

A short guide to major and minor triads

By Daniel Nistico

What does it feel like when you're sight reading music, or reading through a piece of music in order to learn it?

Is it a slow process? Frustrating? Confusing? Have you been reading music for a long time, but have no new direction in how to improve your reading?

What would reading music fluently do for your guitar playing? Why is it important?

If you can read music fluently, it means that you **understand** music thoroughly. If you understand music, it can:

- Help you learn pieces way faster
- Help you memorize pieces quickly
- Make your interpretation more powerful
- Enable you to read virtually any piece of music you want
- Give you tools for composing and/or improvising

I can promise you one thing - if you learn major and minor triads, then your reading will improve. The musical example below will demonstrate this point.

I chose this example very specifically, because it is almost entirely made up of root position major and minor triads.

This means that if you already know major and minor triads, then you don't even need to think when it comes to reading through a piece like this. You have already practiced those chords and know exactly where they are on the fretboard.

Below is Rung's Choral and I have circled every single major and minor triad.

Choral I.

The image shows a musical score for 'Choral I.' in G major (one sharp) and 6/8 time. The score consists of four staves of music. Red circles are drawn around every root position major and minor triad in the piece. The first staff is marked with a '6.' and a 'Fr. R.' at the end. The second staff has a 'p' dynamic marking. The third staff has an 'mf' dynamic marking. The fourth staff has 'mf', 'dim.', 'p', and 'pp' dynamic markings. The score is written in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#).

If you have my book [Fundamental Harmony](#), then every single triad that's circled above is in that book.

So it might seem counter-intuitive at first, but if you spend a lot of time learning triads, you can actually save a lot of time when it comes to learning pieces.

Some key points to remember about triads:

Triad = Three

- A triad is simply when three different notes are stacked in thirds: C-E-G for example is a C Major triad.

Interval Structure

- The interval structure tells us what kind of triad it is. The only difference between a major and minor triad is the interval produced from the tonic to the third (i.e. the first two notes of the triad in root position).

- Major third = major triad **C-E-G** or 1-3-5 (C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C)
- Minor third = minor triad **C-Eb-G** or 1-b3-5 (C-D-Eb-F-G-A-B-C)

Which triads in Rung's Choral are major triads? Which are minor triads?

Major 3rd: C - E *Major Triad* *Minor 3rd: C - Eb* *Minor Triad*

Doubling

- You can double (or triple, or quadruple, etc.) any of those three notes and that wouldn't change the chord's label (C-E-G-C is still C Major)

Which triads in Rung's Choral have doubled notes?

C Major with doubled tonic (C) *C Major with doubled tonic and fifth (C and G)* *C Major with tripled tonic and doubled fifth (C and G)*

Inversions and Figured Bass

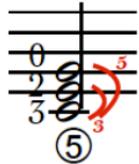
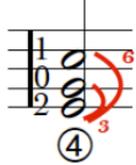
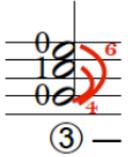
- By changing the order of those notes, you get inversions of the triad

- a) C-E-G = root position
- b) E-G-C = first inversion
- c) G-E-C = second inversion

Which triads in Rung's Choral are in an inversion?

Figured bass: numbers that represent the intervals above the bass note.

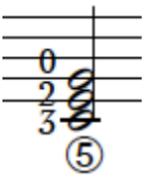
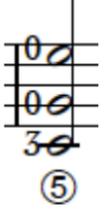
- a) 5/3 = root position
- b) 6/3 (or just '6') = first inversion
- c) 6/4 = second inversion

| | | | | | |
|----|---|----|--|----|---|
| a) |  | b) |  | c) |  |
| | 5/3 | | 6/3 | | 6/4 |
| | root position | | first inversion | | second inversion |

Spacing

- Triads can be stacked (i.e. notes can be distributed) in a variety of ways, but two are commonly seen in music: closed and open.

What position are the triads of Rung's Choral in?

| | |
|--|---|
|  |  |
| Closed position: notes stacked closely | Open position: notes stacked further apart |

Practice

If you've never practiced triads before, then try out these C major triads from my book. The top staff presents triads in closed position and the bottom staff are triads in open position. I would recommend practicing triads each day as part of your technical work material.

As you play each individual triad from the example below, say the inversion in your head or out loud

When triads are in open position, just use the bass note to determine the inversion, because the notes are now distributed out of order (C-G-E instead of C-E-G).

