

Learning Chord Structure Easily

A technical knowledge of harmony is not an absolute prerequisite to the enjoyment of music, but the amateur musician and listener alike should be aware of harmony as an element of guitar chord structure. He should be cognizant of certain basic principles, properties and uses of this element.

Harmony as an element is more sophisticated than rhythm and melody. It was virtually non-existent in primitive cultures. It is an element which appeared comparatively late in the history of music and was developed primarily in western civilization.

Harmony is a musical element based on the simultaneous combination of musical tones (as distinguished from the consecutive tones of a melody), or the accompaniment of a melody using chords.

A combination of three or more tones, played simultaneously and perceived as sounding as a whole is called a chord.

A few rudimentary principles will help you understand the nature of conventional chord construction. The simplest chord is the major triad, which consists of three tones. We can build a triad by selecting the tones of a certain major scale and by adding two or more tones above it in alternate degrees of the original scale. For example, if we start with the tone C as "do", the tonic of the C-major scale, we get the triad do-mi-sol, 1-3-5, or using the letter names C-E-G.

The tones of any chord maybe arranged in different order, and they maybe duplicated an octave above or below without changing the essential nature of the chord. This is the reason why we often see chords such as C/E, (the first inversion of the C major triad using the chord tone E as the bass) or C/G (the second inversion of the same triad using the chord tone G as the bass)

Building chords in thirds (on alternate scale degrees as described) was the basis of all conventional harmony from 1700-1900.

In the twentieth century serious music composers expanded the chord vocabulary by additional means of construction for the sake of more colorful and complex effects. Although additional means of construction have been introduced, modern pop, rock and jazz music still follow the conventional way of chord construction - by thirds.

Going back to the major chord, you may be wondering why there are several fingerings for a certain major chord. This is possible because in the 12 frets of the guitar, the notes simply repeat themselves in increasing octaves, at their corresponding string. C, for example, is on the first fret at the B string, third fret at the A string, fifth fret at the G string, and on the eighth fret at the E string. For reference, here are the other notes and their possible fingerings:

D: 3rd fret at B, 5th fret at A, 7th at G and 10th at E;

E: 2nd at D, 5th at B, 7th at A, 9th at G and 12th at E;

F: 1st at E, 3rd at D, 6th at B, 8th at S and 10th at G;

G: 3rd at E, 5th at D, 8th at B, 10th at A and 12th at G;

A: 2nd at G, 5th at E, 7th at D, 10th at B and 12th at A;

B: 2nd at A, 4th at G, 7th at E, 9th at D and 12th at B.

Depending on how the melody of the song is arranged, the chord formation can assume any fingering position as long as the triad is formed and however it is conveniently played.

Now that you have an understanding of the major chord, let us investigate its parallel counterpart the minor chord. If the third of the major triad is altered by lowering it by one semitone (one fret on the guitar and two frets for each whole tone), the resulting triad will be C-E /flat-G, which is the minor triad.

Check the fret board and investigate all of the possible fingerings, for the minor chord. You may see that if comparing it with the major chord

fingerings, only one string is lowered when forming the minor chord, unless there is a doubling of the minor third (E /flat).

If you are wondering why all the examples mentioned here are on the C chord, it is because it is now your turn to apply the lesson. Chart down the major and minor chord triads for the rest of the notes and ... start strummin'!

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