

TRIADS / CHORDS

What are Triads

Triads are 3-note chords. They are the basic building blocks of harmony and can be manipulated in many ways. Triads usually contain a “root,” a 3rd, and a 5th. We will refer to these as 1, 3, and 5.

In a C major triad, the root is C, the 3rd is E, and the 5th is G. Play them all together, and you have a C major triad.

C **E** **G**
Root *3rd* *5th*

(keep this in mind moving forward.)

These notes are called 1 (root), 3, and 5 because of where they are in the C major scale. This C major triad is played on the 1st, 3rd, and 5th degree of the C major scale.



All other triads also have a root, 3rd, and 5th that relate to its own major scale.

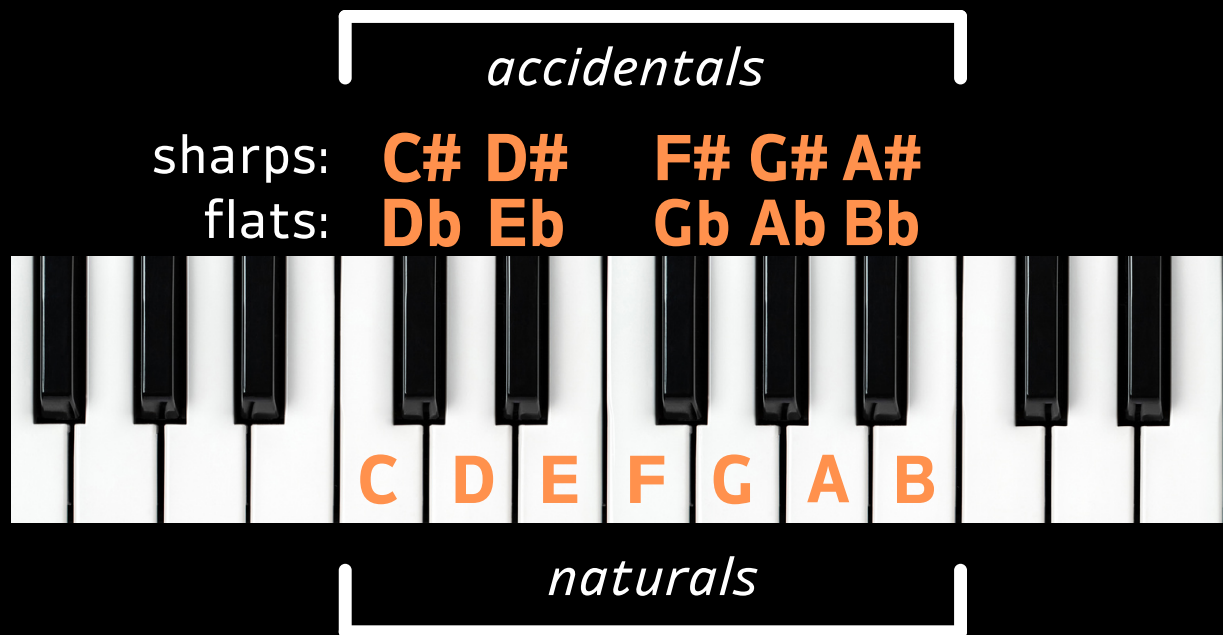
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Major Triads

The first step to learning ALL the chords is to first learn all 12 major triads. There are 12 major triads, one for every note.

The 12 notes can easily be seen on the piano (C, C#, D, D#, E, F, F#, G, G#, A, A#, and B).

In music, we call sharps and flats “accidentals”. The white notes are referred to as naturals.



Enharmonic Equivalent - Remember that C# (C sharp) can also be called Db (D flat), as is the case with any sharp (#) or flat (b). This relationship is called an **enharmonic equivalent**: “*same note, different name.*”

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The Groups

So, we need to spend time memorizing the 12 major triads.

The best system I know for learning these 12 triads on the piano is to break them up into 4 groups:

12 Major Triads (try playing each one).

<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4</u>
C E G	A C# E	B D# F#	Db F Ab
F A C	D F# A		Eb G Bb
G B D	E G# B		F# A# C#
			Ab C Eb
			Bb D F

The two recommended fingering options are:
1-3-5 (*thumb, middle, pinky*) OR **1-2-4** (*thumb, index, ring*).

