

What is a cadence?

In simple terms, a “cadence” is the pair of chords that harmonise the end of a phrase - that is to say, the final two chords that underpin the conclusion of a melody, or a section of melody.

The majority of music phrases, at least in classical music, choose from a surprisingly limited range of chord-pairs, and even music which modulates (changes to a different key), will usually pick from the same small set based around the notes in the new (temporary) key.

This short article defines the principal sorts of cadence, at the level normally found in the Aural section of Classical Guitar Graded Exams, and doesn't cover the more exotic cadences that can be constructed.

Naming the chords

In order to name the chords, we traditionally use the key-independent names such as Dominant, or key-independent degrees of the scale, such as V. My “Degrees of the Scale” article defines these families of names.

Seeing inside the chords

In Classical Guitar, chord names are not written in the music, and so there is an element of detective work to tie together the notes on the page and the chords they make up. My “Three Chord Trick” article includes a list of the notes in the common chords for the common guitar keys, and sure enough, the principal contenders for the chords in a cadence are the same chords as in the three chord trick.

The perfect cadence

The perfect cadence is the cadence that brings closure to a piece, and is V to I.

Here is an example in the key of C that has been tailored to fit on guitar.



The plagal cadence

Often called “the amen cadence”, this also brings closure but does not have the finality of the leading note rising to the tonic. The progression is IV to I and often the melody stays on the tonic, as in the example here.



The imperfect cadence

Not so much imperfect musically, but rather simply the opposite of the perfect cadence - one that moves the phrase to the dominant (without a clear modulation involving a change of key and an accidental), and leaves the phrase there, ready for an answering phrase that returns the music home. The progression is I to V.



The interrupted cadence

Strictly speaking, the interrupted cadence is a perfect cadence that is diverted from V to anywhere other than I, often II or VI (which are minor chords). It generates a feeling of tension, where the expected resolution doesn't come.



See also the Degrees of the Scale article and the Three Chord Trick article