

# The 7 Most Common Chords in Orthodox 4-Part Music

In the two most common key signatures in Orthodox 4-Part Music: *G* and *F*

## 1. “Amen Pitch”

The image shows two musical staves for each key signature. The left key signature is G major (one sharp), and the right is F major (one flat). Each staff has a treble clef on top and a bass clef on the bottom. The notes are: Soprano (treble clef), Alto (treble clef), Tenor (bass clef), and Bass (bass clef). In G major, the notes are G4, B4, G4, G3. In F major, the notes are F4, A4, F4, F3. The notes are highlighted in blue. Below the notes, the text "A - men." is written.

This chord is by far the most common and is referred to by Alex as “Amen Pitch,” because it is the chord used in response to the priest whenever a quick, sung “Amen” is called for. Both Alto and Bass sing the priest’s note (i.e. the Do, the 1, the root note, etc.) in their respective octaves; the Soprano sings the 3<sup>rd</sup> (Mi) while Tenor supplies the 5<sup>th</sup> (Sol). For training purposes, you will see this chord in **BLUE** in the next few handouts.

## 2. “Dominant” / V Chord

The image shows two musical staves for each key signature. The left key signature is G major (one sharp), and the right is F major (one flat). Each staff has a treble clef on top and a bass clef on the bottom. The notes are: Soprano (treble clef), Alto (treble clef), Tenor (bass clef), and Bass (bass clef). In G major, the notes are B4, D5, G4, G3. In F major, the notes are A4, C5, F4, F3. The notes are highlighted in green.

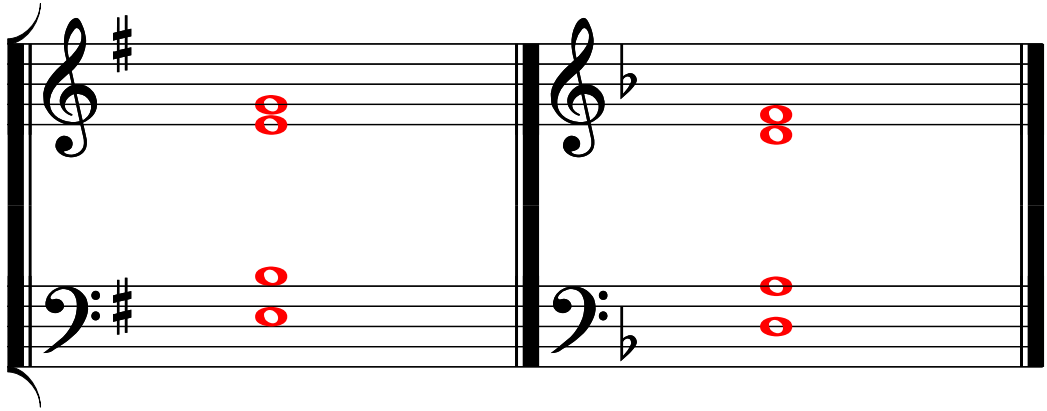
This is the second most common chord. Alex has a specific hand signal for this one: he makes brackets with both hands’ thumb and pointer finger and motions downward to imply that we will start “lower” than “Amen Pitch”. Tenor gets the easy part here, because they have the same note as “Amen Pitch”. Soprano is down a whole step to the 2 (Re) and Alto is down a half step to the 7 (Ti). Finally, in classic fashion, the Bass goes down to the 5<sup>th</sup> (Sol) which is a perfect octave down (“8vb”) from the Tenor. As you will see, it is very common in the Obikhod Tones for this chord to resolve back to “Amen Pitch”. However, in some instances, this chord IS the resolution. You will see this chord in **GREEN** moving forward.

## 3. “Inverted”

The image shows two musical staves for each key signature. The left key signature is G major (one sharp), and the right is F major (one flat). Each staff has a treble clef on top and a bass clef on the bottom. The notes are: Soprano (treble clef), Alto (treble clef), Tenor (bass clef), and Bass (bass clef). In G major, the notes are G4, G3, B4, D5. In F major, the notes are F4, F3, A4, C5. The notes are highlighted in teal.