The 1st group can be characterized as major triads with no sharps or flats, no black notes on the piano.

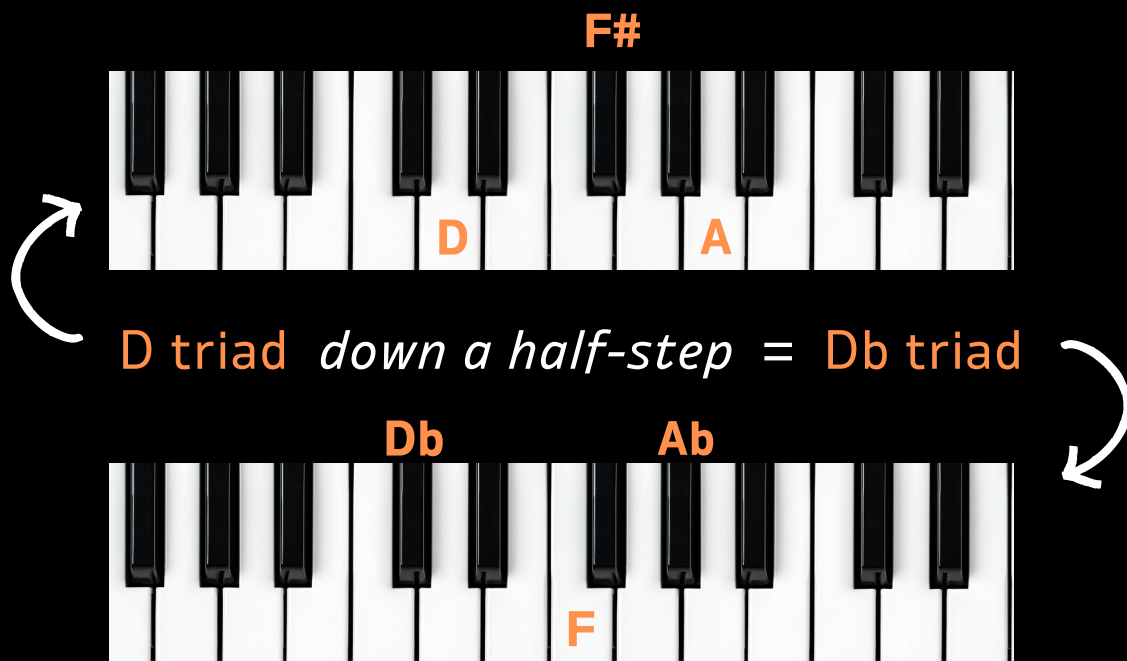
The 2nd group of triads all have a sharp (#), a black note in the middle of the chord.

The 3rd group is an outlier as it has two sharps.

The 4th group contain the last 5 major triads. The root of each triad are black notes on the piano.

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Another way to find the major triads in group 4:
To find a Db triad, you must first know how to play a D triad (from the 2nd group). Play a D triad (D F# A) and flatten it by moving each note down exactly a half-step to find a Db triad.



Active Recall

Memorize these chords one group at a time with a technique called "active recall". Look at the chords and memorize the spelling. Say to yourself "CEG, CEG...FAC, FAC...GBD, GBD..."

Active recall is the process of looking away from your notes and trying to recall these groups from memory, until you can recall all 4 groups. You got this!



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A special note about “The Groups”

The groups are a memory trick that my teacher taught me, but they do not hold any real musical significance.

In other words, the groups don't mean anything musically, we are just using them as a memory tool.

Minor Triads / Chords

After learning the major triads, memorizing them, and playing them on the piano, there is a simple formula to make any major triad into a minor triad. We flatten the 3rd of a major chord down a half-step to make it a minor chord.

C Major Triad

C **E** **G**
Root *3rd* *5th*

C Minor Triad

C **E^b** **G**
Root *flat 3rd* *5th*

Knowing all 12 major and minor triads is like pre-learning thousands, maybe tens of thousands, of songs. This requires work, but it is so rewarding!



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Diminished Triads

One other important triad to know is the diminished triad. Diminished triads appear less frequently than major and minor triads but are still essential. Is there a formula for it? Yes there is, I'm glad you asked! To get a diminished triad, you flatten the 3rd *and* 5th of any major chord.

