

Rev. 8/18/11

## Learn Your Chords Kid! By Bradley Sowash

When I was about 12 years of age, my parents took me to a restaurant that featured a live jazz trio. I was amazed to see the pianist playing without written music. Unaware of the awkwardness I might cause by interrupting a performing musician, I approached the stage and asked him how he did it. His succinct reply changed my life. Without missing a beat, he simply said, “learn your chords kid.”

He was right of course. Improvising musicians understand harmony. My students sometimes ask, “How many chords are there?” I tell them there are hundreds, maybe thousands of chords if you include inversions and voicings but that they only need to learn a few at a time to make their own great music. Here are some of the techniques I use to develop chord fluency.

### Major Key Chords – Skip to Success

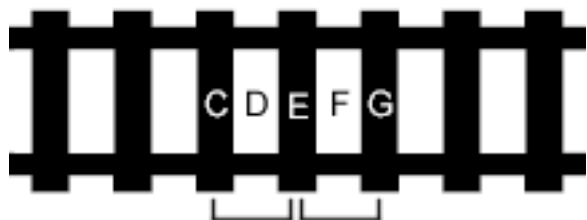
It's important for students to understand that chords are derived from scales. A great way to get the point across is to ask them to construct chords by mentally skipping up a major scale. Write a major scale on the blackboard either as notes on a staff, note names (no staff), solfege or scale degree numbers. The latter two are helpful if working with transposing instruments. Draw lines to connect the root, third, and fifth of the tonic chord.



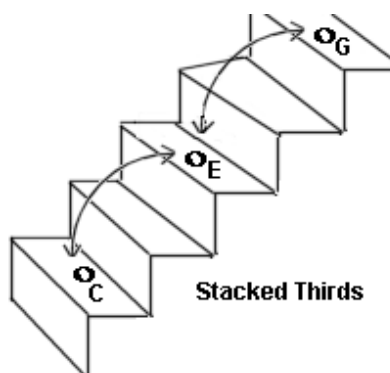
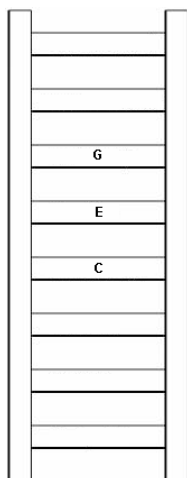
Ask your students to continue “skipping up the scale” by playing broken triads on each on each scale degree.



Some may find it helpful to think in numbers i.e. 135, 246, 357... Horizontal images such as “play the pickets on a fence leaving the spaces between” or “play just the ties of a railroad track” will resonate with visual learners.



Next, help them understand the vertical aspect of chords by “stacking thirds” on the previously written scale. Reinforce the concept of stacking with vertical images such as a ladder or staircase.

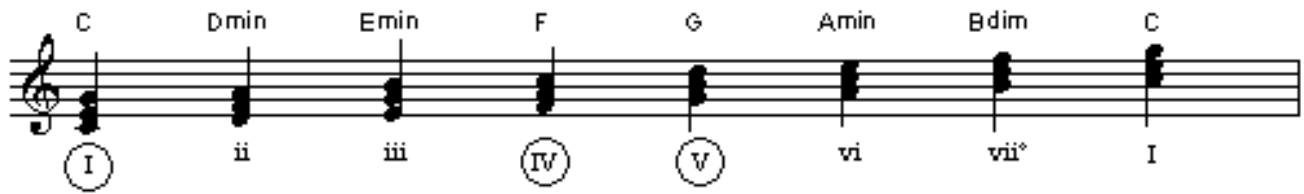


The result will look something like this:

G	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
E	F	G	A	B	C	D	E
C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C

### Chord Qualities

Listening rather than counting half steps best addresses chord qualities. Play and listen to the chords one by one on a piano asking your students to decide whether each is “cheery” (major), “sad” (minor), “creepy” (diminished). As decisions are made, label the constructed chords with pop/jazz chord symbols above and traditional Roman numerals below. Along the way, you might point out that the I, IV and V7 primary chords are the most useful chords on the planet. Prove your point by demonstrating holiday, folk and pop tunes that only use these three chords.



### Keep It Practical

A great way to demonstrate the real life utility of chords is to help your students learn a well-known nursery rhyme, folk song, holiday or patriotic tune by ear. Here are a few possible titles.

Happy Birthday  
Jingle Bells  
Joy to the World  
Oh Susanna  
She'll Be Comin' 'Round the Mountain  
This Old Man  
Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star  
Yankee Doodle

When the tune is secure in their minds and fingers, guide them through harmonizing it by looking for chord tones in the melody.

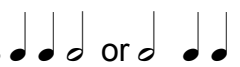
The image shows two staves of music. The top staff is labeled 'Soloist' and is in 4/4 time. It contains a melody of quarter notes: C4, E4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4. Above the first three measures are the chord symbols C, F, and G. The bottom staff is labeled 'Harmony players' and is in 4/4 time. It shows three chords: C (I), F (IV), and G (V). The notes are written as whole notes. The first measure has C, E, G. The second measure has F, A, C. The third measure has G, B, D. The fourth measure is marked 'etc.'.

Assign low and mid-range instruments to all roots, thirds and fifths. Then have them play the harmony together with a higher range soloist.

### Inversions

To help them see the advantage of better voice leading, rewrite the chords using nearby inversions. Then, ask them to play the *nearest* note rather than jumping from root to root, third to third or fifth to fifth.