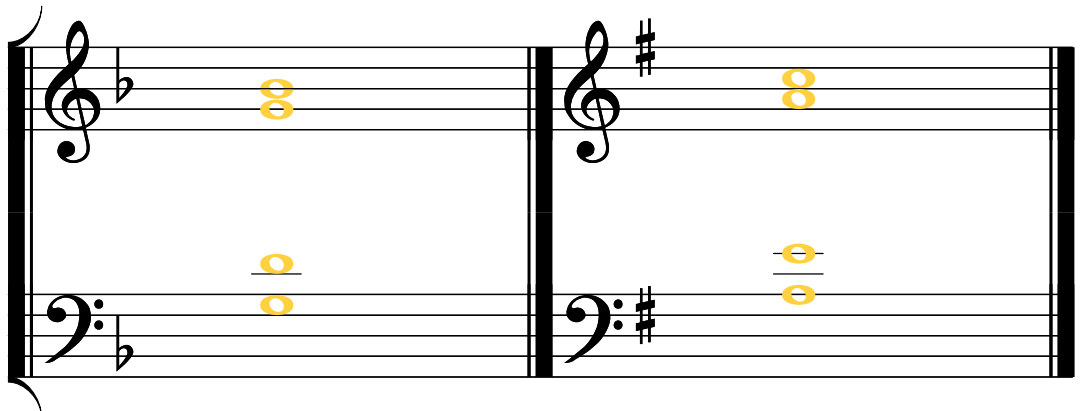
Third most common, this chord is nothing more than “Amen Pitch” inverted downwards. Soprano goes down to where Alto was (the 1/Do/the priest’s note), Alto goes down to where Tenor was (5<sup>th</sup>/Sol) and Tenor goes to where Soprano was (“8vb” or down one octave) on the 3<sup>rd</sup>/Mi. Bass remains on the 1/Do just as with “Amen Pitch.” Alex’s hand signal for this chord: Pointing down. This chord will be shown in **TEAL**.

#### 4. The “Relative Minor”



At a notable 4<sup>th</sup> place, this chord calls to mind many of our favorite hymns (Holy God #1, “Lord, Now Lettest,” “Thy Resurrection, O Christ our Savior” – LIC Tone 6, etc.). In terms of getting to this chord from “Amen Pitch,” the responsibility of finding the “Relative Minor” of the key is left to the Alto and Bass. If in the Key of *G*, the Relative Minor is always an *E*. In the Key of *F*, everything is moved down one whole step, so the Relative Minor is *D* (as shown above). Both Altos and Bases would benefit immensely from learning to recognize where the Relative Minor is in each of the above keys and likewise, when they are singing it. As for the Soprano, getting from “Amen Pitch” to this chord is simple, in that once again, the move is down to the Alto note or the “root” of the key signature (which is now the “minor 3<sup>rd</sup>” above the Alto’s Relative Minor). Tenor moves to what used to be the Major 3<sup>rd</sup> but is now, because of the Alto/Bass movement to the Relative Minor, the 5<sup>th</sup> of this new, minor chord. EXAMPLE: The “Amen” (in “Amen Pitch”) after “O Lord, save the God-fearing” that transitions to Holy God #1: there you go; the Relative Minor. Something relatively complicated that we do practically every Sunday. This chord will be **RED** as we progress.

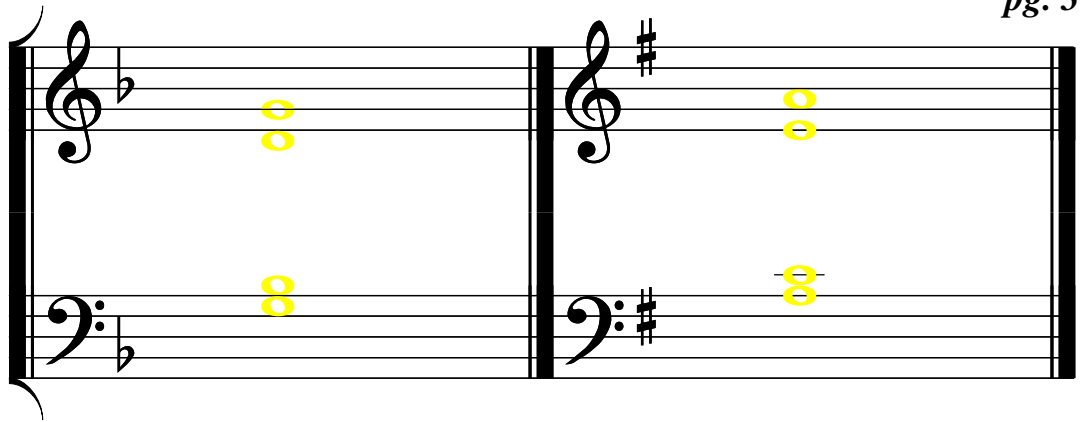
#### 5. Minor “Up”



At #5 we have the high minor chord or Minor “Up” which will normally only be written in the key of *F*. For continuity’s sake, it is displayed here in *G* as well, but rarely if at all will it ever be seen in that key. Transitioning from “Amen Pitch” to this chord is also simple: Alto, Tenor, and Bass all go up a whole step and Soprano goes up a HALF step (thus making the chord minor by setting the 3<sup>rd</sup>). Here are two examples of our choir accomplishing this transition on a regular basis: **1.** Beginning of Panahkida: The first “Amen” (sung in “Amen Pitch”) followed immediately by “Holy God” which starts with this Minor “Up” chord. **2.** “Amen” – “Christ is Risen” #1. Increasing our knowledge of this chord and when it occurs will help us to transition more confidently and accurately to it without having to stop and re-pitch. Failure to recognize this chord can lead and has led to confusion, especially in Prokeimenons. Although this chord is in 5<sup>th</sup> place, it’s a ‘must know’. You will see this chord in **ORANGE** moving forward.

