

Scales, Triads & Color

A Basic Look at Building Chords and adding Color

Scales

Scales consist of whole steps and half steps. Build a major scale as follows (1 = whole step): 1 + 1 + 1/2 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1/2. (Figure A) From C to C completes the octave. There are 3 minor scales, which we will not cover in these lessons.

Figure A

C Major Scale: C | D | E | F | G | A | B | C
 1 | 1 | 1/2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1/2

Triads

Major & minor triads (chords) are made up of 3 notes from the scale. A major triad is build using the 1st (or root), 3rd, and 5th. (Figure B) Even though we didn't cover minor scales, it is possible to figure out a minor triad by using a "gimmick." Build a major triad and lower the 3rd a half step. (Figure C)

Figure B

C Major Triad: C E G

Figure C

C Minor Triad: C Eb G

Color

The most basic definition of "color" in music is adding notes to a triad. I might add that hopefully, for the listener's sake, it sounds good, but that is a matter of opinion. Color is notated using numbers (Figure D). Those numbers can be raised (#) or lowered (b) a half-step.

It's important to note the distinction between a major 7 (C maj7) and a minor 7 (C7) chord. In this case, the major or minor does not refer to the quality of the chord (whether the chord is major or minor). It refers to the quality of the 7. To play a maj7 chord simply play the 7th note in the scale (Figure D). To play a minor 7, lower the 7th note one half-step. The way you should think of it is C major major 7 (C maj7) or C major minor 7 (C7). You can see how using this shorthand is valuable when writing out a chart.

Opinions vary as to the proper way to notate color chords. Please keep that in mind when you are reading a chart. The correct way to notate and communicate the color notes in a chord is easy. There are 2 categories: color chords without a 7 and with a 7.

Chords such as C2, C6, C4 are color chords without a 7. Again, the number tells the reader which note in the scale to add to the triad. For example, a C6 consist of these notes: C-E-G-A

Chords such as C9, Cmaj9, C13, Cmaj13, C11, C9/#11 are color chords with a 7. When notating these chords you can again use shorthand and drop the 7. You will notice that in a C2, Cmaj9 and a C9 the D is present (Figure E). A "2" and a "9" are the same notes in the scale, but by using a number system above the octave we can utilize this shorthand (Figure E). When you see a chord with a "#" or a "b" before a number (C#11, C7b9), again, you simply raise or lower that color note by a half step.

We do not discuss the voicing of these chords much in this lesson because voicings will depend on the style of the music being played. As an exercise, put the color notes in different places within the chord and notice how it makes the chord sound different. Placing color notes next to each other when they are only a half step apart will make the chord have more dissonance; to have the color without as much dissonance try spreading the color notes out within the chord.

Figure D

C Major Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8
 9 11 13

Figure E

C2: C-D-E-G
 Cmaj9: C-D-E-G-B
 C9: C-D-E-G-Bb