DIATONIC HARMONY WITH TRIADS

Why is it Useful?

Can you imagine, being able to play in any key? You can transcend memorizing shapes, you can understand harmony as it is in music.
Understanding diatonic harmony takes time and practice. But in time, with practice, you will be able to know, visualize, and play the harmonies through any key you practice diatonic harmony in.

We will learn more about how to practice diatonic harmony on our instrument, but first we must undertand the concept.

The Nashville Number System

The idea of diatonic harmony has been around since at least the 1700s, and I would argue since about 500 B.C.E. However, in the 1950s, Nashville, Tennesee popularized and perhaps perfected this approach to music.
Nashville was *the* hub for songwriters, vocalists, and performers who needed guitarists, pianists, and bass players to accompany their songs. Because many vocalists have different vocal ranges, songs often had to be played in different keys to suit the vocal range of different vocalists. Thus understanding diatonic harmony became essential for Nashville musicians.

What Does "Diatonic Harmony" Mean?

We have an intuitive sense of what "harmony" means, but a good definition is: *the combination of simultaneously sounded musical notes to produce chords*. In other words, when more than one note is played at the same time, this is considered harmony.

the word "diatonic" can be broken down like this:
dia = *across / through*
tonic = tonality / "key of"

diatonic harmony
=
" harmony through the key of "

The Formula

I IIm IIIm IV V VIm VII°

Lets read on to understand this formula. I promise, its easy to understand with a little work!

Applying Diatonic Harmony

In the key of C major, we would analyze it this way:

I	IIm	IIIm	IV	V	VIm	VII°
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	B°

The formula is telling us exactly this:
The triad built on the 1st degree of the major scale is a major triad,
the 2nd is a minor triad,
the 3rd is a minor triad,
the 4th is a major triad,
the 5th is a major triad,
the 6th is a minor triad,
and the 7th is a diminished triad (more on this later).

Practice this formula through all 12 major keys and one can faithfully know what harmony they are playing when building a triad on any step of the major scale. I've created a practice guide at the end of this document for you to try this in all keys.

The Diminished Chord

A side note: you may notice, the VII chord is different than the rest; it is a diminished triad. You indicate a diminished triad by placing a little circle on the right upper corner of the chord symbol.

There is only one diminished chord in every major key and it is always located on the 7th degree of the major scale.

Warning: Prerequisite Knowledge Required

It is important to note before continuing - a requirement for fully understanding diatonic harmony is that you know at least a few major scales. You also should know how to identify major and minor triads, as you will need to play these triads through the scale to find the correct harmonies.

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Play each triad through the key. There are no sharps or flats in the key of C, so all the triads you play will be white notes on the piano. Lets next analyze the key of G major using the same system. We will do this in all 12 major keys.

	I	IIm	IIIm	IV	V	VIm	VII°
C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	B°	
G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#	

Doing this through all 12 major scale is a full-brain work out, and If you can trick yourself into doing this valuable work, you will be well ahead of the musical curve.

Other musical structures such as 7th chords can be applied to this idea of diatonic harmony. The more you learn, the more you will see and hear how harmony works. We will explore the possibilties in a later lesson, until then, happy practicing!

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	I	IIm	IIIm	IV	V	VIm	VII°
C							
G							
D							
A							
E							
B							
F#							
Db							
Ab							
Eb							
Bb							
F							