

# The Fundamental Triad System

A chord-first approach to jazz theory and practice

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# Introduction

## The Chord-First Approach

In the realm of jazz theory and improvisation, there are two distinct approaches by which players come to understand the chord and scale structures associated with this idiom: the conventional scale-first approach, and the chord-first approach. In a scale-first system, students learn to play scale structures, usually starting with the major scale. Those scales become their first point of reference on their instrument. They learn to identify chord progressions which originate from specific keys and use these scales as their first improvisational device.

Eventually, these patterns are reduced to modes and arpeggios which serve as a more specific reflection of the structure and functionality of each chord in the progression. In time, a player may also come to use smaller subsets, chord inversions, which would help him or her understand in greater detail the components which make up chords and scales. In any event, scales become the primary point of reference by which the player creates improvised lines.

In contrast, the primary reference point in a chord-first approach is the chord itself. Scale forms are seen as extensions to chords. In this book, we'll use the smallest chord structure in music, the **triad**, as our primary reference point. At the center of any song melody, improvised line or chord voicing, will be one of four "fundamental triads." Thus, a chord-first system starts with a small note field and works up to larger forms, whereas a scale-first system starts with larger note fields and works down to smaller forms.

The important question here isn't which approach offers a more accurate understanding and usage of chord and scale structures; in theory, both systems ultimately lead to the same place. Rather, the compelling question is: **which system allows us to focus on real musical concepts sooner?** Our primary point of reference shouldn't inhibit us from being musical; on the contrary, it should facilitate the process. It's my hope that the information presented in this book will help you to make the musical discoveries necessary for developing your own voice as a jazz performer sooner rather than later.

*Pete Pancrazi*

# Chapter 3

## The Fundamental Triads

A triad is a three-note chord. The procedure for building a triad is to stack two notes, in 3rds, over a given note designated as the **root** of the chord. These two notes are called the **3rd** and **5th** because of their interval relationship with the root. The notes in a chord are also referred to as **chord tones**.

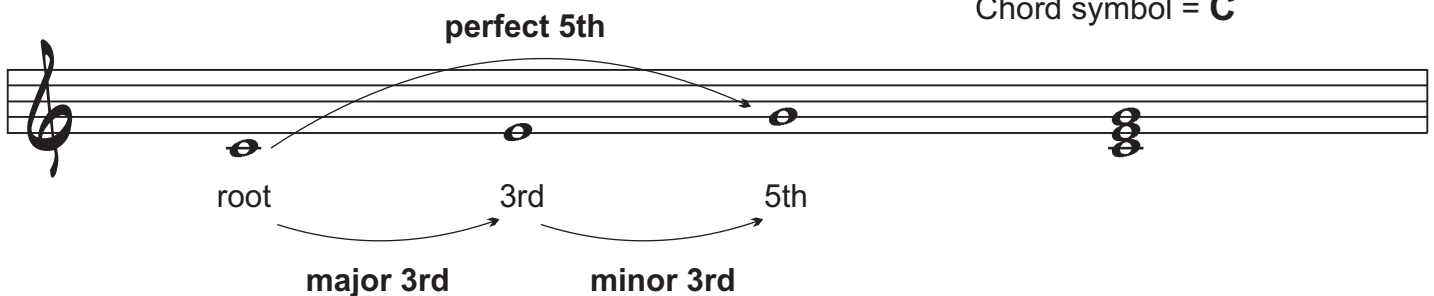
A **fundamental triad** is a three-note chord built exclusively from combinations of major or minor 3rds. There are four fundamental triads: **major**, **minor**, **diminished** and **augmented**.

### The Major Triad

(major 3rd / minor 3rd)

**C major triad**

Chord symbol = **C**



The note **E** is called the 3rd because it's a **major 3rd** above the root. The top note, **G**, is called the 5th because it's a **perfect 5th** above the root. It's acceptable to use the formal interval descriptions, major 3rd and perfect 5th, when referring to the 3rd and 5th of the major triad. Since the root of this triad is the note **C**, this chord is a **C major triad**.

A symbol or sign that represents the elements present in a chord structure is called a **chord symbol**. The chord symbol for a major triad is simply the letter name for the root of the chord. Therefore, the chord symbol for a C major triad would be **C**.

# Chapter 5 Extending the Triads with a 7th or 6th

Any triad can be extended to include a 7th or 6th. Specifically, a 7th can be major or minor. When the 7th is a major 7th above the root, it's referred to in the chord symbol as **maj7** or **ma7**. When the 7th is a minor 7th above the root, it is noted in the chord symbol as **7**. The 6th will be a major 6th above the root and noted in the chord symbol as **6**. Chords that include a 7th or 6th are often referred to as **7th** or **6th chords**.

## Adding a 7th or 6th to the Major Triad

### C major 7

Chord symbol = **Cmaj7** or **Cma7**

Diagram illustrating the C major 7 chord structure on a treble clef staff. The notes are C (Root), E (3rd), G (5th), B $\flat$  (7th), and C (Root). The intervals between the notes are labeled: major 7th (C to B $\flat$ ), minor 2nd (B $\flat$  to C), major 3rd (C to E), perfect 5th (C to G), and major 3rd (E to G).

