

Lesson 1 : Basic chords

NOTE: Carefully read How to use this book. If in any doubt about any musical term used, refer to Appendix I (Basic revision course) or Appendix II (Chord symbol chart).

Basic chords should be thought of as comprising *three notes* and taking their name from the bottom note (the root). The intervals between these three notes are varied to give the different basic chords required.

I think of there being four basic chords: major, minor, diminished and augmented. These are dealt with in this lesson. The next lesson deals with notes added to chords to make up remaining chords.

In following this lesson, if you have any doubts or difficulties with scales or keys, please refer to the Basic revision course, Appendix I. I use chord symbols based on the key of C as examples of symbols used to denote chords, but the name of any note could be substituted before the symbol to describe the same chord on that note. This is made clear in the symbol chart in Appendix II. All basic chords in all keys are built up in the same way and the examples given illustrate the application of this system.

1 · Major chords (Symbol : C)

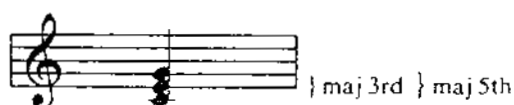
To obtain the three notes of the chord of C major, first play the major scale of C as follows:



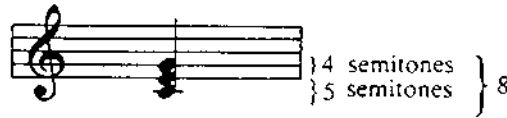
Counting from the bottom take the first, C; the third, E; the fifth, G; and play the chord of C major:



Put another way, the intervals are a major third and a major fifth between these notes which are taken from the major scale of C:

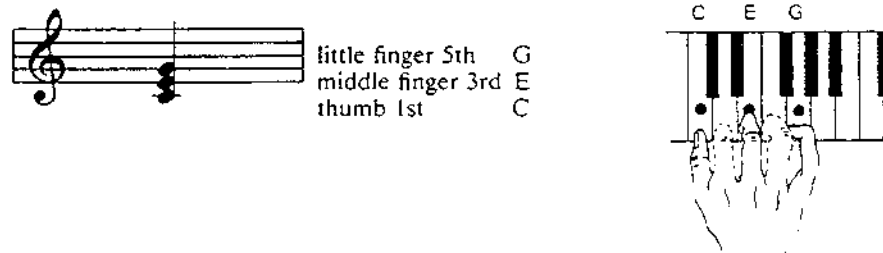


In semitones the inclusive gaps between the notes are:



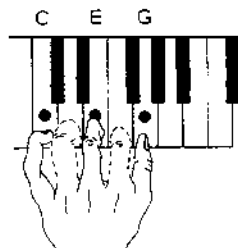
NOTE: This may help in counting to the notes, but the easiest way is to think of the major scale and take the third and fifth notes.

In fingering, to help you to think of the first, third and fifth notes, use the right hand and play the notes as follows:



This basic principle applies to any major chord: think first of the scale, then take the first, third and fifth notes of that scale to get the major chord.

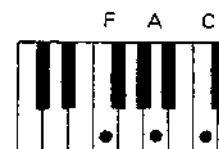
With the left hand, the fingering (using the chord of C major as an example) is as follows:-



Use this, or any other convenient fingering, in playing chords with right or the left hand from any of the examples given.

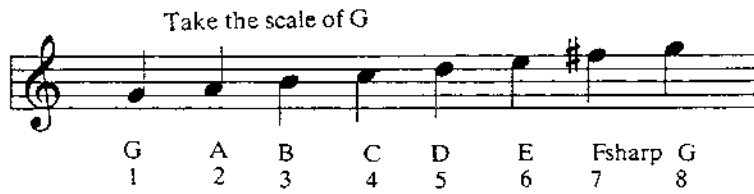
Examples

Chord of F major



Chord of G major

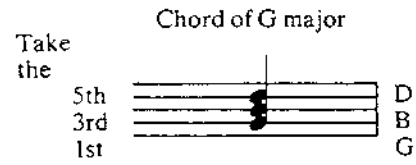
Take the scale of G



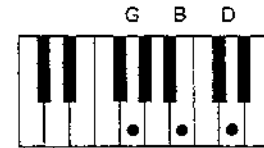
G 1 A 2 B 3 C 4 D 5 E 6 Fsharp 7 G 8

Take the

Chord of G major



5th D
3rd B
1st G



G B D

Now try the chords of D major, A major, E \flat major by first playing the major scales of D, A and E \flat and taking the first, third and fifth notes from each to get the major chords. You should end up with these chords:




D major

5th A
3rd F \sharp
1st D



D F \sharp A



A major

5th E
3rd C \sharp
1st A




A C \sharp E



E \flat major

5th B \flat
3rd G
1st E \flat



E \flat G B \flat

To recap: a major chord comprises the first, third, and fifth notes of the major scale that takes its name from the bottom note (the root). To play a major chord, therefore, it is best to first play the major scale and then take the appropriate notes. This is only necessary at the early stages. If you have any difficulty with any scales the information in the Basic revision course (Appendix I) will help. Once you can work out a major chord, all the rest will follow.

