

# CHAPTER 11

## TRIADIC CHORDS

A *chord* is a combination of three or more different tones sounded simultaneously or in succession (*broken chord*). Chords in music are often spelled in thirds.

Tones of chord  
sounded simultaneously



Same chord as a  
broken chord



Figure 11.1: Chord.

A *triad* is a chord of three tones spelled in thirds. It may be constructed of any combination of two superimposed major and minor thirds. The lowest of these tones is called the *root* of the triad. The middle tone is called the *third* of the triad because it is a third above the root of the triad. The highest of the three tones is called the *fifth* of the triad because it is a fifth above the root of the triad.

The written triad uses alternate staff degrees in its notation. That is, the triad is notated on adjacent lines or spaces, depending on whether the root is on a line or a space.

Four combinations of major and minor thirds are possible in the construction of triads:

a major third as the lower interval with a minor third as the upper interval,

a minor third as the lower interval with a major third as the upper interval,

major thirds as both upper and lower intervals,

minor thirds as both upper and lower intervals.

Triads have the following qualities:

Major (Maj)

minor (min)

Augmented (Aug)

diminished (dim)

The image displays two musical staves, treble and bass clef, each containing four triads. The triads are labeled as follows:

- D Maj Triad:** Treble clef, root D4, third F#4, fifth A4. Intervals: root to third (Maj 3), root to fifth (Maj 3).
- a min Triad:** Bass clef, root A3, third C4, fifth E4. Intervals: root to third (min 3), root to fifth (Maj 3).
- G Aug Triad:** Treble clef, root G4, third B4, fifth A#4. Intervals: root to third (Maj 3), root to fifth (Maj 3).
- e dim Triad:** Bass clef, root E3, third G3, fifth Bb3. Intervals: root to third (min 3), root to fifth (min 3).

Figure 11.2: Triad qualities.

## MAJOR TRIAD

The *major triad* has three tones on alternate staff degrees with a major third (4 half steps) as the lower interval and a minor third (3 half steps) as the upper interval. The interval between the root and fifth is a perfect fifth (7 half steps). When constructed on the first degree of a major scale, a major triad contains the tonic, mediant, and dominant of that scale. This corresponds to the first, third, and fifth (1, 3, and 5) scale degrees of that major scale.

C Major Scale

C Maj Triad

D Major Scale

D Maj Triad

Figure 11.3: Major triads.

## MINOR TRIAD

The *minor triad* has three tones on alternate staff degrees with a minor third (3 half steps) as the lower interval and a major third (4 half steps) as the upper interval. The interval between the root and fifth is a perfect fifth (7 half steps). When constructed on the first degree of a minor scale, a minor triad contains the tonic, mediant, and dominant of that minor scale. This corresponds to the first, lowered third, and fifth (1,  $\flat 3$ , and 5) scale degrees of the parallel major scale.

c minor Scale

C Major Scale

Lower ( $\flat$ )

c min Triad

b minor Scale

B Major Scale

Lower ( $\flat$ )

b min Triad

Figure 11.4: Minor triads.

## AUGMENTED TRIAD

The *augmented triad* has three tones on alternate staff degrees with two major thirds (4 half steps) for the upper and lower intervals. The interval between the root and fifth is an augmented fifth (8 half steps). When constructed on the first degree of a whole tone scale whose fifth is raised, the augmented triad contains the tonic, mediant, and dominant of that whole tone scale. This corresponds to the first, third, and raised fifth (1, 3, and  $\sharp 5$ ) scale degrees of the parallel major scale.

F Whole Tone Scale	Ab Whole Tone Scale
F Aug Triad	Ab Aug Triad

*Figure 11.5: Augmented triads.*

## DIMINISHED TRIAD

The *diminished triad* has three tones on alternate staff degrees with two minor thirds (3 half steps) for the upper and lower interval. The interval between the root and fifth is a diminished fifth (6 half steps). When constructed on the first degree of a locrian scale, the diminished triad contains the tonic mediant, and dominant of that locrian scale. This corresponds to the first, lowered third, and lowered fifth (1,  $\flat 3$ , and  $\flat 5$ ) scale degrees of the parallel major scale.

The figure illustrates the construction of diminished triads from locrian scales. It is organized into two columns: one for E and one for G.

