like its name suggests, this cadence tricks the ears. It occurs when a song or piece approaches what sounds like it should be the end of a complete phrase, but instead of resolving to I, the V chord goes somewhere else, prolonging the final cadence and the ending of the phrase. In a deceptive cadence, the V chord most often moves to the vi chord, but can also move to ii or IV. The vi chord and ii chord are especially surprising in this context because, not only is the chord different than expected, but the quality of the chord is also different (i.e., a minor chord in a major key, and vice versa).

Plagal Cadence: This cadence moves from the IV chord directly to the I chord to conclude a phrase. It is

Half
Authentic

Half
Deceptive Plagal

often called the “Amen Cadence” because of its frequent use in church hymns.

Jazz Cadence: Also referred to as a turnaround, this cadence frequently found in jazz music is similar to the authentic cadence, but is preceded by a ii chord (ii-V-I).

Backdoor Progression: In this jazzy progression, the resolution is “sneak up on,” because the tonic (the root note of the I chord) is approached in a somewhat unusual way, by a whole step. The chords used are iv - \flat VII⁷ - I. (The four-note chord \flat VII⁷ is built on the seventh note of the scale, lowered by a half step.)

Besides the chords themselves, rhythmic placement can also determine how strong or weak a cadence is. A cadence with the final chord falling on a downbeat sounds more convincing than one with the final chord falling on an upbeat. These used to be called “masculine” and “feminine” endings, but are now referred to by more politically correct terms: metrically accented and metrically unaccented cadences. In addition, longer note values will give a cadence a more resolute feeling.