2 · Minor chords (Symbols : Cm, Cmin)

To get a *minor chord* take any major chord and *flatten the middle note*. This is called *flattening the third*. Thus to play C minor:

Take C major	<i>Flatten the third</i>	C minor	C E \flat G
	5th G 3rd E 1st C		

The interval between the first and third is altered from a major third to a minor third. As with C minor, all other minor chords are similarly obtained from the corresponding major.

Examples

F minor

First play F major	<i>Flatten the third</i>	F minor	F A \flat C
	5th C 3rd A 1st F		

G minor

First play G major	<i>Flatten the third</i>	G minor	G B \flat D
	5th D 3rd B 1st G		

E \flat minor

First play E \flat major	<i>Flatten the third</i>	E \flat minor	E \flat G \flat B \flat
	5th B \flat 3rd G 1st E \flat		

and so on with every major chord, *flatten the third* to get the *minor chord* from the root note.

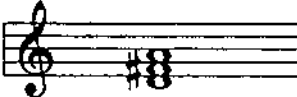
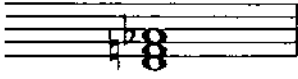

3 · Diminished chords (Symbols : C $^{\circ}$, C $^{\ominus}$, C dim)

To get a *diminished chord*, take any major chord and *flatten (diminish) the third and the fifth notes*. Thus to play C diminished:

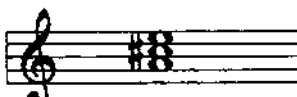
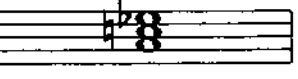

Take C major	<i>Flatten the third and fifth</i>	C diminished	C E \flat G \flat
	5th G 3rd E 1st C		

Similarly to obtain any other diminished chord, take the major and *flatten the third and fifth*:

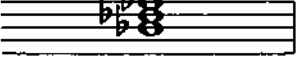
D diminished

<p>First play D major</p>  <p>5th A 3rd F# 1st D</p>	<p>Flatten the third and fifth</p>	<p>D diminished</p>  <p>Ab Fb D</p>	 <p>D F Ab</p>
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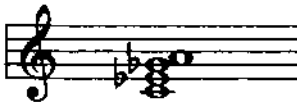

A diminished

<p>First play A major</p>  <p>5th E 3rd C# 1st A</p>	<p>Flatten the third and fifth</p>	<p>A diminished</p>  <p>Eb Cb A</p>	 <p>A C Eb</p>
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Bb diminished


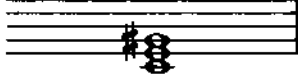

<p>First play Bb major</p>  <p>5th F 3rd D 1st Bb</p>	<p>Flatten the third and fifth</p>	<p>Bb diminished</p>  <p>Eb Db Bb</p>	 <p>Bb Db E</p>
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NOTE: Diminished chords (also known as diminished seventh chords for reasons which need not be gone into here), usually add the sixth note. So for the full sound the chord of C diminished would be:

	 <p>C Eb Gb A</p>
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4 · Augmented chords (Symbols : C⁺, C⁺⁵, C aug)

To get an *augmented chord*, take any major chord and *sharpen (augment) the fifth* to get the augmented chord. Thus to play C augmented:

<p>Take C major</p>  <p>5th G 3rd E 1st C</p>	<p>Sharpen the fifth</p>	<p>C augmented</p>  <p>G# E C</p>	 <p>C E G#</p>
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Similarly to obtain any other augmented chord, take the major chord and *sharpen the fifth*:

F augmented

First play F major *Sharpen the fifth* F augmented

5th C
3rd A
1st F

C#
A
F

F A C#

G augmented

First play G major *Sharpen the fifth* G augmented

5th D
3rd B
1st G

D#
B
G

G B D#

E^b augmented

First play E^b major *Sharpen the fifth* E^b augmented

5th B^b
3rd G
1st E^b

B
G
E^b

E^b G B

5 · Summary

(a) Think of there being four basic chords.

(b) Each chord has three notes.

(c) Each chord takes its name from the root.

(d) We obtain the basic chords in all the different keys as follows:

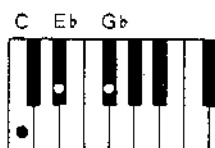
(i) major chords : play the first, third and fifth notes of the major scale that runs from the root; e.g. C major:



(ii) minor chords : take the major chord then *flatten the third*; e.g. C minor:



(iii) diminished chords : take the major chord then *flatten the third and fifth*; e.g. C diminished:



(iv) augmented chords : take the major chord then *sharpen the fifth*; e.g. C augmented:



6 · Exercises

Try playing, however slowly, the following pieces, using the right hand to play the melody line and the left hand to play the chords – play the chord wherever the symbol is written.

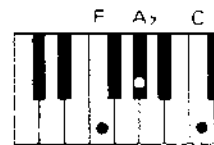
When the Saints

Right hand 

Left hand 




G C F Fmin C C F G C



On Top of Old Smoky

Right hand

Left hand

G C C C

G B D C E G

G G D D D

D F# A

D D G G