When reading a chord chart, the chord symbols appear in specific ways:

Chord symbol:

C Major Triad

C

C Minor Triad

Cm or C-

C Diminished Triad

C[°] or Cdim

Chord spelling:

C Major Triad

C E G
Root 3rd 5th

C Minor Triad

C Eb G
Root flat 3rd 5th

C Diminished Triad

C Eb Gb
Root flat 3rd flat 5th



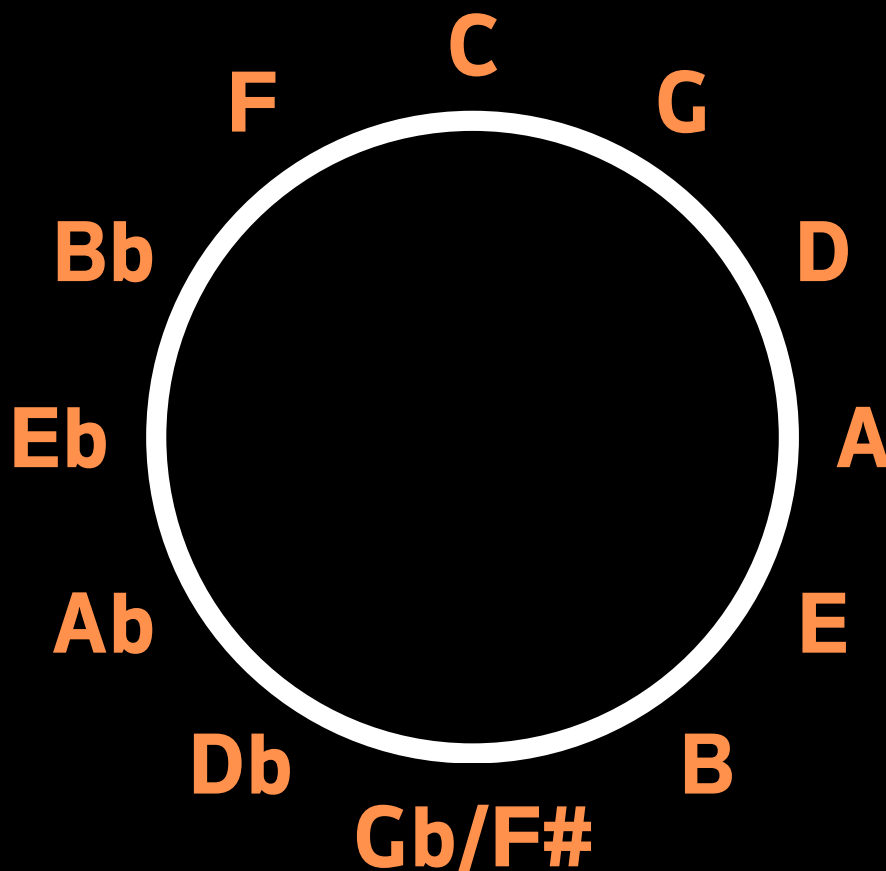
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The Ultimate Practice Tool

At this point, after learning how to make all these triads, we need to find a musical way of practicing them. We must always bring our efforts back into the music.

The Circle of 5ths is perhaps one of the most useful concepts for learning music. It is capable of presenting all of these triads in an organized and musical way.