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To make it more interesting, you could introduce a repeating rhythm such as  or 

instead of whole notes for the harmonic accompanists.

### Chord Fluency

Here are some exercises designed to develop instant recall for common chords.

Chromatic Chord Crawls - Pick a chord quality and ask your students to run it up or down chromatically as broken chords.

etc.

Repeat this drill with minor chords. Another variation would be to play all first inversion or all second inversions.

### Step Down Progressions

Q: What chord results from lowering root of a Cdim triad by a half step?

A: B major triad

You can use this nifty trick to create an exercise to practice all four triad qualities in all keys.

etc.

### Seventh Chords

When students have a thorough understanding of triads in several keys, they are ready to expand their knowledge of harmony by constructing and playing seventh chords.

First a refresher course on pop/jazz chord nomenclature:

Chord Name	Pronounced	Explanation
C	C major	Just the root of a chord is major by default.
C-, Cm, Cmi, Cmin	C minor	“Minor” only ever modifies the triad (never 7 <sup>th</sup> ).
CM7, CMa7, CMaj7, C△	C major seven	“Major” only ever modifies the 7 <sup>th</sup> (never triad).
C7	C seven	Root is major by default and 7 <sup>th</sup> is dominant.
C-7, Cm7, Cmi7, Cmin7	C minor 7	Triad is minor and 7 <sup>th</sup> is dominant.
Cm7(b5), Cø7	C half diminished	Triad is minor, 7 <sup>th</sup> is dominant, 5 <sup>th</sup> is lowered.
Cdim7, C°	C diminished 7	Triad is diminished and so is 7 <sup>th</sup> .

### Stack On Another Third

Whether learning triads or seventh chords, the process is the same. Ask your students to build, name and number the diatonic seventh chords by stacking 3rds on each note of a major scale. You can take dictation by writing the results on the blackboard. For example in C major, the students would construct and label the following.

IMaj7 II m7 III m7 IVMaj7 V 7 VI m7 VII m7(b5) IMaj7

A good way to sort out chord qualities is to think of the bottom three notes independently

(major, minor or diminished) and then work out the seventh degree (major or dominant). By the way, it's easier for students to think backwards from the root down to the 7<sup>th</sup> rather than count all the way up 7 notes. Convolved but practical, students can readily understand that a major 7<sup>th</sup> lies a ½ step below the root and a dominant 7<sup>th</sup> lies a whole step below the root.

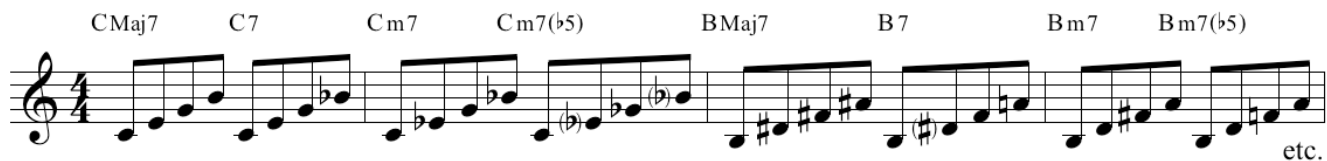
### Building Chord Fluency With Seventh Chords.

A great way build instant recall of chords is to play sequential chord progressions that move logically from key to key. Here are some possibilities.

Seventh Chord Crawls - Just like triad chord crawls, you just pick a chord quality and run it up or down chromatically.



Seventh Chord Step Down Progressions - Here's how to apply step-downs to seventh chords.



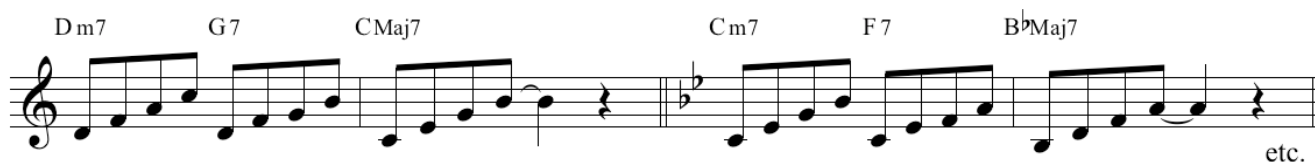
### Seventh Chord Cycle Progressions

This one moves the roots by fourths alternating root position and 2<sup>nd</sup> inversions along the way for better voice leading.



### Mini Progression Chains

The ii – V – I sequence of chords is surely the most often found mini-progression or “chord cell” found in standards. This exercise isolates the progression and moves through six keys. To practice the other six keys, start on Ebm7.



Mastering harmony is a steep but rewarding road. Use these exercises to enrich your students' harmonic vocabulary, train their ears and open the doors to more musical freedom so they can enjoy a lifetime of versatile and satisfying music making.



### **Author's Bio**

Creative pianist, multi-instrumentalist, recording artist, composer/arranger, collaborator, author and educator, Bradley Sowash has performed with such luminaries as The Cab Calloway Orchestra and The Mills Brothers. As a soloist and bandleader, he has delighted listeners of all ages in concert halls and churches throughout the United States and Europe for over two decades garnering enthusiastic reviews in national publications including *The Village Voice* and *Billboard Magazine*. His broadcast credits include National Public Radio and he has been a frequent guest on the PBS-TV series, *The Piano Guy* for seven seasons. His publications include several volumes of jazz hymn arrangements published by Augsburg Fortress Press and educational jazz piano books published by the Neil A. Kjos Music Company and Houston Enterprises. He also writes and arranges for ensembles of all sizes from string quartets to big bands and full orchestras.