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# Chapter 3

# BASIC CHORDS AND VOICINGS

## TRIADS

Now that you have become familiar with the major scales, you are ready to learn the basic chords. There are four types of **triads** (chords of three notes that can be stacked in 3rds). In the chart below, the name of the chord type is followed by the formula, followed by chord symbols that are commonly used. The formula numbers correspond to notes of a major scale that are then flatted or sharped as shown. The notes that result are referred to as the root, 3rd, and 5th of the chord. These chord formulas are shown in **root position**, meaning the root is the lowest note. Chord symbols for triads are composed of the root of the chord followed by the symbol that represents the chord type or what we call the **chord quality**. In the examples, C is used as the root, but chords can be played in any of the 12 keys.

major triad	1 3 5	symbols: Cmaj, Cma, CM, CΔ, C
minor triad	1 b3 5	symbols: Cmin, Cmi, Cm, C-
augmented triad	1 3 #5	symbol: C+
diminished triad	1 b3 b5	symbols: C°, Cdim



C major triad      C minor triad      C augmented triad      C diminished triad

**Practice:** Learn to play major triads in all keys through the cycle. Once you are comfortable with this, learn to play the other chord types (chord qualities) in all keys moving through the cycle. Make sure you are able to play chords with either hand, but when you start to play tunes, much of your chording will be done by the left hand. The standard fingering is 1-3-5 for the right hand, and 5-3-1 for the left hand. You can use the sustain pedal to hold the sound of a chord as you move to the next one; just be sure to clear the pedal each time you play a new chord.

Chords can be played as **inversions**. When a chord is inverted, a note other than the root is in the lowest position. When the 3rd of the chord is the lowest note, the chord is in first inversion. When the 5th of the chord is the lowest note, it is in second inversion. The standard right-hand fingering for a first inversion triad is 1-2-5, and 5-3-1 for the left hand. The standard right-hand fingering for a second inversion triad is 1-3-5, and 5-2-1 for the left hand.



C major triad in 1st inversion      C major triad in 2nd inversion      C minor triad in 1st inversion      C minor triad in 2nd inversion

**Practice:** Play root-position, first-inversion, and second-inversion major and minor triads in all keys through the cycle as in the example below.



Continue through the entire cycle.

## FOUR-NOTE CHORDS

Here are the formulas for **seventh chords**, which all have four notes. Although triads are found in jazz, chords of four or more notes are the norm. This is a distinctive feature of jazz harmony. In the chart below, the name of the chord quality is followed by the formula for the chord in root position, followed by chord symbols that are commonly used. The chord symbols in bold are the ones I use for subsequent examples in this book. The formula numbers correspond to notes of a major scale that are then flattened or sharpened as shown. The notes that result are referred to as the root, 3rd, 5th, and 7th of the chord. In the examples, C is used as the root, but chords can be played in any of the 12 keys.

Major 7th	1 3 5 7	symbols: <b>Cmaj7</b> , Cma7, CM7, CΔ7
Dominant 7th	1 3 5 b7	symbol: <b>C7</b>
Note the difference in the symbols between dominant and major 7th. Beginners sometimes see the symbol for dominant 7th and inadvertently play major 7th instead.		
Minor 7th	1 b3 5 b7	symbols: Cmin7, Cmi7, <b>Cm7</b> , C-7
Half-diminished 7th also called Minor 7th(b5)	1 b3 b5 b7	symbols: <b>C°7</b> , C <sup>o</sup> symbols: Cmin7(b5), Cmi7(b5), Cm7b5, C-7(b5)
Diminished 7th (This chord contains the double-flatted 7th, which is the same note as the 6th.)	1 b3 b5 bb7	symbol: <b>C°7</b>
Minor-major 7th	1 b3 5 7	symbols: Cmin(maj7), C-(Δ7), <b>Cm(maj7)</b>
Major 7th(#5)	1 3 #5 7	symbols: <b>Cmaj7#5</b> , Cma7#5, CM7#5, CΔ7#5, CΔ7(+5)

Here are examples of these chords with C as the root.



**Practice:** Learn to play major 7th chords in all keys moving through the cycle. Once you can do this, learn dominant 7th and then minor 7th chords. These are the three most common chord qualities in jazz, and learning them will allow you to get started playing lots of tunes. Next, you can move on to learning the other chord types in all keys. The standard fingering for the right hand is 1-2-3-5, and 5-3-2-1 for the left hand. Remember, it is best to practice in tempo. Start slowly. Increase your speed as you become more familiar with the chords.

Seventh chords can be played as inversions. When the 3rd of the chord is the lowest pitch, the chord is in first inversion. When the 5th of the chord is in the bass, it is in second inversion. When the 7th of the chord is in the lowest position, the chord is in third inversion.

Here is an example of C7 in root position and inverted.



