

Lesson 29: Triads in major keys

In this lesson you will learn about triad names, Roman numerals, and triad qualities in major keys.

A triad can be built on each degree of a major scale using the notes of that scale. (We will use C major as our example, but all of the relationships can be transposed to any other major scale.) The name of the triad is the name of its root: tonic, supertonic, mediant, subdominant, dominant, submediant, and leading tone.

Triad names

Tonic Supertonic Mediant Subdominant Dominant Submediant Leading tone

Triads also can be named using *Roman numerals*, with the numerals corresponding to the scale degrees of the triad roots.

Roman numerals

I ii iii IV V vi vii°

Of the seven triads in a major scale, three are major (I, IV, and V), three are minor (ii, iii, and vi), and one is diminished (vii°). Note that for major triads, the Roman numeral is uppercase, for minor triads it is lowercase, and for diminished triads it is lowercase with a ° sign.

Triad qualities

M m m M M m d

In identifying chords, Roman numerals are often combined with figured bass numbers: the Roman numeral identifies the root of the chord; the figured bass numbers tell the position of the chord.

C Dm Em F G Am B°

I $\frac{5}{3}$ ii $\frac{5}{3}$ iii $\frac{5}{3}$ IV $\frac{5}{3}$ V $\frac{5}{3}$ vi $\frac{5}{3}$ vii° $\frac{5}{3}$

Triads in major

C/E Dm/F Em/G F/A G/B Am/C B°/D

I $\frac{6}{3}$ ii $\frac{6}{3}$ iii $\frac{6}{3}$ IV $\frac{6}{3}$ V $\frac{6}{3}$ vi $\frac{6}{3}$ vii° $\frac{6}{3}$

The figured bass $\frac{5}{3}$ is usually omitted—any Roman numeral without a figured bass after it will be assumed to be in root position ($\frac{5}{3}$ position). The figured bass $\frac{6}{3}$ is sometimes abbreviated 6 (the 3 is just assumed). In theory, it is also possible to construct $\frac{6}{4}$ chords on each degree of the scale. In musical practice, however, $\frac{6}{4}$ chords are used only under special conditions to be discussed in Chapter 6. Therefore, $\frac{6}{4}$ chords are omitted from the in-class activities and written exercises for this lesson. Another aspect of these harmonies, namely their functional relationships to each other and their combination into meaningful harmonic progressions, will also be deferred until Chapter 6.