- Left Column (E):**
  - e locrian Scale:** A scale starting on E in the treble clef. A box above the notes E, G, B, D, F, A, C is labeled "dim 5". A smaller box above the notes G, B, D is labeled "min 3 min 3". Below the notes are labels: 1,  $\flat 3$ ,  $\flat 5$ .
  - E Major Scale:** A scale starting on E in the treble clef. Below the notes are labels: lower ( $\sharp$ ) lower ( $\flat$ ). Arrows point to the lowered 3rd and 5th degrees.
  - e dim Triad:** A triad in the treble clef with notes E, G $\flat$ , B $\flat$ .
- Right Column (G):**
  - g locrian Scale:** A scale starting on G in the bass clef. A box above the notes G, B $\flat$ , D $\flat$ , F, A $\flat$ , C $\flat$ , E $\flat$  is labeled "dim 5". A smaller box above the notes B $\flat$ , D $\flat$ , F is labeled "min 3 min 3". Below the notes are labels: 1,  $\flat 3$ ,  $\flat 5$ .
  - G Major Scale:** A scale starting on G in the bass clef. Below the notes are labels: lower ( $\flat$ ) lower ( $\flat$ ). Arrows point to the lowered 3rd and 5th degrees.
  - g dim Triad:** A triad in the bass clef with notes G, B $\flat$ , D $\flat$ .

Figure 11.6: Diminished triads.

## CONSONANT AND DISSONANT TRIADS

The basic sound of triads may be generally described as consonant or dissonant. Consonant triads tend to remain stable. Dissonant triads tend to be unstable requiring movement to a consonant triad. Major and minor triads are generally consonant triads. Augmented and diminished triads are generally dissonant triads.

### Consonant Triads

Maj  
min

### Dissonant Triads

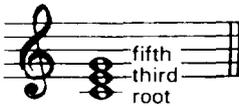
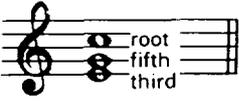
Aug  
dim

Figure 11.7: Consonant and Dissonant Triads.

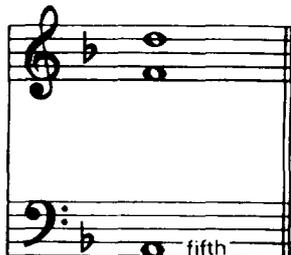
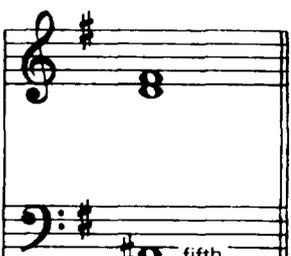
The quality of the fifth affects consonance and dissonance more than the quality of the third. When the fifth is augmented or diminished, dissonance usually occurs.

## INVERSION OF TRIADS

When the root of a triad is its lowest note, the chord is in *root position*. *Inversion* is a change in the relative position of the notes from root position. When the third of a triad is the lowest note, the triad is in *first inversion* regardless of the placement of the root and fifth above it. When the fifth of a triad is the lowest note, the triad is in *second inversion* regardless of the placement of the root and third above it. The root of the triad remains the root regardless of its position. The same is true of the third and fifth.

C Maj Triad	C Maj Triad	C Maj Triad
		
Root Position	First Inversion	Second Inversion

*Figure 11.8: Inversions of C Major Triad.*

Bb Maj Triad	d min Triad
	
First Inversion	Second Inversion
C# dim Triad	D Aug Triad
	
First Inversion	Second Inversion

*Figure 11.9: Inversion of the Four Types of Triads.*

## DIATONIC TRIADS IN MAJOR AND MINOR KEYS

Writing the diatonic third and fifth above each scale degree of a given scale will construct the triads diatonic to a particular scale or key.

### *Diatonic Triads in Major*

Constructing diatonic triads on major scale degrees produces:

major triads on the tonic, subdominant, and dominant

minor triads on the supertonic, mediant, and submediant

a diminished triad on the leading tone

C:							
Maj	min	min	Maj	Maj	min	dim	Maj
Tonic	Supertonic	Mediant	Subdominant	Dominant	Submediant	Leading Tone	Tonic
F:							
Maj	min	min	Maj	Maj	min	dim	Maj
Tonic	Supertonic	Mediant	Subdominant	Dominant	Submediant	Leading Tone	Tonic
<b>Maj Triads</b>			<b>min Triads</b>			<b>dim Triad</b>	
Tonic Subdominant Dominant			Supertonic Mediant Submediant			Leading Tone	

