

Chord Quality

So far, I have presented quite a variety of chord types: major, minor, diminished, and augmented triads; major, dominant, minor, tonic minor, half diminished, and fully diminished seventh chords; ninth, eleventh and thirteenth chords, with or without alterations; major and minor sixth chords, suspended chords, and slash chords. I discussed all of these chord types because you will encounter all of them in lead sheets to standards, so you need to learn them.

However, in order to understand harmony, there are really only a handful of chord types that are relevant: major, dominant seventh, minor seventh, tonic minor, half diminished, and fully diminished. All other chord types can be related to one of these six.

This might seem to be a rather extravagant claim, so it is important that you understand what I mean here. I am not saying that you cannot have, for example, a **G7b9b13** chord in tonal harmony. Nor am I saying that one should not play flatted ninths or other extensions and alterations. I am saying that when it comes to understanding the function of a given chord in the context of a particular standard, **G7b9b13** does not behave any differently than **G7**, so if we understand how **G7** functions, we know all we need to know about the function of **G7b9b13**. An understanding of the six basic chord types is sufficient for understanding the rest. So in the chapters that follow, where I explain how to understand the function of various chords in different contexts, the six basic chord types are all I will be concerned with. I sometimes refer to these basic chord types as chord *qualities*.

I use this idea in my writing and playing as well. When I write out lead sheets, I tend to use simple seventh chords most of the time, and I expect each player to supply his own extensions and alterations. Similarly, when I read a lead sheet for a standard, I tend to ignore any specified extensions and alterations and supply my own instead, based on my own tastes and understanding of the harmony. This attitude is, I suppose, found almost exclusively among jazz musicians, but you will find it is quite common in that world.

It should be obvious how to relate an extended chord to one of the basic chords types: simply ignore all extensions beyond the seventh, and ignore alterations as well. For example, if you see **Dmaj7#11** in a standard, for the purpose of understanding the chord progression you can treat it as **Dmaj7**. Similarly, **Dm9** is equivalent to **Dm7**, and **D7#5** is equivalent to **D7**. The exception is the “m7b5” or half-diminished chord, which I consider to be a distinct chord quality from the minor seventh.

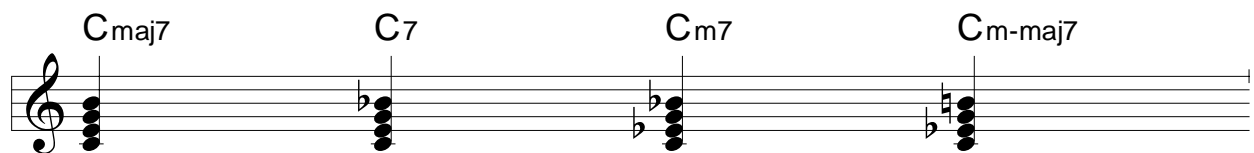
Major sixth chords are basically the same as major seventh chords. When you see a major sixth chord in a lead sheet, it is virtually always going to be the **I** chord or the **IV** chord of the current key, and it could just as easily have been specified as a major seventh chord. When actually playing the chord, you can include a sixth or seventh at your pleasure, regardless of which was actually notated. Trust me on this.

Minor sixth chords are generally the same as tonic minor chords. Again, either the sixth or seventh can be used, regardless of which was specified.

Suspended chords are usually dominant sevenths. This is certainly true for chords such as **Eb7sus**, where the seventh is specifically called for, but it also holds in most cases when no seventh is specified, like **Ebsus4**.

If the chart specifies a simple triad, you will have to do a little detective work to figure out what kind of seventh chord it corresponds to in this context. If the chord is diatonic, then you can usually safely assume it is the type of seventh chord that occurs diatonically. For example, the **IV** chord usually functions as if it were a major seventh chord, whether the seventh is specified or not. On the other hand, the **V** chord usually behaves as if it were as a dominant seventh chord, even when it is notated as a triad. Minor chords are usually minor sevenths, except for the **i** chord in a minor key, which may be a tonic minor chord. For non-diatonic chords, the various guidelines listed in the next chapter can often help you establish a context for understanding the function of the chord. When in doubt, use your ear. If the chord seems to work better as a dominant seventh than as a major seventh, then that is how you should treat it. As you become more familiar with the sounds of various harmonic idioms, you will find this easier.

A corollary of all this is that the third and seventh become the most important notes in most chords, because these are the notes that differentiate the major seventh, dominant seventh, minor seventh, and tonic minor chords. Consider the chords **Cmaj7**, **C7**, **Cm7**, and **Cm-maj7**:



The roots and fifths of these chords are all the same, but the thirds and sevenths differ. This observation is perhaps not so important in understanding harmony, but it can be useful in actually playing chord progressions. When playing any of these chords on the piano, a common way to voice them is with the root in the left hand and the third and seventh in the right hand, and this is often enough to convey the sound of the chord. The half-diminished and fully diminished chords have different fifths than these, but even in the case of the half-diminished or “m7b5” chord, you will find that it behaves in very much the same manner as a minor seventh chord. The fully diminished seventh chord also has a different seventh than any other chord type, which helps distinguish it from the others.