

VOICINGS

The individual notes within a chord as sometimes called voices, presumably derived from choral music. Therefore the voicing of a chord relates to how the notes are spread out to achieve particular sounds. Read on.

VOICINGS

1. The word *voicings* refers to the way in which a chord is spread out. Each note is sometimes called a voice, especially when talking about the movement of the *inner voices* of a chord progression.
2. Although pianists and arrangers are free to use their own voicings and by doing so develop a style of their own, there are nevertheless certain principles which determine whether a voicing has a good sound or not. These principles are as follows:

3. Register a) Up to the C an octave below middle C.

If the notes are too close together in the lower register they will sound muddy. This is more noticeable on piano than when a chord is voiced for other instruments, eg. woodwind or strings. The reason for this lies in the abundance of overtones which low notes produce. When you play a low note you hear not only the note itself but other notes too, particularly the fifth above the note. The lower the note you play the more overtones (notes of the *harmonic series* related to that note) which are produced. This gives low notes their sense of fullness.

To understand the concept of the *harmonic series*, it is useful to see how a **trombone** works. There are seven positions. In 1st position, with the slide closest to one's mouth, the notes are these:

Trombone - notes in 1st position

A musical staff in bass clef. It shows a sequence of notes starting from a low note on the bottom line, moving up through several semitones. An arrow points to the first note on the bottom line, labeled "pedal note". The notes are black dots on the staff lines, with some having small vertical stems.

In 2nd position, with the slide an inch or two further away from you, the same series of notes are produced, but a semitone lower, and so on, down to the 7th position. So if you combine several low notes on the **piano** to make a chord in this low register, you can see how there will inevitably be clashing overtones in the higher frequencies. Therefore keep notes at a good distance from one another and avoid in particular the higher intervals of a chord (ie. the 7th and above), as well as the 3rd, in the very low register. If however you want a muddy sound for effects, go ahead but don't overdo it.

b) From the C an octave below middle C up to about the F above middle C.

This is a very resonant area where the overtones are fewer but enough to create a rich sound without chords sounding muddy. This is the area in which you're left hand is centered and gives large chords which stretch beyond this zone their strength. Notes of a chord can be fairly close together. Intervals of a 4th, 3rd and even major 2nd work well here and the inclusion of a minor 2nd interval can give bite - but limit it to 1 or 2 minor 2nds at the most. A higher interval of a chord can be included in this zone but with care to avoid losing the nature of the chord. Time spent working on good left hand voicings to accompany your right hand is invaluable.

c) *Above middle C to about F an octave and a fourth above.*

This is a good area where the notes are still strong but are less resonant. You can, if you choose, have very close intervals here (many minor seconds and clusters - several adjacent notes, semitones or tones, played together) Higher intervals can be used without any worry because the basic notes of the chord will be an octave lower.

d) *Above the F, an octave and a fourth above middle C.*

Here the notes get increasingly thinner. Close clusters can be used, but in spite of their dissonance they will in themselves be rather weak unless lower notes are also played. To prevent the top note of a chord in this register being overcome by the lower notes, it is often necessary to double the lead an octave below. The gap between these two notes - an octave - can be filled in as best as one can to get a rich sound.

4. **Strength** - the strongest interval is the octave, followed by the perfect fifth, then the perfect fourth, then the third, and lastly the second. Major triads are the strongest chord - rock music's *macho* sound partly derives from the use of plain major triads. Major triads contain a perfect fifth and a major 3rd. The fifth to the root note an octave above is a perfect fourth. The doubling of the notes also results in octaves. That's why the chord is strong. In jazz, richness is as important as strength - especially in ballads, but sometimes both are required. One way to achieve this is to use a closely voiced chord in the middle register (left hand on the piano), with the tune in octaves above this. The notes added to this octave form a triad in themselves, even though this triad may be different from the basic chord itself, eg. a C triad over an E7 chord. These elaborate chords can be viewed as being superimposed chords.

5. Chords made out of perfect **fifths** are too unwieldy to use generally. But chords consisting of **fourth** intervals can be used to give a modern sound. This is sometimes referred to as *quartal harmony*. Not all the fourths are necessarily perfect fourths.

C major scale harmonised in 4ths

A musical staff in common time (4/4) showing a C major scale harmonised in 4ths. The staff consists of four measures. The first measure contains a C4 chord (root position). The second measure contains an F4 chord (root position). The third measure contains a G4 chord (root position). The fourth measure contains a C5 chord (root position). Asterisks (*) are placed under the bass notes of the F4 and G4 chords, indicating they do not have two perfect 4th intervals.

chords which do not have 2 perfect 4th intervals are marked *

6. The distance between notes of a chord is often roughly the same, except as already mentioned, larger intervals will be found lower down and smaller ones higher up. This however need not be too closely adhered to but it's a good rule of thumb. Sometimes specific chords are required which give a certain sound, rather than being chosen for their purely functional purpose. When this is the case, all the rules including this one are ignored.

