

Reading Mark Simos “Chord Charts From Hell”

Mark Simos

”Welcome to Heaven; here’s your harp. Welcome to Hell; here’s your Mark Simos chord chart!” — Tom Rozum, after reading the chart for the song “Dangerous Boys” on Mark Simos’ Crazy Faith (Devachan Music CD4347)

As a songwriter whose focus is getting other people to play and sing my tunes and songs, I have been gradually learning about how to provide chord charts, holding mostly to the conventions of the so-called “Nashville number system” notation. The great advantage of this system is that instead of using specific chord names, it uses numbers to stand for scale degrees in a functional sense. This kind of functional notation, in the classical music world, usually shows up as impressive and intimidating looking Roman numerals; the Nashville session cats simply turned these Roman numerals into regular numbers, so that the dominant chord is written not V^7 but as 5^7 —end of story except for a few other details. The problem I’ve run into is that many of my songs do weird things that typical Nashville country songs don’t do. In some cases I’ve had to invent my own additions to the notation; in some cases I’m probably just doing it plain wrong!

In any case, I’ve prepared this hand-out to help you use the charts I provide for my songs. If you’re familiar with Nashville notation, this may help explain some of the things I do differently than accepted convention. If you’re not used to reading these charts, this hand-out may be of some use but is not intended as a thorough introduction to the Nashville number system, which has been well-described in a number of readily available books.

This is an evolving document, as my practice is evolving all the time. I welcome your feedback. Please email comments, questions and suggestions to: simos@devachan.com.

1. **Double-time notation.** Most chord charts, Nashville or otherwise, use a single chord symbol to stand for what feels like a “measure” given the pace of the song. In the exceptional cases where a chord changes twice within a measure, a bar is put under the two quicker chords (suggesting an eighth-note bar from staff notation, I believe).

However, in many of my songs the chords, *as a rule*, change more rapidly than this. For example, in a fast $3/4$ time song, my chordal rhythmic ‘default’ sense is often to change chords on beats 1 and 3 of the measure, alternating with occasional movement on 1 and 2. I’ve come to realize that this chordal style derives in large part from my experience as a Celtic accompanist, where chord progressions are felt as separate, contrapuntal, near-melodic lines of their own.

Whatever the reason, the fact that my chords change so often has led me to adopt a charting style where, in general, I use two chord ‘positions’ where most people would use just one. In doing this, I’m perhaps departing from convention to some extent; but I am obeying the broader principle to strive for maximum economy and clarity of notation. If a chart would wind up with more underlined, half-time chord changes than the default chord rhythm, then the exception has begun to be the rule and a shift to a double-time notation makes sense.

2. **Repeated chords.** Many charts I've seen write a new chord name even when the same chord repeats over many measures. (This stylistic preference is related, naturally, to the afore-mentioned tendency to use one chord symbol per measure.) For example, four measures of the 1 chord would be written: < 1 1 1 1>. This has led to a number of the short-hand phrases like: "eleven fifteen" (mnemonic for <1 1 1 5>), "fourteen eleven" (for <1 4 11>) and the like.

My preference is to use a "place-holder" indicator like a back-slash (\) to mark the continuing time of a held chord. For example, for two measures of 6/4 time that fill a line of text, rather than writing:

6- 6- 6- 6- 6- 6-

I would write:

6- \ \ 6- \ \

... which, in my opinion, scans quicker to the eye the concept of "2 groups of three beats" than the more standard option. Of course, in reality since a typical chart would write only one chord for each measure, the fair comparison is to...

6- 6-

... which does not make my method come off so well, I admit! But if you imagine that in various places in the chord progression you will see things like:

6- \ 5 1 \ 1/3
4 1/4 \ 2- \ \

... the advantages of double-time charting and 'chord continuation' marks become more evident. Also, my rule is to repeat the chord explicitly at the beginning of what would be each measure; so that usually the eye is tracking no more than 2 or 3 "ticks" to indicate whether we are in 3/4 or 4/4 time, etc.

[At least one notational problem with this approach of mine is that in typical Nashville notation minor chords are indicated with a hyphen after the chord number (e.g., "6-" for 6 minor); it can be difficult, especially with hand-written charts, to make sure that the 'placeholder' backslash isn't mistaken for that minor chord hyphen indicator. Spacing can help that; often, in subsequent lines we will want chords on corresponding beats of the phrase to line up vertically, which means we must leave enough space for the widest of the chord indicators (for example, 3-⁷). This will naturally create some spatial separation between hyphen and back-slash. There is also the possibility of visually confusing the "placeholder" backslash with the forward slash used for "chord over bass note" indications like "1/3"; and for the "1" chord itself, especially when hand-drawn in a sans-serif style.]