*Figure 11.10: Diatonic Triads in Major.*

## *Diatonic Triads in Natural Minor*

Constructing diatonic triads on natural minor scale degrees produces:

minor triads on the tonic, subdominant, and dominant

major triads on the mediant, submediant, and subtonic

a diminished triad on the supertonic

**g:**



min	dim	Maj	min	min	Maj	Maj	min
Tonic	Supertonic	Mediant	Subdominant	Dominant	Submediant	Subtonic	Tonic

**e:**



min	dim	Maj	min	min	Maj	Maj	min
Tonic	Supertonic	Mediant	Subdominant	Dominant	Submediant	Subtonic	Tonic

<b>Maj Triads</b>	<b>min Triads</b>	<b>dim Triad</b>
Mediant	Tonic	Supertonic
Submediant	Subdominant	
Subtonic	Dominant	

*Figure 11.11: Diatonic Triads in Natural Minor.*

## *Diatonic Triads in Harmonic Minor*

Constructing diatonic triads on harmonic minor scale degrees produces:

minor triads on the tonic and subdominant

major triads on the dominant and submediant

diminished triads on the supertonic and leading tone

an augmented triad on the mediant

The harmonic use of the major quality dominant chord gives the harmonic minor scale its name. Altering the third of the dominant chord creates this scale. The third of the dominant chord is the leading tone of the minor key.

c (harmonic):

A musical staff in treble clef showing the C harmonic minor scale (C, Bb, A, G, F, E, D, C). Triads are shown on each degree: C (min), Bb (dim), A (Aug), G (min), F (Maj), E (Maj), D (dim), and C (min). Labels for each triad are: min Tonic, dim Supertonic, Aug Mediant, min Subdominant, Maj Dominant, Maj Submediant, dim Leading Tone, and min Tonic.

b (harmonic):

A musical staff in bass clef showing the B harmonic minor scale (B, A, G, F, E, D, C#, B). Triads are shown on each degree: B (min), A (dim), G (Aug), F (min), E (Maj), D (Maj), C# (dim), and B (min). Labels for each triad are: min Tonic, dim Supertonic, Aug Mediant, min Subdominant, Maj Dominant, Maj Submediant, dim Leading Tone, and min Tonic.

**Maj Triads**

Dominant  
Submediant

**min Triads**

Tonic  
Subdominant

**Aug Triad**

Mediant

**dim Triads**

Supertonic  
Leading Tone

*Figure 11.12: Diatonic Triads in Harmonic Minor.*

## *Diatonic Triads in Melodic Minor*

Constructing diatonic triads on ascending melodic minor scale degrees produces:

minor triads on the tonic and supertonic

major triads on the subdominant and dominant

diminished triads on the submediant and leading tone

an augmented triad on the mediant

Constructing diatonic triads on descending melodic minor scale degrees produces triads identical to those of the natural minor scale. Eliminating the augmented second in the ascending form of the scales creates a major subdominant triad. Using the descending form of the scale creates a minor subdominant triad, resulting in a more minor sound.

f# (melodic ascending):

min    min    Aug    Maj    Maj    dim    dim    min

Tonic    Supertonic    Mediant    Subdominant    Dominant    Submediant    Leading Tone    Tonic

f# (melodic descending):

min    Maj    Maj    min    min    Maj    dim    min

Tonic    Subtonic    Submediant    Dominant    Subdominant    Mediant    Supertonic    Tonic

f (melodic ascending):

min    min    Aug    Maj    Maj    dim    dim    min

Tonic    Supertonic    Mediant    Subdominant    Dominant    Submediant    Leading Tone    Tonic

f (melodic descending):

min    Maj    Maj    min    min    Maj    dim    min

Tonic    Subtonic    Submediant    Dominant    Subdominant    Mediant    Supertonic    Tonic

**ASCENDING MELODIC MINOR**

**Maj Triads**

Subdominant  
Dominant

**min Triads**

Tonic  
Supertonic

**Aug Triad**

Mediant

**dim Triads**

Submediant  
Leading Tone

**DESCENDING MELODIC MINOR**

**Maj Triads**

Mediant  
Submediant  
Subtonic

**min Triads**

Tonic  
Subdominant  
Dominant

**dim Triad**

Supertonic

*Figure 11.13: Diatonic Triads in Melodic Minor.*

