



Music Musings No.8: How to Read Chords !

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How to Read Chords

Chords are the symbols used to describe which notes to use to create harmonies to go with your melody. (See Music Musings No. 3 for a complete list of all 7 chords made from notes of the C scale. These are the chords in the key of C.) Chord symbols often appear above the words or piano music in songbooks. They may look scary -- but, don't worry -- this factsheet will give you the secret to understanding how chords work. Once you understand how to build chords using notes in the key of C (all the white notes), then you can transfer this information to other keys (scales which use combinations of white and black notes).

A chord is made from the 1, 3 and 5 notes of a scale.

Fig. 1) Notes of the C scale:

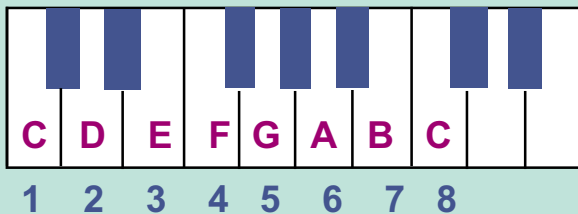
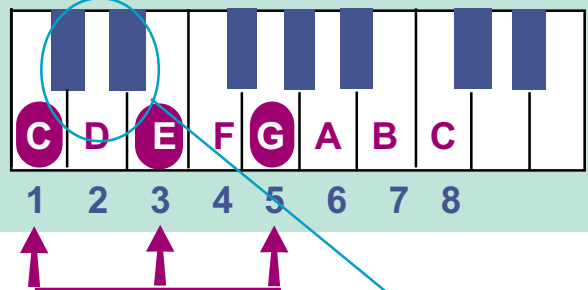


Fig. 2) C Chord (1, 3 & 5 notes)



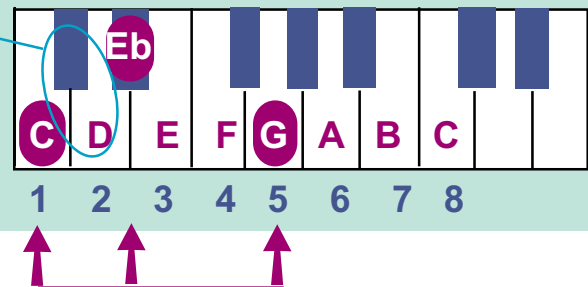
Now take a look at the number of unused notes between the C NOTE and the E NOTE. There are **3 UNUSED NOTES** (the 2 black ones and a white one). This is how you can tell that this is a **MAJOR CHORD** -- the interval (space between) the 1 note and the 3 note is a **MAJOR 3rd**. A chord is **MAJOR** if it has 3 unused notes between 1 and 3 notes, and **minor** if it has 2 unused notes between the 3 and 5 notes.

What's the difference between a Major and a Minor chord?

The only difference between a Major and Minor chord is whether you play the 3 note is a Major 3rd away from the 1 note (with 3 unused notes inbetween), or if it is a Minor 3rd away (with 2 unused notes inbetween).

Play a C Major chord as shown in Fig. 2. Now play the same chord, but change the E note to the next note lower -- this is called flattening the note. When you see a "b" symbol after a letter, that means to play it one key lower. Eb is the note you play in a C minor chord.

Fig. 1) C minor Chord (1, b3 & 5)



Remember, the 3 of a chord is what determines whether it is major or minor. Let's take a look at some chord names:

| Chord name | What notes you play |
|------------|---------------------|
| C | 1 - 3 - 5 |
| Cm | 1 - b3 - 5 |

This 1-3-5 or 1-b3-5 is the foundation of every chord you play. Almost every chord starts with the basic triad (1-3-5) and then adds notes to it. Let's check out what I mean by going to the next page!

How to Read Chords in the key of C

Here is a chart of some common chord names, and guidelines for how to play them. Play all the notes shown in blue boxes to the right of each chord name. Note that they all begin with the 1-3-5 triad, and build from there:

The triad is the building block of chords.

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | b7 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|---|---|---|
| Note numbers: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | b7 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Note names: | C | D | E | F | G | A | Bb | B | C | D |
| CHORD NAME: | | | | | | | | | | |
| C | C | | E | | G | | | | | |
| C6 | C | | E | | G | A | | | | |
| C7 | C | | E | | G | | Bb | | | |
| C9 * | C | | E | | G | | Bb | | | D |
| * a 9th is always built on a dominant 7th (a 7th lowered a half step) | | | | | | | | | | |
| CMaj7 | C | | E | | G | | | B | | |
| CMaj9 * | C | | E | | G | | | B | | D |
| * a Major 9th is always built on a Major 7th (the natural 7th note of the scale) | | | | | | | | | | |

| | 1 | 2 | b3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | b7 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
|---------------|---|---|----------------|---|---|---|----------------|---|---|---|
| Note numbers: | 1 | 2 | b3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | b7 | 7 | 8 | 9 |
| Note names: | C | D | E _b | F | G | A | B _b | B | C | D |
| CHORD NAME: | | | | | | | | | | |
| Cm | C | | E _b | | G | | | | | |
| Cm6 | C | | E _b | | G | A | | | | |
| Cm7 | C | | E _b | | G | | B _b | | | |
| Cm9 | C | | E _b | | G | | B _b | | | D |
| CmMaj7 | C | | E _b | | G | | | B | | |
| CmMaj9 | C | | E _b | | G | | | B | | D |

Parts of a chord:

BASIC CHORD TRIAD:

Notes used:

1 - 3 - 5 (3 is lowered a half step in a minor chord)

Foundation note:

1 (Root -- this is the name of the chord)

Defining notes:

3 and 7 (major or minor 3rd; major or dominant (lowered) 7th
(3 is the middle note of the 1-3-5 note triad; 7 is added to the 1-3-5 triad)

Color notes:

6, 9, 11 13 (These are added to the 1-3-5 notes of the chord triad)

Suspended notes:

2 and 4 (the 3 note is lowered to the 2 or raised to the 4)
Csus4 = C F G • C add2 (or C sus2) = C D G