C7 in root position    C7 in 1st inversion    C7 in 2nd inversion    C7 in 3rd inversion

Here are a few more four-note chords you will need to know. The chord symbols in bold are the ones I use for subsequent examples in this book.

Major 6th                    1 3 5 6                    symbols: **C6**, Cmaj6, CΔ6  
 This chord is sometimes used in place of Cmaj7, often when the root is in the melody.

Minor 6th                    1 b3 5 6                    symbols: Cmin6, Cmi6, **Cm6**, C-6  
 This chord is sometimes used in place of Cm(maj7), often when the root is in the melody.

Dominant 7th(sus4)        1 4 5 b7                    symbols: C7sus4, **C7sus**, C11  
 This chord is sometimes used in place of a dominant 7th chord.

Here are examples of these chords with C as the root.



C6                    Cm6                    C7sus

## SHELL VOICINGS AND CONCEPTS OF VOICE LEADING

Now that you have become familiar with the basic chords, it's time to start learning some typical jazz voicings. The term **voicing** refers to the particular arrangement of notes in a chord. **Shell voicings** are named as such because they provide just a basic framework, nothing fancy. They make use of just three notes: the root, 3rd, and 7th. The 5th is omitted because it is the least essential note in a 7th chord. There are two types of shell voicings, closed and open. Closed means that the voicing fits within the span of an octave, and open means the interval from the lowest to the highest note of the voicing is more than an octave. Shell voicings are most often played by the left hand to accompany right-hand melodies or to provide the foundation for more complex voicings.

Here is how to play a closed-shell voicing.



Cmaj7

The 3rd and 7th can be flatted as needed to create the various chord qualities, or the 6th can be used in place of the 7th.



Cmaj7                    C7                    Cm7 or C°7                    Cm6 or C°6                    C6                    Cm(maj7)

To play an open voicing, move the 3rd up an octave to create a voicing that spans a 10th. The following example shows how to play open voicings.



TRACK 24

Cmaj7
C7
Cm7 or C<sup>ø</sup>7
Cm6 or C<sup>o</sup>7
C6
Cm(maj7)

Unless you have hands like Fats Waller or an NBA basketball player, you are finding that the open chords are either difficult or impossible to reach with your left hand alone. There are several options open to you (pun intended). When you are playing with a bassist, you can leave out the root since a bass line typically provides the root at the start of each chord change. There will also be times when you might choose to play just the 3rd and 7th because the chords are fast moving, and it is just too cumbersome to catch all the roots. Here is an open shell without the root.



TRACK 25

Cmaj7

Another possibility is to use the right-hand thumb to play the top note of the open-shell voicings.



TRACK 26

Cmaj7

Although leaving out the root or assisting with the right hand are techniques you will use in the future, as you are getting started, I recommend you play the entire open shell with the left hand alone and break the chord in a rhythmic way.

Play it like this:



TRACK 27

Cmaj7

Or play it like this:



TRACK 28

Cmaj7

The main reason to use a combination of closed and open chords is to achieve **smooth voice leading**, meaning the notes above the root of each chord are positioned so only minimal movement is required to go from one chord to the next. The next ten examples will get you accustomed to using open- and closed-shell voicings to create smooth voice leading. You can use the broken chord technique for the open chords, but if your reach is big enough to play the notes all at once, go for it! In the recorded examples, I play the broken chords using a swing-eighth-note rhythm.

In the first of these shell voicing exercises, I play dominant 7th chords through the cycle and alternate between open-closed-shell voicings. The fingering, which you can continue through the whole exercise, makes it easier to go from one chord to the next. Note how the upper two voices move down chromatically as you move through the different keys. You may be used to starting the cycle pattern on C, but these exercises begin on a chord that allows you to play through all 12 keys while remaining in an ideal register.



TRACK 29

*GRB Practice*

D7 G7 C7 F7 Bb7 Eb7 Ab7 Db7 Gb7 B7 E7 A7

The next exercise provides you with a way to practice playing the chords that are closed in the preceding example as open-shell voicings, and those that are open in the preceding example, as closed-shell voicings.



TRACK 30

Db7 Gb7 B7 E7 A7 D7 G7 C7 F7 Bb7 Eb7 Ab7

Now try a similar exercise using major 7th chords. Notice how the upper two voices move in a slightly different way than they did with the dominant exercise.



TRACK 31

Dmaj7 Gmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Bbmaj7 Ebmaj7 Abmaj7 Dbmaj7 Gbmaj7 Bmaj7 Emaj7 Amaj7

Now try it this way.



TRACK 32

Dbmaj7 Gbmaj7 Bmaj7 Emaj7 Amaj7 Dmaj7 Gmaj7 Cmaj7 Fmaj7 Bbmaj7 Ebmaj7 Abmaj7