

Chord Melodies -Chord Construction 101 – by Pete Simms

Ok, this lesson is for you who can read music to at least a beginners level. I'm hoping to relieve you from the "mystery" of how chords get their names. This is a condensed lesson. So make a cup of coffee, get your pencil and paper ready to study.... but don't be scared... this is suppose to be interesting.

You must first understand the Major Scale. In example #1, I have written out two octaves of the C major scale and given number degrees for each note (1-15). I'm using the C major scale because there are no sharps or flats in this scale. A major scale consists of a combination of Whole (W) and Half (H) steps. That combination is WWHWWWH. When we start with a C note on your instrument, there will be all natural notes when you play this scale. The system is designed this way. But when you start with any other note, you will need to sharpen or flatten at least one or more notes to create the WWHWWWH combination. I am going to refer to the C major scale the complete time, in order to keep it as simple as possible. Let's get started!

There are 3 types of chords that you can relate all your chords to: #1) Major Chords (bright - pretty sounding) #2) Minor Chords (dark - serious sounding) #3) Dominant Chords (chords with a bite! - bebop guys love this stuff)

There are countless combinations and inversions. If you can understand how they are put together and how they function, you can make chord melodies a whole lot easier.

A chord symbol will describe which notes are being played together out of our scale. There can also be numbers, sharps and flats to indicate if there are any modifications needed to be made.

Our 3 types of chords are as follows:

C major = 1 3 5 = C E G

C minor = 1 b3 5 = C Eb G

C dominant = 1 3 5 b7 = C E G Bb

Here is a little chart with extensions to the chords that I make for my students:

Major Chords: 1 - 3 - 5 - (6) - 7 - 9 - (#11) - 13

Minor Chords: 1 - b3 - 5 (b5) - (6) - b7 - 9 - 11

Dominant Chords: 1 - 3 - (b5) 5 (#5) - b7 - (b9) 9 (#9) - (#11) - (b13) 13

Diminished Chords: 1 - b3 - b5 - bb7 (double flat (bb) = whole step lower)

Suspended Chords: 1 - (2) or (4) - 5 - b7

You can do a lot with this only! A chord symbol will tell you what is in the Chord itself. So Let's do a few to see if you have gotten this far.

Major Chords

C (C E G)

C6 (C E G A)

Cmaj7 (C E G B)

Cmaj9 (C E G B D)

Cmaj7#11 (C E G B F#)

Cmaj13#11 (C E B D F# A)

Minor Chords

Cm (C Eb G)

Cm7 (C Eb G Bb)

Cm9 (C Eb G Bb D)

Cm11 (C Eb G Bb D F)

Cm6 (C Eb G A)

Dominant Chords

C7 (C E G Bb)

C9 (C E G Bb D)

C13 (C E G Bb D A)

C7b9 (C E G Bb Db)

C7b9b13 (C E G Bb Db Ab)

C7#5 (C E G# Bb)

C7b5 (C E Gb Bb)

C7b9#11b13 (C E G Bb Db F# Ab)

Cdim7 (C Eb Gb Bbb)

Suspended Chords

Csus2 (C D G)

C7sus4 (C F G Bb)

If you use the C major scale with the degrees marked and the chord formulas I presented to you, you should get a good general idea of how C chords are built. You can do the exact same with the other eleven notes of the chromatic scale! The diminished scale has a dominant characteristic, but really sticks out. Therefore it is grouped with the dominant chords, but I separated it in the formulas. The suspended chord belongs to "no one". The 3rd and the 7th degree are the most important notes to give color (it's tonal characteristic) to a chord. When the 3rd degree is removed, it has a floating type of tone. It is not until the other chords in a song or the melody can give away its nature of major, minor or dominant.

Look at the Chord symbols and how they describe which degrees in the scale make up the Chord. There are other combinations you can come up with. Knowing this system, you can manipulate the chord symbol to describe what notes you want in a chord.

The only other feature I want to talk about is changing the bass note. Just make your chord symbol and use a slash (/) then the bass note.

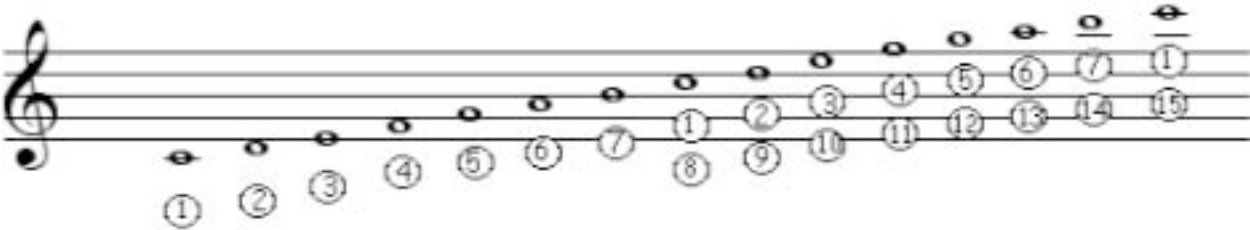
Example: Cm7/G (this is a Cm7 with a G in the Bass). It's that simple to write.

That is pretty much it. You need to practice it for sure. If you take the time, you will find it easy. Have Fun!

There are chords which are enharmonic to each other (chords that share the same notes but have different functions and therefore different names). We will deal with that another time. There are also chord substitutions.... they are easy ways to extend the colors of the original chord.... I'll talk to you about them another time.

Tip: When I assemble a chord melody, I want to stay true to a chord, but I will eliminate notes if I need to. Which notes? you might ask well it depends on how difficult it is to make it sound good. At that point... I don't care as long as it sounds good so bend or break the rules if you need to. The big question is "Does it Sound Good?" Well.... that's all I'm looking for. I'll leave the number crunching to the analysts.... ha!

Soooooooo..... are you ready for that aspirin yet? Take some time with this and check out the actual notes with the chords you already play! It always works. When I do that with my students, they always trip out.



Enjoy! "Sometimes it's kind of cool to know what you're playing"

Pete Simms