3. **Time signature changes.** Many of my songs switch time signatures, sometimes in the course of a single line. While this looks very complicated in the chart, it is usually motivated by a particular approach to rhythmically setting lines so that, as much as possible, the natural lilt of the spoken word is honored in the musical rhythm. For most songs, this means lining up words against regular series of beats—but on occasion, for particular musical effect, I break these rules and set lines to odd

rhythms, often derived or modeled from the odd meters of Balkan, Scandinavian or Middle Eastern music. Figuring out how to chart these odd signatures, and these signature transition points, has proved to be quite tricky, in part because there are multiple goals: cueing singers for the desired way of hearing the phrasing, where to place pauses and breaths to support the way of scanning and grouping the words that makes most lyrical sense; vs. making the passage easy (or as easy as possible) for instrumentalists; and so forth.

Quite often there are multiple ways of interpreting or ‘parsing’ a given rhythmic phrase. (For example, quite often there will be an extra two beats in a line. This could be heard, counted, and written as: 4 beats followed by 6; or 6 followed by 4; or 4 then 2 then 4.) In such cases, as the songwriter preparing the chart rather than a transcriber trying to guess the composer’s intent, I usually opt for one of the more explicit 4-6 or 6-4 combinations, rather than leaving it ambiguous with the 4-2-4 notation. In my opinion, the latter notation still leaves both singer and player with the need to decide how to phrase the passage in a fluid way, and rarely is the 2-beat inner phrase intended to stand alone, detached from both preceding and succeeding phrase.

When rhythm changes from, say, 4/4 to 5/4, there are two notational options: indicate the shift with an explicit signature marking; or, using the aligned chord symbols on the chart, simply extend the 5/4 phrase with one extra chord. The latter option makes sense when the rhythm is x/4 rather than x/8, because then the rhythm is heard more in the sense of phrasing. On the other hand, in terms of notational clarity, especially when the extra beat involves a held chord, there’s a danger of misreading the chart:

$$\begin{array}{cccc} 1 & \backslash & 4 & 5 \\ 4 & \backslash & 5 & 4 & 5 \end{array}$$

leaves little ambiguity, whereas:

$$\begin{array}{cccc} 1 & \backslash & 4 & 5 \\ 4 & \backslash & 5 & \backslash & \backslash \end{array}$$

... might be more clearly written as:

$$\begin{array}{cccc} & 1 & \backslash & 4 & 5 \\ (5/4) & 4 & \backslash & 5 & \backslash & \backslash \end{array}$$

(Note that if the latter were written more conventionally with one chord per measure, it would look like this:

$$1 \quad \underline{4 \ 5} \quad 4 \quad 5 \text{ (3 beats)}$$

with some sort of indicator of an extra ‘half position’ on the final 5 chord.) The faster the chord movement, the more the explicit signature seems to make sense, because the ear is more likely to hear the extra beats as forming a real metrical *rhythmic* pattern rather than a phrasing pattern or an extra held beat. But this leads to additional complications, discussed below.

4. Whenever there is a major change of time signature, there is always some ambiguity as to how the transition must be made. For example, if you switch from 4/4 to 5/8 or 7/8, do you preserve the constancy of the underlying eighth note (in effect, then, moving from what's felt as 8/8 to 7/8)? Or do you preserve the overall measure period, switching from a division of that measure into four, to a division into 5, or 7, etc.? Knowing which type of transition is intended is really important in traditional music, when a medley switches from a jig to a reel, for example. But I employ such rhythmic techniques a lot in my songwriting as well; and so these problems come up for me in the preparation of charts. For now, the best I can do is indicate the transition with some side annotation.
5. With some of these rhythmic changes and variations, there is a certain amount of performer's discretion involved. I'm a great admirer of some of the early Dylan recordings, where you hear the tremendous rhythmic and phrasing freedom of his playing and singing. If you were to try to "chart out" much of this music it would appear endlessly complex, but as he played it and as one hears it, it is very intuitive and loose.

Over time, I've come to see these elements in my own songs as much more malleable and amenable to performer's interpretation. So I have found that in my demos of songs, I might play something in what clocks out as 7/8 time, but 'stretching' it just a bit to keep it in 4/4 does no real harm to the integrity of the song.

In some cases, there are clear alternate possibilities, which I will indicate by putting parentheses around certain optional chords. Where the option is to change a chord rather than keep on the same one, I will indicate this by putting the alternate chords above the main line of the chords and in parens. In some cases, particularly the end of lines, there is the option of leaving an extra beat or two to provide some more breathing room. In those cases I'll put the chords on the optional beats in parens within the main line of the chord chart (most often this will come at the end of written out lines, which will generally coincide with the ends of important lines or stanzas).

When there are accented anticipations and other syncopated beats, the line between these different metrical feels can become even more subtle. So: use the charts to understand my intent as best you can, but then by all means make the song your own. (Why am I bothering to even say this? You will anyway...)

I hope these comments make the chord charts provided here easier for you to understand and use. Please email comments, questions and suggestions to: simos@devachan.com.