

## Sus Chords

'Sus' chords. You hear this from time to time and think "what is 'sus' and what does it mean?"

Chords you see written as a 'Sus4' for example are suspended chords.

Their origins and how they were originally used are most likely the most poorly understood of all chords in the world of modern / contemporary music.

First off, I'll give you a little insight into where this chord originates from.

'Sus' is an abbreviation for 'suspended'.

Why?

Because one or more notes of a chord can be 'suspended' across from the previous chord.

Huh?

Here's how they work

When you change from one chord to another, some / all notes will change.

This of course depends upon the two chords in question.

Imagine changing from one chord to another, but leaving one of the notes from the original chord at the same note value.

This note is just hanging there, dissonant [meaning that it's not a note belonging to the next chord].

So this note is hanging over from the previous chord – being 'suspended'.

Finally this 'suspended' note resolves onto a note that is 'consonant' to the target chord.

This means that the suspended note moves to a note that belongs to the next chord.

Not only does the suspended note move to a consonant note, but it moves "step-wise" too.

This means that the note moves by one degree.

This suspended note will therefore create a new and momentary chord in the transition between the first chord and the chord that you're heading for.

This momentary chord is known as a 'suspended' chord.

So as you can see, the 'suspended chord' is the 2nd [middle] chord that is created during a 'chord progression' that contains three chords. Each of these chords can be described in terms of an 'event'.

There are three events in all during a suspension - one for each chord

These events are called 'preparation', 'suspension' and 'resolution'.

Preparation - this is the initial chord where the note that is to be suspended resides [as a consonant].

Think of it as the starting point setting up or 'preparing' the note for the suspension event.

Suspension - this is where the chord changes but the suspended note does not change, so it hangs over from the previous chord and therefore becomes 'dissonant'.

Resolution - the suspended note moves by one degree to become 'consonant' with the target chord.

It's easier to understand when you see it happen note by note.

Example:

In the key of G major a V >> I progression is D >> G

so looking at the notes in the chord change it could look something like this:

D major	>>	G major
F#	>>	G
D	>>	D
A	>>	B
D	>>	G

So to add some colour we can intercept this V >> I with a suspension using for example chord I sus4. The chord progression then becomes V >> I sus4 >> I

Preparation		Suspension		Resolution	
D major	>>	G sus4	>>	G major	
F# [3rd]	>>	G [tonic]	>>	G [tonic]	
D [tonic]	>>	D [5th]	>>	D [5th]	
A [5th]	>>	A [sus4]	>>	B [3rd]	<< the suspension occurs in this voice
D [tonic]	>>	G [tonic]	>>	G [tonic]	

If you look closely you see that the note A is hanging over from the first chord and does not belong to the chord of G. Also notice that during the suspension, the G chord has a note missing because of the suspension.

In this example it is effectively as if the chord change from D >> G occurs but the note A changes later than all of the others which briefly creates a new chord.

Notice also that the G sus4 chord contains root, suspended 4th [from the previous chord] and 5th. The suspended 4th then resolves to the 3rd.

Suspended notes normally resolve downwards and stepwise to the note below in the same key - but that note must be one of those that belongs to the target chord

sus4 >> 3rd,  
 sus2 >> root  
 sus6 >> 5th

Also you can suspend more than one note at a time  
 Imagine moving from one chord to another one note at a time  
 this would therefore cause multiple suspensions

Below is an example of a series of suspensions that would not look out of place in a piece by JS Bach.

G major	>>	Dsus4/6	>>	D sus4	>>	D maj	>>	D7
G [tonic]	>>	G [sus4]	>>	G [sus4]	>>	F# [3rd]	>>	F# [3rd]
D [5th]	>>	D [tonic]	>>	D [tonic]	>>	D [tonic]	>>	C [7th]
B [3rd]	>>	B [sus6]	>>	A [5th]	>>	A [5th]	>>	A [5th]
G [tonic]	>>	D [tonic]	>>	D [tonic]	>>	D [tonic]	>>	D [tonic]

The anomaly of contemporary / modern music:

If you see a chord spelt root, 4th and 5th in isolation [no chord before or after] or alternatively you see a chord progression containing a chord that is spelt this way but the preparation and resolution events do not take place, then it is technically more accurate to describe the chord as 'x5 add11'.

This because no suspension actually takes place.

However, modern music theory contains terminologies and labels that had origins in misunderstanding, slang and ignorance.

Example:

Fender naming the clever new floating bridge as a 'tremolo'.

Tremolo is a fluctuation of volume [which a floating bridge does not do].

Fluctuating pitch [which a floating bridge does do] is called vibrato.

But then, the term 'vibrato arm' although technically correct sounds pretty un-cool.

For me, it's 'whammie' [slang, but at least it's not misuse of an absolute term].

I suspect that the naming / usage of 'sus4' for x5 add 11 could possibly have had similar origins?

As you can see, some of these deviations from the correct terms and labels came to be so widely used and accepted that they stuck and became convention.

So in modern music [Jazz, pop, Rock Metal etc],  
a chord containing a Root, a 4th and a 5th is a Sus4  
a chord containing a Root, a 3rd and a 6th is a Sus6  
a chord containing a Root, a 2nd, and a 5th is a Sus2

note that in a 'true' suspension event, the Sus2 could have also been the root being suspended, but in the 'modern' equivalent, this makes little sense.

When you start using suspensions [the 'old way' that is - and not as a stand-alone x5 add 11] you can arrive at some very expressive results, especially in ballads where you can spin out chord changes.

This is because you're not changing chord en-bloc, so in places you can drift in small pieces from one chord to the next - as in JS Bach harpsichord concerto #1 in Dm 2nd movement  
truly beautiful stuff

Also, when going for the 'big finish' you can string it out with suspensions - as in JS Bach's Toccata and Fuga in Dm [BWV565] during the closing minute or so of the whole piece.  
Breathtaking stuff.

And there's me

A nose bleed, eye gouge, blood 'n' snot, mindless shredder

I'm actually a big user of suspensions in the true sense. My own music is full of them.

They can create incredible amounts of tension within the music that when resolved makes the music feel as though it's taking a sigh of relief.

Tension and release – a very powerful compositional tool indeed.

With imagination, they can add very expressive and dynamic angles to your music, and that's before a single note of a vocal / solo is added on top.

Experiment with this stuff.

It really is a lot of fun and very rewarding once you crack it.