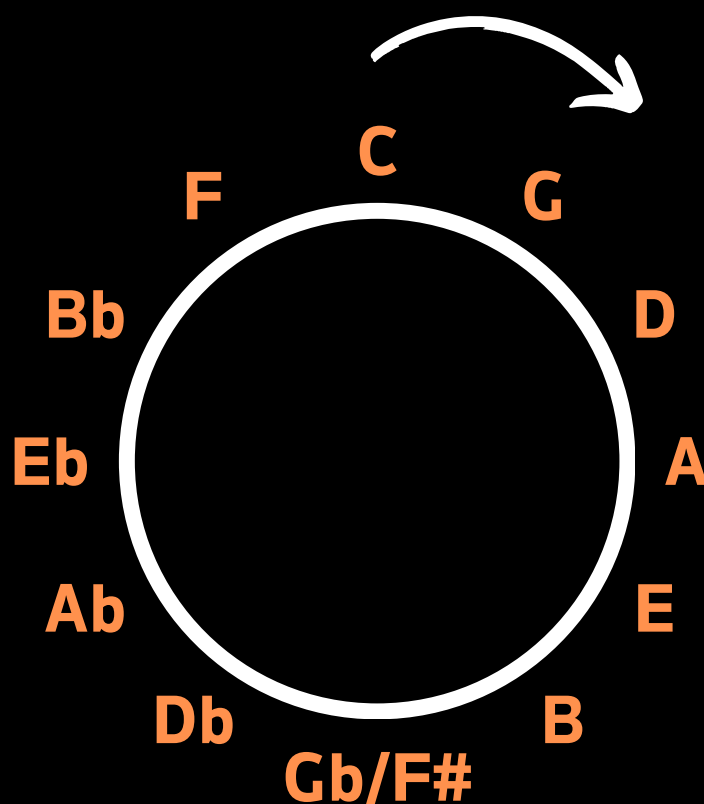
The Circle of 5ths



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We will have a more in-depth look at the Circle of 5ths in a later lesson. For now, let's just use the Circle of 5ths right away to practice our triads. I'll explain how.

Start by playing your major triads clock-wise (to the right), through the circle of 5ths. So, for this exercise, you will play a C major triad, a G major triad, a D major triad, and so on around the circle until you reach C again. You should try to accomplish 4 to 5 successful cycles through the circle in a row with minimal mistakes. If you can improvise music while doing this, that is even better.



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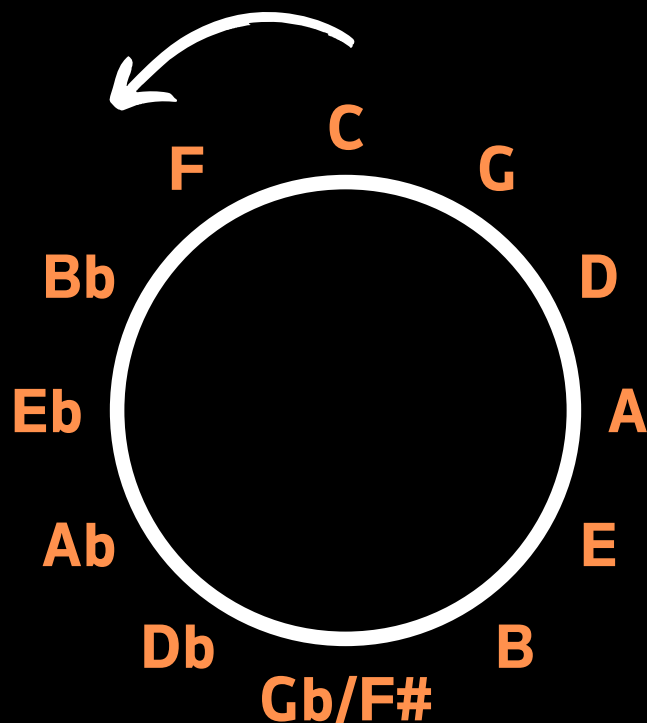
Hear how musical this sequence sounds and know that so many chord progressions move in 5ths like this. The chord progression for the song "Hey Joe" by Jimi Hendrix is "coincidentally" major triads being played through the circle of 5ths:

"Hey Joe" chord progression:

|| C G | D A | E7 | E7 ||

The Circle of 4ths

The other direction (to the left) on the circle is referred to as the circle of 4ths. Many chord progressions in jazz, rock, and pop move in 4ths. Again - practicing your chords through the circle of 4ths is like pre-learning thousands of songs.



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I could think of a hundred songs just off the top of my head where the chord progression move in 4ths.

A classic example is "Autumn Leaves."

"Autumn Leaves" chord progression:

Cm	F7	Bb	Eb
Adim	D	Gm	Gm

This approach to music has endured for a long time. Can you see how this chord progression in a Bach prelude mostly moves in 4ths and 5ths?

J.S. Bach "Prelude in C major" chord progression:

C	Dm	G7	C
Am	D7	G	Cmaj7

This has been a beginning lesson on triads, but the use of triads can get very sophisticated and complex, so make sure you practice the material in this lesson so you can be ready for what is to come in your future as a musician!