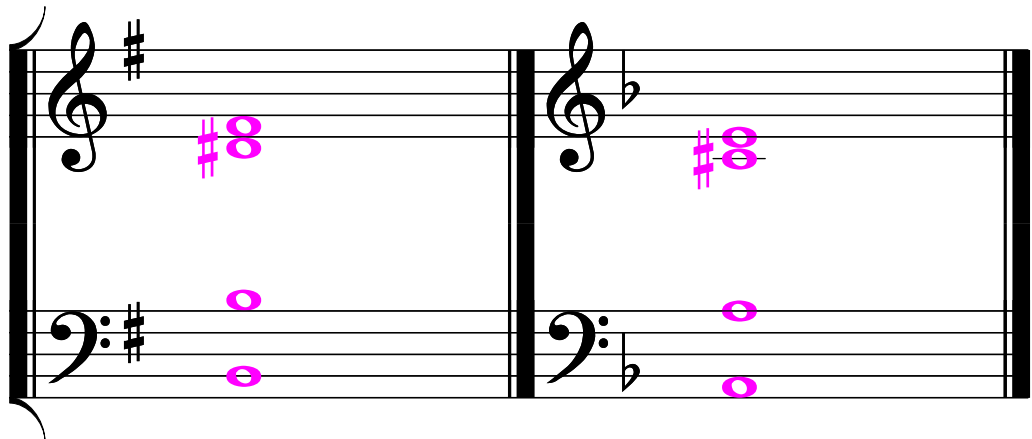
#### 6. “Inverted Minor” (next page)

**6.**  
**“Inverted  
Minor”**



#6 is nothing more than #5 inverted downwards. Now the Tenor sets the chord minor with the 3<sup>rd</sup> (where the Soprano was in chord #5 “8va” - an octave higher) while the Soprano shifts down to where the Alto was (the 1 of the chord) and Alto moves to the 5<sup>th</sup>, where the Tenor was in chord #5. Bass remains on the 1. This chord can be seen in the Key of *G*, but most of the time, it will be in *F*. It is crucial that the Tenor recognizes that in the Key of *F*, the *B* is flatted. Therefore, if Tenor is on this note and Bass is a 3<sup>rd</sup> below (as shown above), it is a **minor chord**. Example: “The Lord is King” in Regular Tone 6 begins and ends with this chord. Example 2: “Having Beheld the Resurrection of Christ” at Pascha. Moving forward, you won’t see this chord much, because none of the Obikhod “Lord, I Call” or Tropar Tones begin with it. However, if you do, you barely will, because it will be in **YELLOW**. (sorry...running out of colors)

**7.**  
**“Dominant  
Minor”**



Finally, the #7 most common chord in Orthodox 4-Part music is only ever seen in the context of #4 chord, the “Relative Minor.” You will see this chord either leading into the “Relative Minor” (Example 1: Old “**Praise ye the Name**” / Example 2: “**I-saiah saw the Never-Setting Light**”) OR coming immediately from the “Relative Minor” chord (i.e. in “O Lord, our Lord” – “**the work of Thy fin- gers, the moon and the stars...**”). In terms of when this chord begins a hymn or response, the director will always (or should always) still intone the “Relative Minor” chord and motion to the choir to start lower (using the “finger brackets” described in chord #2). What that means specifically is that both Soprano and Alto start a half step lower than the pitches given and the Bass starts down on the 5<sup>th</sup> (Sol) of the Relative Minor chord, solidifying this dominant or lead chord (see above and refer back to chord #4). You will see the “Dominant Minor” chord in **THIS COLOR**.

Every single Orthodox 4-Part Hymn sung in the past and currently in our parish begins with one of these 7 chords (with the exception of two chords that didn’t quite make the list: LIC Tone 1 and Tropar Tone 3 – both will be discussed in the next two handouts). You may see them in different keys than *G* and *F*, but they are the same. Hopefully this handout has given you a better understanding of how our beloved hymns are structured; we will build on these concepts as we begin to discuss the Tones and Modes to which these 7 chords are prevalent. May God bless your efforts!