7. Certain important notes should not be omitted from a chord, except under certain circumstances. The third (or fourth) and the seventh (except in a sixth chord or triad) define a chord. They should be included, usually *below* higher intervals, but not

always. The root is also important to include but it is best to omit it if playing with a bass player whose main function is to play the root notes. Try not to double the root in the low or medium register - it can make the chord sound too grounded. Doubling the major third in the medium register can also sound too syrupy, but this does not apply so much to the minor third. Avoid the major third and fourth in the same chord as a general rule, although there are acceptable ways of incorporating them both.

8. The interval of a minor 9th between two voices, not necessarily adjacent notes, is usually to be avoided. This applies to these circumstances: a) if the fourth is a m9th above the major third; b) if the root note is in the melody with the major seventh a m9th below; c) if the minor seventh is in the melody and the thirteenth is a m9th below; d) if the major third is in the melody and the sharpened ninth is a m9th below; e) if the fifth is in the melody and the sharpened fourth is a m9th below. Note that in all these instances, the problem arises when the basic notes of a chord are in the lead and a higher interval note is below it. If it sounds wrong, change it.

The image shows a musical staff with two voices. The top voice is in treble clef and the bottom voice is in bass clef. The staff has four measures. Above each measure, labels indicate whether a chord is 'BAD' or 'BETTER or'. Measure a: BAD (top), BETTER or (bottom). Measure b: BAD (top), BETTER (bottom). Measure c: BAD (top), BETTER (bottom). Measure d: BAD (top), BETTER (bottom). Measure e: BAD (top), BETTER (bottom).

9. Don't include a natural ninth with any altered ninths. Don't use the natural fifth with the raised fifth. However the sharpened fourth (flattened fifth) can be used with a natural fifth if the former is the lead. Don't use a major seventh and minor seventh in the same chord. These rules can be broken with experience.

10. In dominant thirteenth chords, you should usually avoid the fifth a major 9th below. The fifth weakens this chord. Either use the flattened fifth, double the thirteenth or omit the note altogether.

The image shows a musical staff with two voices. The top voice is in treble clef and the bottom voice is in bass clef. The staff has four measures. Above the staff, labels indicate: 'weak', 'better', 'or', 'or'. Below the staff, text states: 'the 5th weakens the 13th' and 'don't use 2 3rds in the chord - they can overpower the other notes'. The first measure shows a natural fifth. The second measure shows a flattened fifth. The third and fourth measures show an omitted fifth.

11. The points above can sound negative. Don't let them worry you. But if a chord jars, it's useful to know why so you can generalise from it. If you want a deliberate jarring noise, break the rules. It's the way music progresses.

12. Pay attention to the movement of inner voices, especially in legato passages where the chords are sustained. You will see that each voice will either stay on the same

note or move: try moving them by steps of a tone or semitone rather than larger intervals.

13. **Resolution** - The seventh of a dominant seventh chord should usually be resolved by going down a semitone to the third of the next (tonic) chord according to classical music. Be aware of this pull. There are times though, especially in jazz, when you can ignore this rule.

14. Some arranging terms: a) **close position voicing** - a chord that is not opened up. eg. C E G B. b) **open position voicing** - drop the 2nd note from the top (G) down an octave - G C E B c) **open position voicing II** - drop the 3rd note from the top (C) down an octave - C G E B.

If five-note chord, you can double the lead: B C E G B.

This gives you the Shearing sound or the Glenn Miller sound with clarinet on top and four saxes below it. The chord can be opened up just as with the four voices.

The image contains four staves of musical notation, each representing a different voicing of a C major chord (C-E-G-B).
1. Top staff: Labeled 'closed'. Shows a standard C major chord (C-E-G-B). A 'drop 2' instruction is shown above the staff, indicating that the E note should be dropped down an octave to form a G-C-E-B voicing.
2. Second staff: Labeled 'open I'. Shows a G-C-E-B voicing where the G note is dropped down an octave.
3. Third staff: Labeled 'open II'. Shows a C-G-E-B voicing where the C note is dropped down an octave.
4. Bottom staff: Another 'open II' voicing, identical to the third staff but with a different staff position.
All staves are in common time (4/4) and treble clef.

This process applies mainly to 4-note chords as above. For larger chords, try re-arranging notes in different octaves, doubling or omitting notes and altering fifths and ninths to get the voicing that appeals to you. But do take into account the chords surrounding the chord in question.

15. Get ideas for voicings from books and from imitating music on disc. When you find something you like, try and play it in all keys. Also analyse it - what type of chord is it, what are the extensions/alterations, how is the chord voiced. Remember: learning piano voicings is also a stepping stone to learning arranging and composition.