

ENRICHING MAJOR AND MINOR TRIADS

Four-note chords built on the notes of a major scale produce major seventh chords on the tonic (the first note of the scale) and on the sub-dominant (the fourth note of the scale).

C^Δ
C maj7

major triad
plus note
major seventh
from root (C)

F^Δ
F maj7

major triad
plus note
major seventh
from root (F)

The chord symbol of a triangle is the one I prefer, but the symbols *maj 7*, *maj* and *mj* are used a lot too. However these can easily be confused with the minor chord symbols: *m* or *mi*.. Unfortunately, the triangle symbol is not available in the usual fonts, so for written texts like this, you sometimes have to revert to the *maj 7* form.

It may be helpful to think of the seventh as being just a semitone below the octave. A major seventh chord has three inversions - note where the semitone comes in each of the three inversions. The first inversion is not used as much as the other chords.

C^Δ

root position 1st inversion 2nd inversion 3rd inversion

The major seventh chord has a much richer and less strident sound than a triad and was used by composers such as Delius and Vaughn Williams to portray pastoral scenes.

Today it is frequently found in bossa novas and ballads. On the other hand, the interval of a semitone in the inversions can give the chord a biting edge when played loudly. Played softer, the semitone interval adds intensity.

Although there are only two major seventh chords in a major key which occur naturally, you can use these chords on any chromatic note (the 12 notes which make up the span of an octave), particularly on notes which fall outside the key. Like any chord type, a major seventh on one note can be followed by a major seventh chord on another note. They can also be interspersed with chords within the key, particularly where one or two notes are found common to the consecutive chords, eg:

Dm⁷ D^bΔ G^bΔ G⁷ Em⁷ E^bΔ A^bΔ Am⁷

etc.

The fifth note of a major seventh chord can be changed without altering the chord type. It can be lowered or raised by a semitone:

C^Δ C^{Δ-5} C^{Δ+5}

usually written thus

Use the altered fifth where you think it sounds better, for instance to give one of the voices of the chord a more interesting line within a chord sequence.

Other notes can be added to a major seventh chord:

C^Δ 9th sharpened 9th may be written as Eb sharpened 11th thirteenth/sixth

All these notes can be added to the major sevenths with altered fifths too, except for the thirteenth which cannot be used with a major seventh with a sharpened fifth.

As well as adding just the one note, several of the notes can be added:

C^Δ Bm B D D#o

plus

equals equals equals equals

C^{Δ+11} C^{Δ (#9+11)} C^{Δ (13+11)} C^{Δ (13#9+11)}

The top line shows the additional notes written as superimposed chords over the major seventh, whereas the bottom line shows the full chords.

Instead of the convoluted chord symbols shown here, they may be simplified or written as superimposed chords, eg. Bm/C^Δ which means a Bm triad over a C major seventh chord. Note that if an unaltered fifth (G, here) is found lower down in the chord, the F# is strictly speaking a sharpened eleventh (+11). Be aware though that the (+11) is often written as a (-5).

Where the melody note is the root note of the chord (a C in a C major seventh chord) there may be a clash between that note and the seventh of the chord (a semitone above) which you may want to avoid. This is particularly noticeable in accompanying vocalists who may find it hard to pitch their note. To get around this problem, you could use a major sixth chord or a major six-nine chord (see separate tutorial.).

The major sixth chord is formed by adding the major sixth note to a major triad. It has three inversions:

C⁶

root position 1st inversion 2nd inversion 3rd inversion

The image shows four chord diagrams for C6 on a treble clef staff. The first is the root position (C4, E4, G4, A4). The second is the first inversion (E4, G4, C5, A4). The third is the second inversion (G4, C5, E4, A4). The fourth is the third inversion (C5, A4, G4, E4).

Note that the 3rd inversion could also be called an Am7 chord (ie. a minor third below the C).

Major sixth chords lack the sophistication of major seventh chords, but in the Swing Jazz era they were very popular. Never use them in place of triads in rock songs, unless the melody note is the sixth note, as they can sound very sugary.

A lot of traditional big band writing uses sixth chords intermingled with mainly diminished chords for section work as well as ensemble block passages, eg:

The image shows two staves of music in 4/4 time. The top staff starts with a C major chord (C4, E4, G4) and then moves through several chords, including C6 (C5, A4, G4, E4) and other complex chords. The bottom staff shows a similar progression of chords, with some notes marked with accents (>).

This can sound powerful because there are 2 or 3 horns playing each note.

Other notes can also be added to a major sixth chord - see tutorial on 69s.

MINOR MAJOR SEVENTHS

The minor major seventh, which is formed from the minor scales, has a minor third instead of a major third.

Cm^Δ
Cm maj7

root position 1st inversion 2nd inversion 3rd inversion

This chord has a rather melancholy sound and is not used that frequently. It sometimes crops up where a minor chord stretches over a few bars with the seventh note being part of a moving chromatic line, as in *My Funny Valentine*

Additional notes can be added to it:

Cm^Δ 9th 11th sharpened 11th thirteenth/sixth

The minor sixth chord is often used to avoid a clash when the tonic of the chord (C) would be played/sung against the seventh note of the chord.

This is the minor sixth chord and its inversions:

Cm⁶

root position 1st inversion 2nd inversion 3rd inversion

The 3rd inversion could also be viewed as an A half-diminished (Am7-5) chord. (a minor third below the C)

For some reason -probably something to do with harmonics - the minor sixth chord sounds richer than the major sixth chord, so it doesn't have to be avoided so avidly.

THE ADDED SECOND OR FOURTH

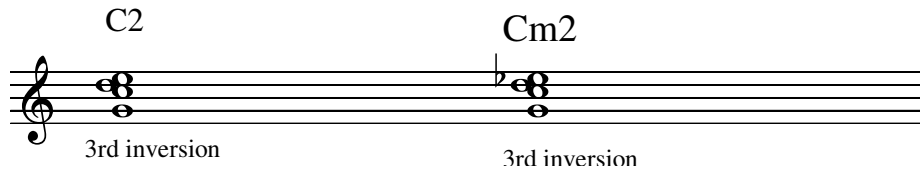
Another way to enrich a major or minor chord is by adding the second to it. This is often done in pop music

C2 or C add 2 or C add D Cm2 or Cm add 2 or Cm add D



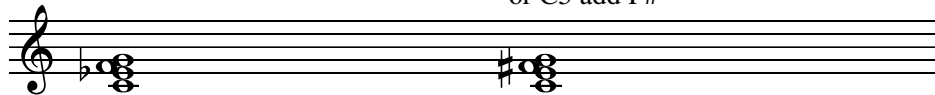
The root note is often avoided, except by the bass. The second can then be resolved on to the root note, but it doesn't have to.

Inversions can be used, particularly the 3rd inversion to fluff up a chord;



The fourth can also be added to a minor triad to fatten it up. It cannot be added to a major triad because of the clash between the third and fourth - unless you particularly want that clash to occur. The sharpened fourth can be used in a major triad if you want a rather blurred discord. Usually you are advised not to do this, because it is said to confuse the ear which wants a clearly defined lead note. But where the lead is not important and you really do want a discord, go for it.

Cm4 or Cm add 4 or Cm add F C add F# or C triad add F#
or C5 add F#



The point is this - choose which chords and additions YOU want and not what someone else wants you to use. That's what all the great composers did.