Any 7th chord that has a major 3rd and a minor 7th can be called a **dominant 7**. This will be discussed at greater length in *Chapter 12*.

### C dominant 7

Chord symbol = **C7**

Diagram illustrating the C dominant 7 chord structure on a treble clef staff. The notes are C (Root), E $\flat$  (3rd), G (5th), B $\flat$  (7th), and C (Root). The intervals between the notes are labeled: minor 7th (C to B $\flat$ ), major 2nd (B $\flat$  to C), minor 3rd (C to E $\flat$ ), tritone (E $\flat$  to B $\flat$ ), and minor 3rd (E $\flat$  to G).

### C major 6

Chord symbol = **C6**

Diagram illustrating the C major 6 chord structure on a treble clef staff. The notes are C (Root), E (3rd), G (5th), A $\flat$  (6th), and C (Root). The intervals between the notes are labeled: major 6th (C to A $\flat$ ), minor 3rd (A $\flat$  to C), major 2nd (C to E), and perfect 4th (E to A $\flat$ ).

# Chapter 10

## The Major II-V-I Progression

Probably the single most important progression in jazz is the **II-V-I** progression: II-7 progressing to V7, which resolves to Imaj7. The function of the chord movement is **subdominant - dominant - tonic**. The IV chord is replaced by II-7 which is a subdominant-quality chord. Using the II-7 chord creates root motion of 5ths throughout the progression.

### Guide Tone Line for II-V-I

The 7th of II-7 will be a half step above the 3rd of V7, and the 7th of V7 will be a half step above the 3rd of Imaj7. Learn the following II-V-I guide tone line. When you're ready, start expanding upon the line by using other notes from the chords.

Musical notation showing the guide tone line for the II-V-I progression: D-7, G7, and Cmaj7. The notation is in 4/4 time and features a treble clef. The notes are: D-7 (F, C), G7 (B, D), and Cmaj7 (E, G). The 7th of D-7 (C) is a half step above the 3rd of G7 (B), and the 7th of G7 (D) is a half step above the 3rd of Cmaj7 (E). Arrows indicate these half-step relationships. The notes are marked with 'b7' and '3' below them.

Blueprint: Analyze and learn the following line.

Musical notation showing the blueprint line for the II-V-I progression: D-7, G7, and Cmaj7. The notation is in 4/4 time and features a treble clef. The notes are: D-7 (F, C), G7 (B, D), and Cmaj7 (E, G). The notes are marked with 'b7' and '3' below them.

Variation: Notice the transitional anticipations used in this variation.

Musical notation showing the variation line for the II-V-I progression: D-7, G7, and Cmaj7. The notation is in 4/4 time and features a treble clef. The notes are: D-7 (F, C), G7 (B, D), and Cmaj7 (E, G). The notes are marked with 'b7 3' below them.

# Chapter 13

## Modes of the Major Scale

All the chords in the major scale can be extended with a 9th, 11th, and 13th. Those extensions also form a triad. The seven-note structures that now reside on each degree can be broken down into three components: a **primary triad** (consisting of the root, 3rd, and 5th), the **7th** and a **secondary triad** (which represents the 9th, 11th, and 13th).

The secondary triad to any chord is simply the triad built on the next scale degree. For example, in the key of C major, the secondary triad to **Cmaj7** would be **D-**, (II-). The specific value of the 9th, 11th and 13th will depend on the type of secondary triad and its distance from the root of the primary triad.

(I major)

major 13th  
perfect 11th  
major 9th

D F A = D minor

I (9, 11, 13)

C major major 7th D minor D minor

Primary triad 7th Secondary triad Secondary triad an octave lower

**C major** is the primary triad. The note **B** is the major 7th. **D-** is the secondary triad representing 9, 11 and 13. Notice that the major 6th and the 13th are the same note.

**Rule:** A minor triad a whole step above the root of any chord will function as the 9, 11 and 13 of that chord.



# Chapter 17 The Minor II-V-I Progression

Unlike the major II-V-I, in which the chords originate from a single scale source, all three parallel minor scales are used to create the variations of a minor II-V-I.

**The II chord:** The most common II is **II-7<sup>b5</sup>**, which is derived from either natural minor or harmonic minor. Less common is **II-7**, derived from melodic minor.

**The V chord:** The V chord is **V7**, which is derived from either harmonic or melodic minor and is used (because of its dominant function) for strong resolution to I.

**The I chord:** The I chord can be **I-**, **I-maj7**, **I-7** or **I-6**. **I-7** is derived from natural minor. **I-maj7** comes from harmonic or melodic minor, and **I-6** comes from jazz melodic minor.

**Summary:** (II-7<sup>b5</sup> or II-7) → (V7) → (I-, I-maj7, I-7 or I-6)

## Guide Tone Lines for the Minor II-V-I

The guide tone connections that we learned for the major II-V-I are also present in the minor II-V-I. When the **I-7** is present, the 3rd of **V7** will move a half step down to the <sup>b</sup>7 of **I-7**. Create lines over the following minor II-V-I progression using chord tones and guide tone connections.

Major II-V-I blueprint line adapted to minor: