

A Complete Guide to Piano Chords

by JERMAINE GRIGGS



Piano chords are like blood to the human body. Without them, your songs won't have life.

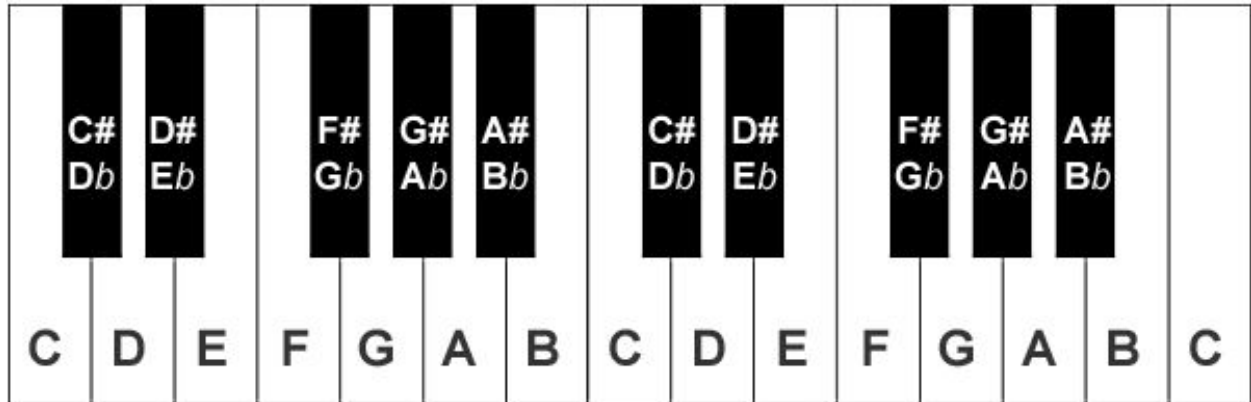
"Notes create scales, scales create chords, chords create progressions, and progressions create songs."

If chords are blood, chord progressions represent the flow of blood.

In this post, we're going to explore all the different types of piano chords you need to know in order to play most of today's songs.

Piano Chords – Notes

I don't want to assume you know all the notes of the piano, so here's a handy diagram illustrating them all:



The piano uses the first 7 letters of the alphabet: *A, B, C, D, E, F, and G.*

These are shown on the white keys.

But each note can also be sharped (raised) or flatted (lowered).

Sharp = # = Raise

Flat = ♭ = Lower

**Just remember a “flat” tire lowers the car. Lower means going deeper in pitch to the left on the piano. Raise means going higher in pitch to the right on the piano.*

#1 Mistake with sharps and flats

A lot of musicians think sharps and flats are only designated to black keys. Sure, if you lower D, you

get Db (pronounced “D flat”), the black key directly to the left of D. And if you raise F, you get F# (pronounced “F sharp”), the black key directly to the right of F.

But you can also raise and lower white keys that do not have black keys directly in front or back of them. For example, lowering F is called “Fb” (“F flat”), even though to the beginner, it’s the same as playing “E.” Likewise, raising E is called “E#” (“E sharp”), even though it uses the key most people know as “F.”

The fancy name for the different spellings of the same tone is [“Enharmonic.”](#)

These may seem like advanced topics, but getting this clarification EARLY will ensure that you not only play piano chords well, but spell the notes correctly.

Piano Chords – Intervals

An “interval” in music is simply *distance* – or the difference between two tones.

Just like inches, feet, yards, and meters describe distance in physical spaces, intervals like “half steps” and “whole steps” describe distance in music.

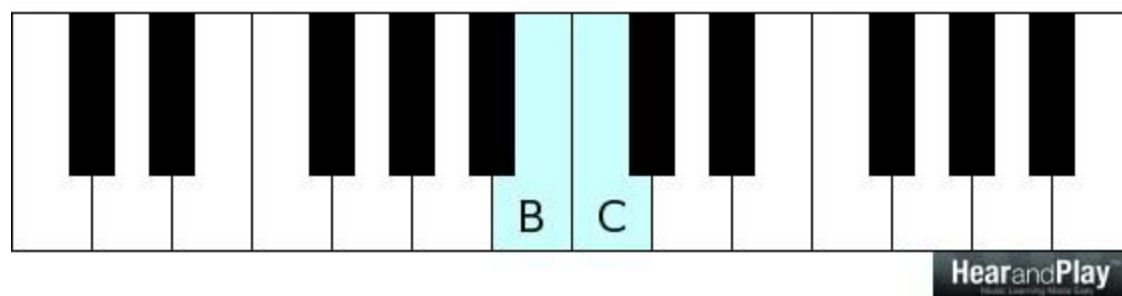
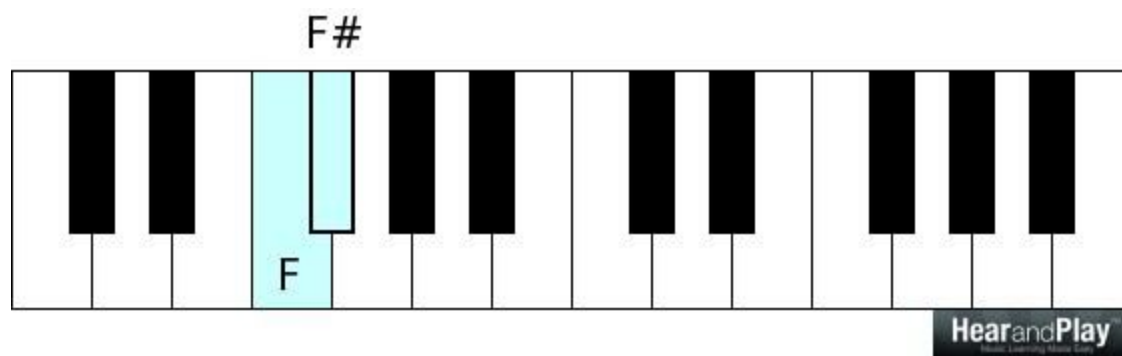
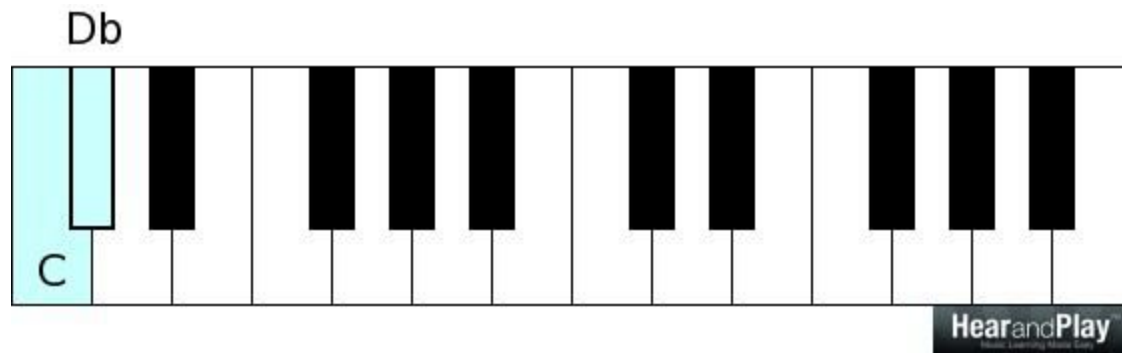
Here’s a poem:

“Half steps” are from key to key with no keys in between,

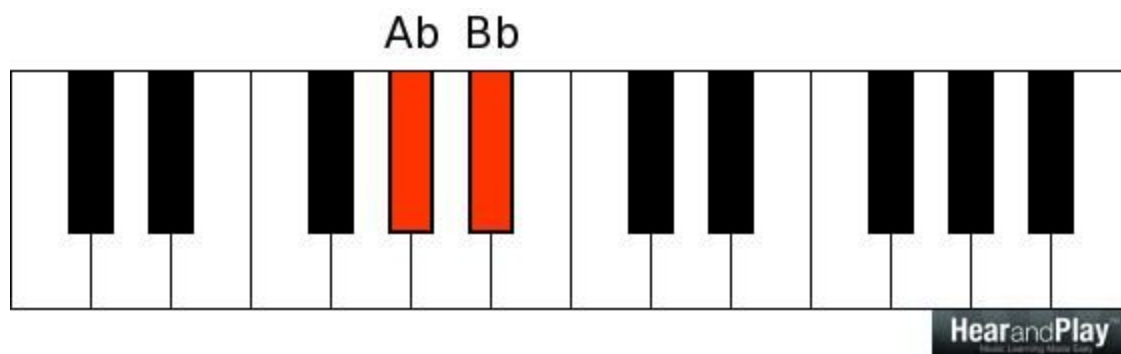
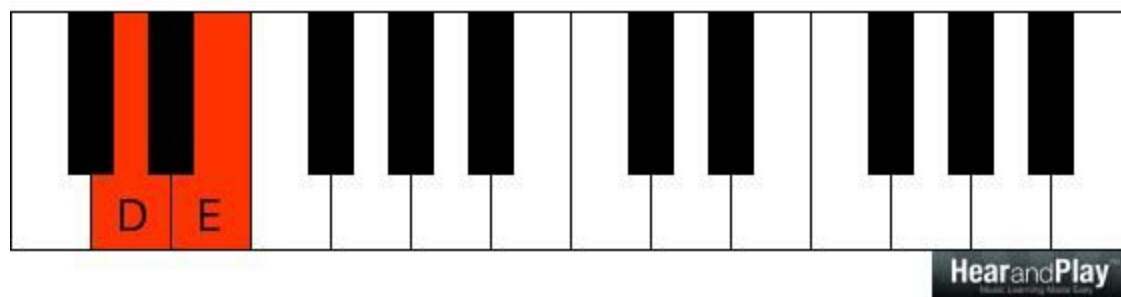
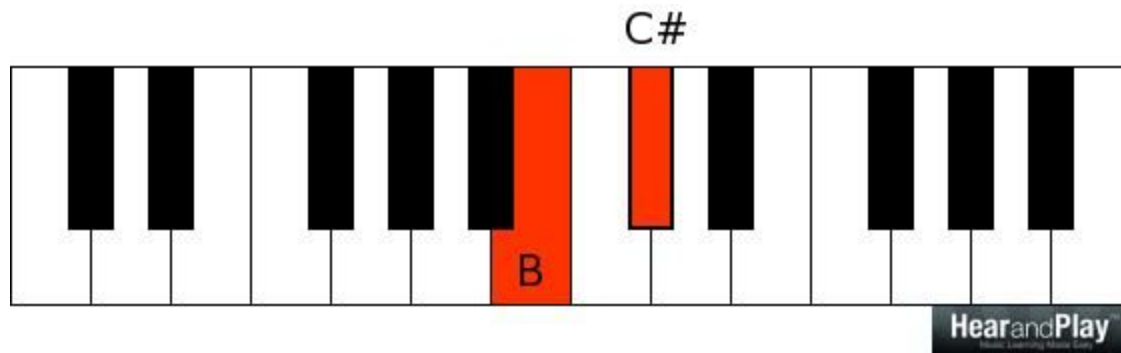
“Whole steps” always skip a key with ONE key in between.

In the previous section, when we talked about how flattening a note lowers it and sharpening a note raises it, we were referencing half steps.

These tones are all half steps apart because there are **NO** keys in between:



These tones are a whole step apart because there are **ONE** key in between them:



With a mastery of half and whole steps, you're ready to learn what chords are made of.

Piano Chords – Three Methods To Build Them

We'll cover three ways to build piano chords. One using *scales*, one using *intervals*, and one using the *combining of chords* to produce bigger ones.

Major scales

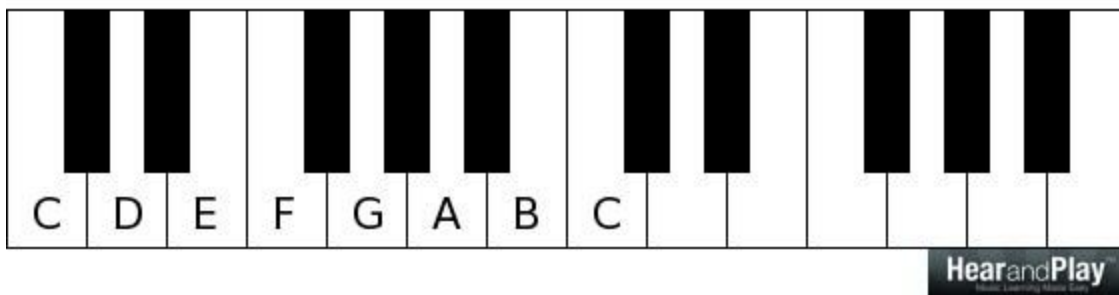
You don't have to be a musician to know the sound of a major scale. We've all heard them.

There are 12 primary major scales in total – one for each unique key of the piano.

A major scale has 7 unique notes in it.

The easiest to remember is the C major scale.

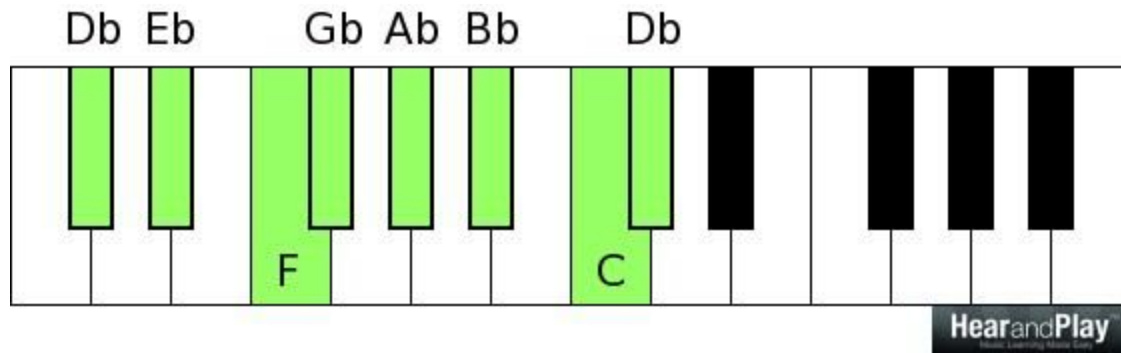
C major:



*The C major scale has all white keys and no black keys.

But the other scales aren't so easy to remember. For example...

Db major:



So how did we form these scales?

With your friends, the “half step” and “whole step.”

Here’s a cool mnemonic device I made up over 10 years ago to help you remember the formula for major scales:

“**W**hy **W**on’t **H**e **W**ear **W**hite **W**hen **H**ot”

(I’ll spare you the full story but it stems from my wife making fun of me for wearing really hot and dark clothes during 95 degree summer weather. “Why Won’t He Wear White When Hot?” she asked.)

Just take the first letter of every word and that tells you whether to use a whole step or a half step.

A lot easier than having to remember:

W W H W W W H

You can form ANY major scale you want by starting on any tone and using the above WWHWWWH formula.

For example, forming the “F major” scale is as easy as starting on F:

Adding a whole step because the first word of our formula is “Why”.

“G” is a whole step up from F.

F – G

“Won’t” is the next word so we need to add another whole step to this scale. That gives us “A.”

F – G – A

“He” is the next word so we need to switch things up and add a half step to the mix. That gives us Bb (B flat).

F – G – A – Bb

(If you were tempted to use B instead of Bb, you probably got carried away with the two whole steps in the beginning. Don’t forget to switch to the half step!)

“Wear” is the next word so we’re back to needing a whole step. That’s “C.”

F – G – A – Bb – C

“White” is up next, which calls for another whole step. That’s “D.”

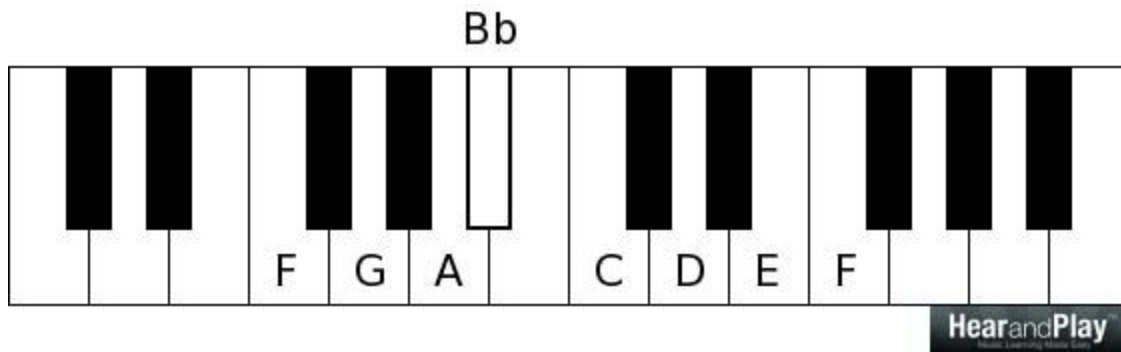
F – G – A – Bb – C – D

“When” gives us another whole step, “E.”

F – G – A – Bb – C – D – E

“Hot” gives us our final half step, which will always bring us back home to the same note that started our scale (but just higher).

F major:

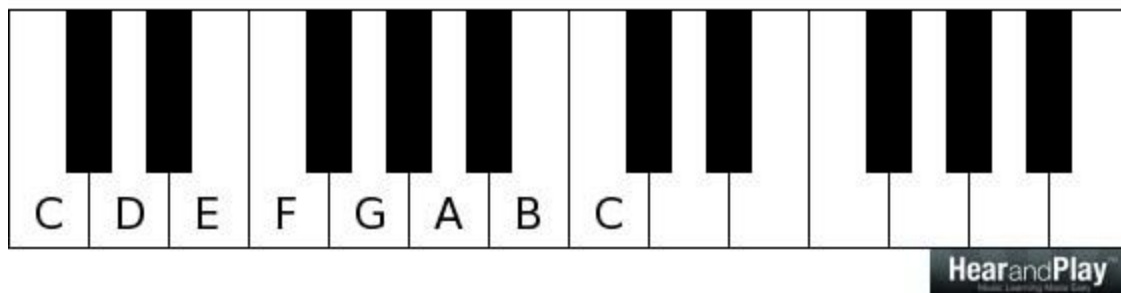


Homework: You got C major and F major down. Can you figure out the other 10 major scales?

Piano Chords – Using major scales to learn chords

With major scales under your belt, learning chords will become a cinch.

Let's go back to C major and let's number this scale:



C is 1

D is 2

E is 3

F is 4

G is 5

A is 6

B is 7

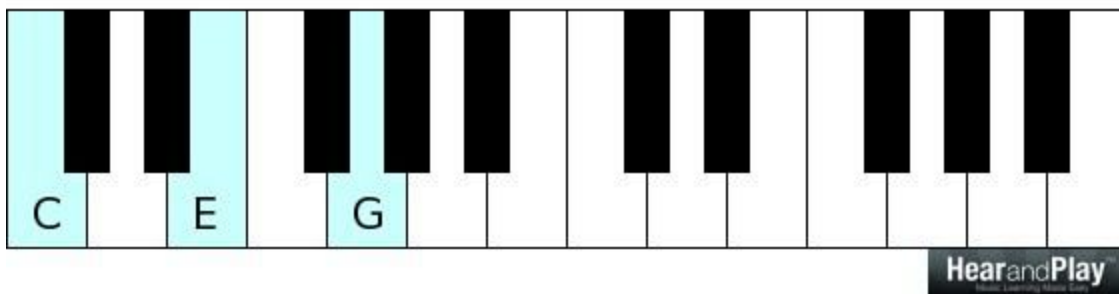
With these numbers, you can learn almost any chord out there!

Major Triad Piano Chord

Chord Type: Major triad

Formula: 1+3+5

Notes in C: C + E + G



Just as it looks, we took the 1st, 3rd, and 5th tones of the C major scale, played them together, and produced our first chord – *C major*.

Minor Triad Piano Chord

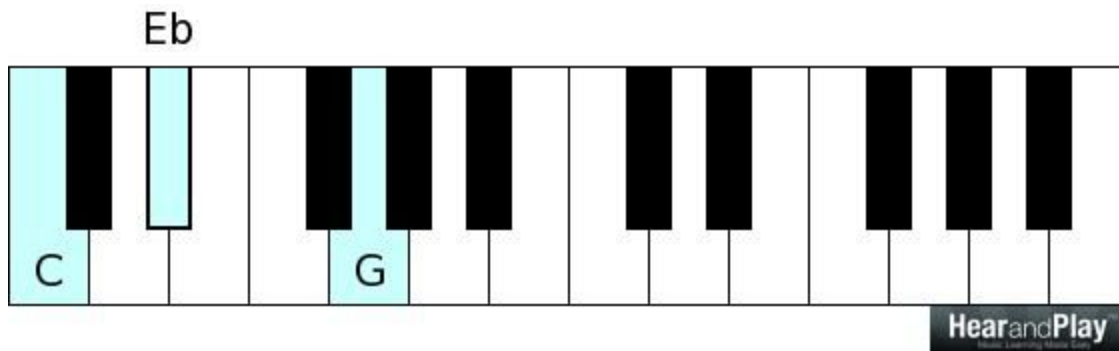
Chord Type: Minor triad

Formula: 1 + \flat 3 +5

*With minor chords, you'll be putting what you learned about "flats" (\flat) into good use. A \flat 3 means to take whatever the third tone of the scale is and lower it by a half-step.

As a reminder, [never change the letter](#) when you "flat" it. To flat a "C" does not give you "B" (even though it may seem like it). Instead, it gives you a C flat. **NEVER CHANGE THE LETTER when you flat it.** More on that topic [here](#).

Notes in C: C + Eb + G



Diminished Triad Piano Chord

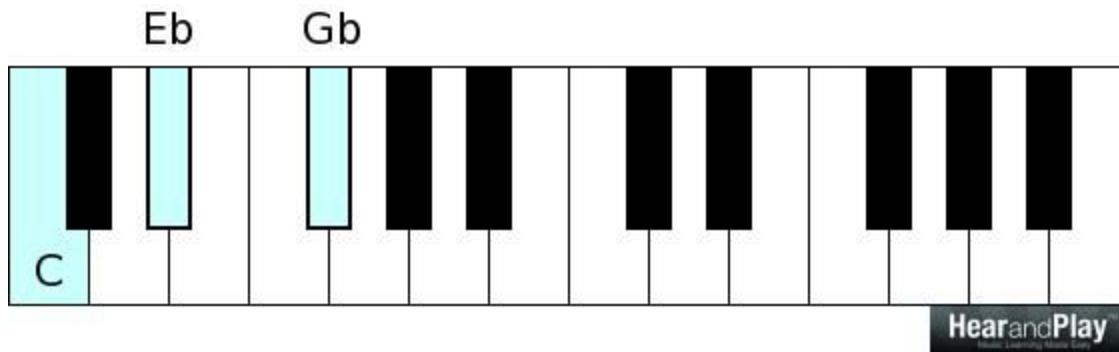
Chord Type: Diminished triad

Formula: 1+ \flat 3+ \flat 5

*Do you see a pattern here? Most chords will use some version of the 1, 3, and 5th tones (later, we'll add in the 7th tone, which is HUGE in music). Diminished chords take the sad and serious sound of

minor chords even further by flattening yet another tone (the 5th). This gives you a scary-sounding chord, but is used in tons of situations.

Notes in C: C + Eb + Gb



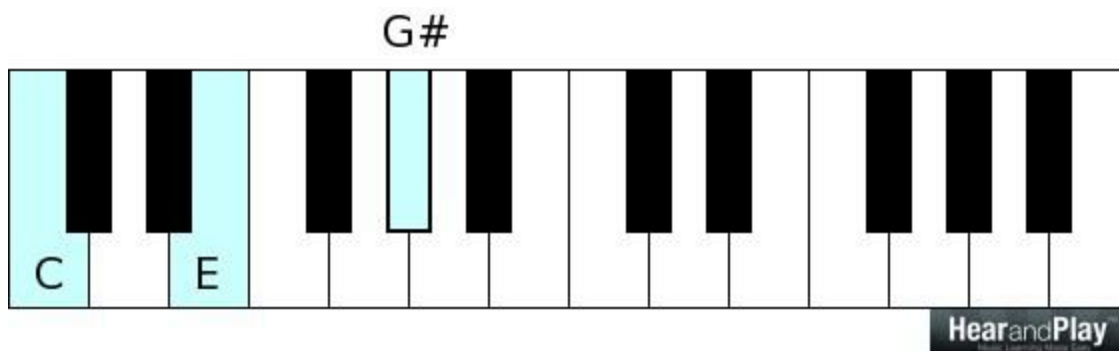
Augmented Triad Piano Chord

Chord Type: Augmented triad

Formula: 1+3+ #5

*The augmented chord almost does the opposite of the minor and diminished. We take the regular major triad and raise the 5th tone.

Notes in C: C + E + G#



Diminished means to make smaller.

Augmented means to make larger.

Isn't that exactly what these chords have done?

Consonance and Dissonance

These are the opposite of each other.

What is consonant is not dissonant and what is dissonant is not consonant.

I know, sounds confusing.

According to [wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consonance_and_dissonance), *"Consonance and dissonance define a level of sweetness / harshness, pleasantness / unpleasantness, acceptability / unacceptability, of the sounds or intervals under consideration."*

In other words, consonant chords and intervals sound good and harmonious to us. Dissonant ones sound less harmonious and have more tension.

Major and minor chords have more consonance than diminished and augmented chords.

If I had to rank them by consonance, it'd be:

Major chords

Minor chords

Diminished chords

Augmented chords

THIS DOESN'T MEAN DISSONANCE IS A BAD THING.

In fact, at one point (hundreds of years ago), dissonant chords and intervals like diminished chords and [tritones](#) (another topic) were [banned](#) from the church! They were called the “devil’s interval.”

This is not the case today. In fact, most modern musicians aggressively search for ways to add “*flavorful dissonance*” to their playing. It is dissonance that creates the unpredictability and sound that characterizes much of today’s contemporary gospel, soul, R&B, and similar genres.

I call these four chords – major, minor, diminished, augmented – the “FANTASTIC FOUR.”

These are your four foundational chords. With these four chord types, you can learn practically all others (I’ll prove it to you in a second).

Piano Chords – Using intervals to learn chords

You’ve already learned the foundational chords but I want to cover the second way to build them. This method takes an “intervallic” approach (fancy word for “interval” or distance).

Whereas the major scale approach simply gave you the numbers of the scale to combine together, this one will use distance to determine the chord.

Introducing Major and Minor Thirds

When it comes to intervals, major and minor thirds make the world go round n round.

And the great part is you already have what it takes to create thirds.

A Quick Crash Course On Intervals

There are two classes of intervals: *Generic* and *Specific*.

Generic intervals won't tell you specifically what to play but it'll make sure you're referencing the notes correctly. ***Specific intervals*** then tell you exactly what notes to play.

Let me explain.

Intervals are described with numbers: *first, seconds, thirds, fourths, fifths, sixths, and sevenths*.

(We could take it a step further and move into extended intervals like *ninths, tenths, elevenths, and thirteenth*s but we'll leave these out for now).

Since an interval is the distance between two notes, if you want to figure out any interval, just count up the number of alphabet letters encompassed between the notes.

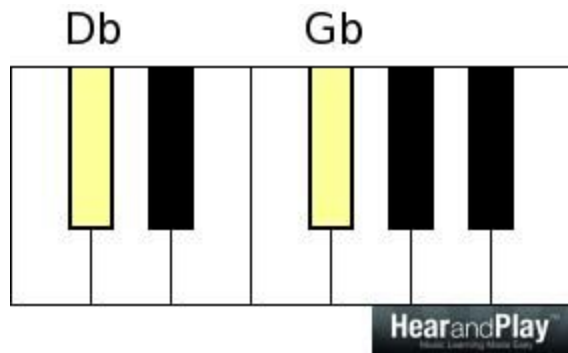
What you're doing when you're counting alphabet letters is trying to figure out the GENERIC INTERVAL at work first.

You're trying to figure out if the interval is a third vs fourth, or a sixth vs seventh (many musicians get this wrong).

And at this point, sharps and flats don't even matter. We're only counting alphabet letters so drop the sharps and the flats. We'll come back to them when we're trying to figure out the specific interval (whether it's major, minor, diminished, augmented, or perfect).

Let's do a few:

Db to Gb



What generic interval is this?

Answer & Explanation:

The first thing you do is drop the sharps and/or flats. We don't need them right now. We'll bring them back later.

So we're left with:

D

and

G

Now, take it back to Kindergarten and simply count the alphabet letters encompassed in this interval. Include the starting and ending letters (D and G).

D

E

F

G

*Even though the “E” and “F” aren’t played, they are inside, or encompassed in the interval.

Because this has four letters, it’s definitely a FOURTH.

What type of fourth depends on what we figure out in the “specific” interval step (but that’s not important right now; this example was solely about understanding *generic intervals*).

Knowing about generic intervals is important because a specific interval can never be different from its generic interval.

For example, since notes can be raised and lowered, sometimes musicians get confused over whether to call something, for example, a minor third or augmented second since those both produce the same sound. Or an augmented fourth and diminished fifth since those, too, produce the same sound.

Count up the alphabet letters and that’ll give you the answer!

Major and Minor Thirds – Constructed (Specific Intervals)

With what you know already, how many letters do major and minor thirds encompass?

The answer is: **Three**

Where major and minor thirds will differ is by how many half steps it takes to construct them.

Major thirds = 4 half steps

Minor thirds = 3 half steps

There you have it...

...*Specific* third intervals and the difference between major and minor thirds.

Let's try a few:

Major third on D:

Start on D.

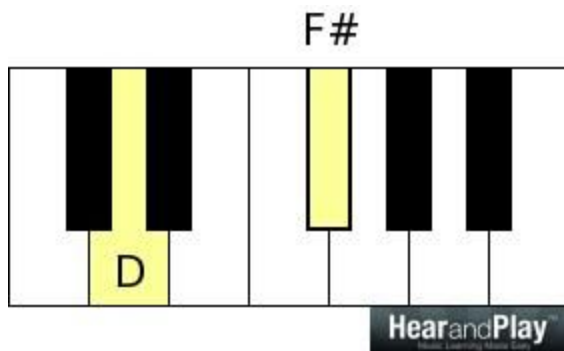
Move up one half step (D#)

Move up another half step (E)

Move up another half step (F)

Move up another half step (F#) – that's 4 half steps.

Major third on D: D + F#



Does it also pass the generic interval test? In other words, does it encompass three alphabet letters?

Let's drop the sharps and flats:

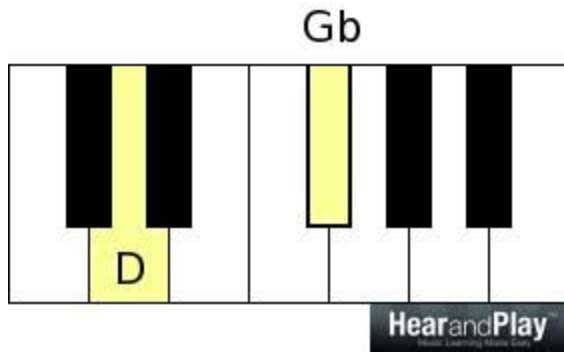
D

E

F

Looks like 3 alphabet letters to me.

Check out this interval: D + Gb



Even though this interval sounds like a major third, is it really?

Because we chose to use “Gb” as the highest note instead of F#, this totally changes the type of interval. While there are still 4 half steps at work, it fails the generic interval test:

D

E

F

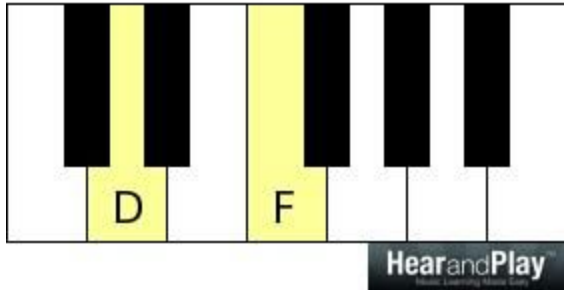
G

There are 4 alphabet letters. That means this interval is a fourth. It’s just a “SMALL” fourth or what we call a “diminished” fourth.

Major, minor, diminished, augmented, and most other chords you’ll learn use THIRDS.

And now that you know how to correctly create them and what letters to use, you should never spell a chord wrong again... even big, fancy chords.

Let's turn our correct major third (D + F#) into a minor third. Since a minor third has only 3 half steps, simply lower the F# to F and now you're playing a minor third interval:



Notice, we haven't changed letters. We're still encompassing 3 alphabet letters between D and F:

D

E

F

Generic test? **Pass.**

Specific test? **Pass.**

Fantastic Four Piano Chords Using Intervals

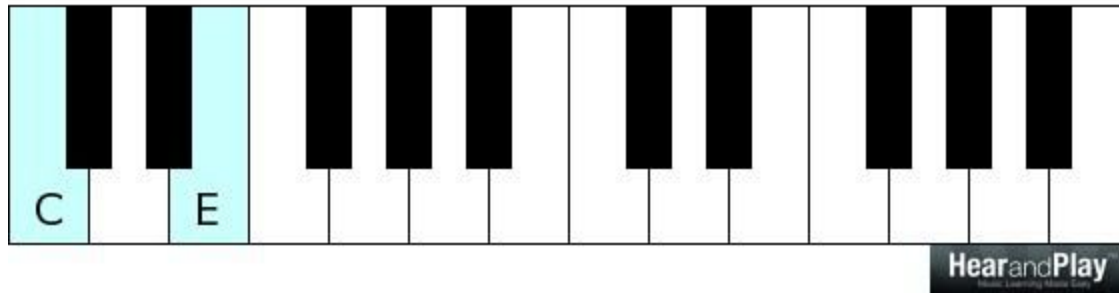
Major Triad Piano Chord

Chord Type: Major triad

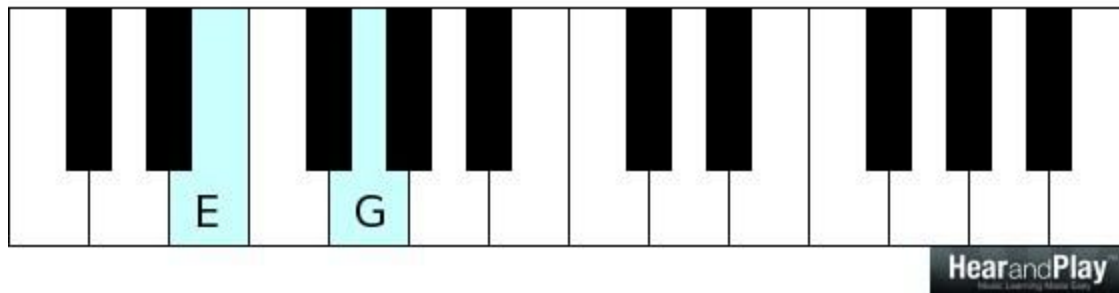
Formula: Major third + minor third

Notes in C: C + E + G

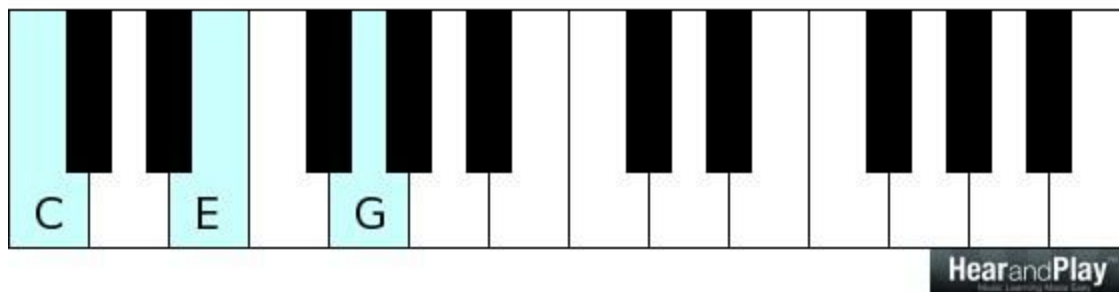
C + (major third) = C + E



E + (minor third) = E + G



Combine both intervals: C + [E] + G

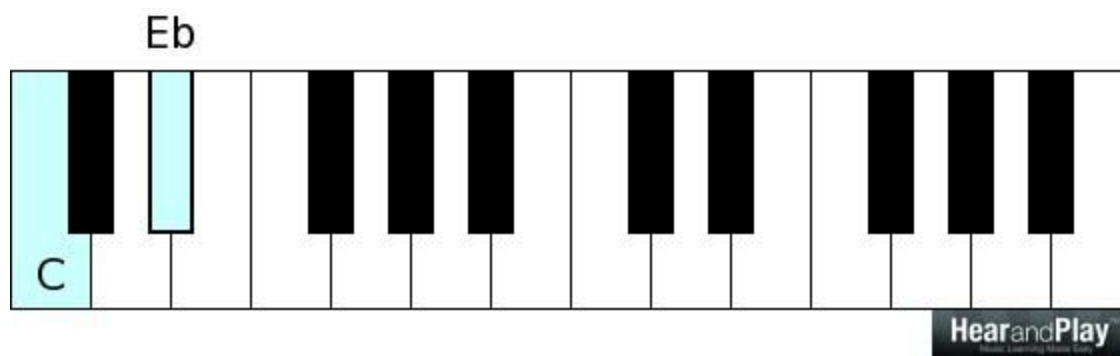


Chord Type: Minor triad

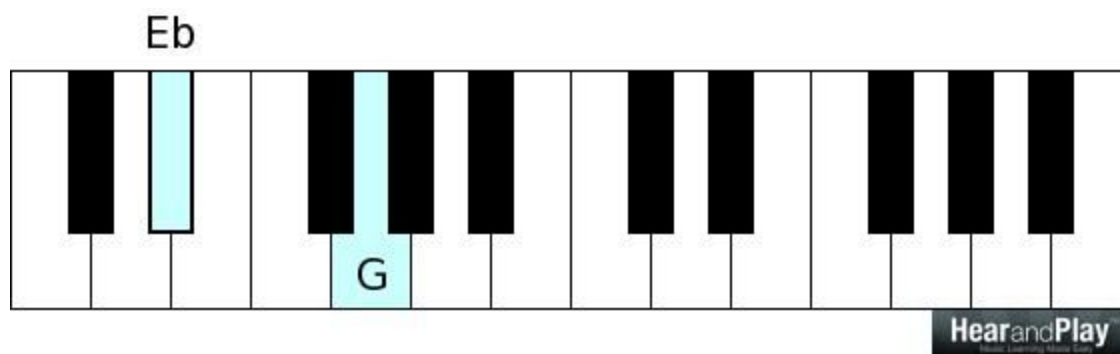
Formula: Minor third + major third

Notes in C: C + Eb + G

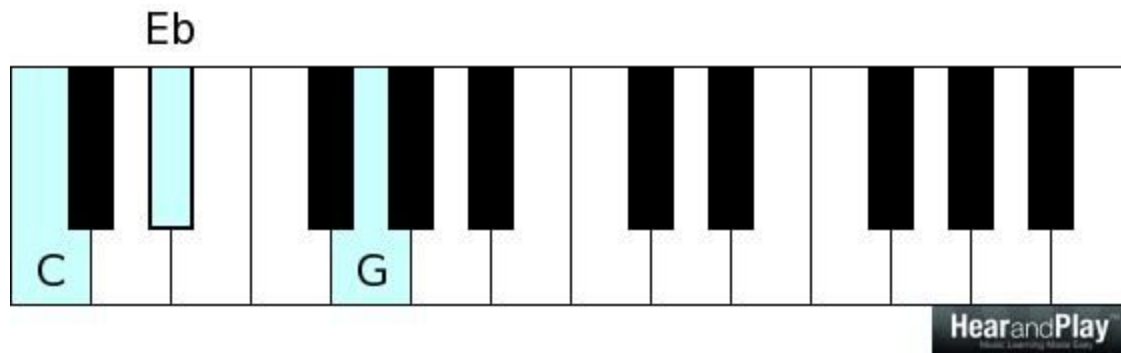
C + (minor third) = C + Eb



Eb + (major third) = Eb + G



Combine both intervals: C + [Eb] + G

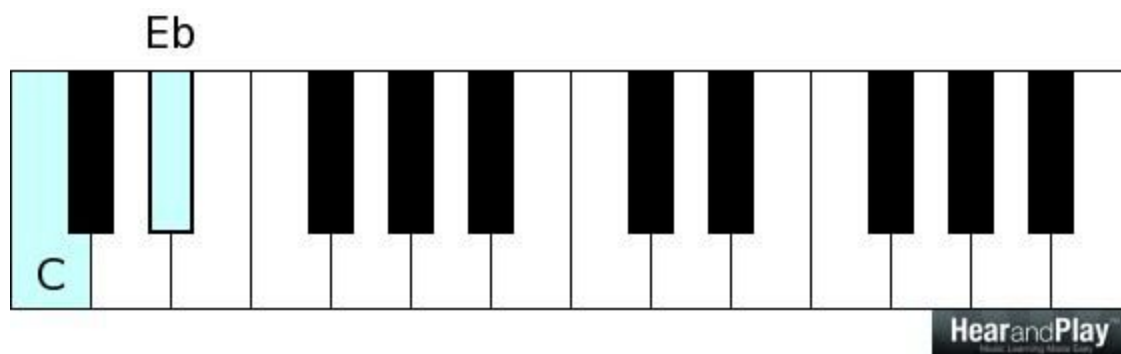


Chord Type: Diminished triad

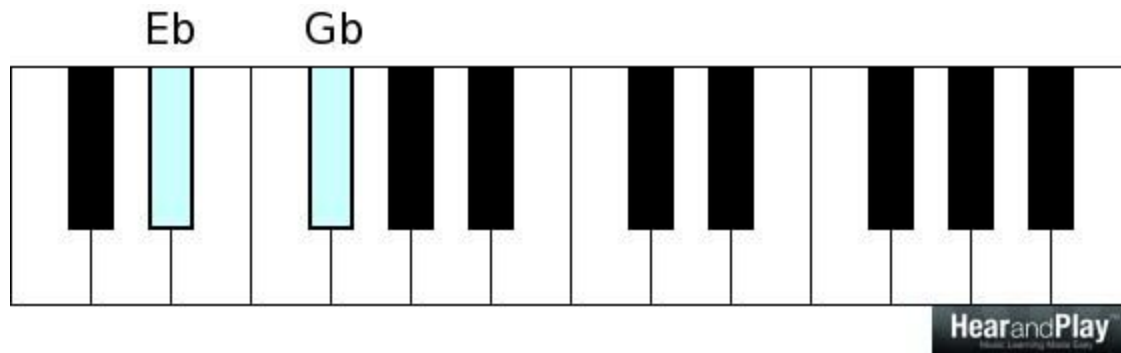
Formula: Minor third + minor third

Notes in C: C + Eb + Gb

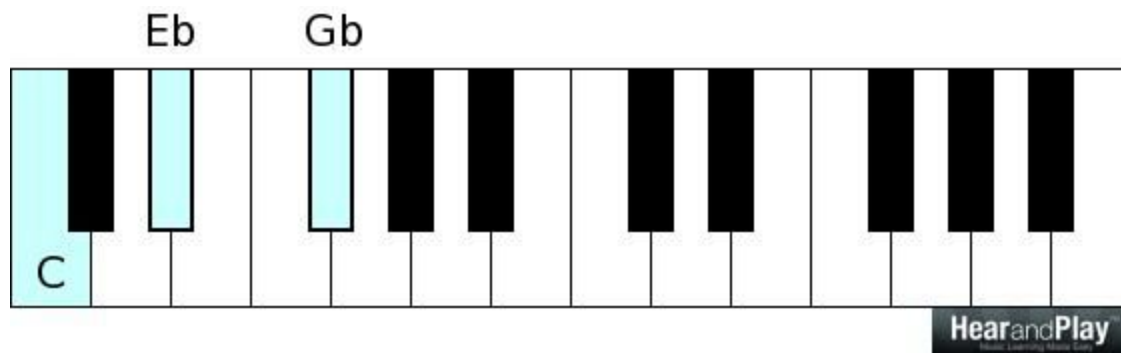
C + (minor third) = C + Eb



Eb + (minor third) = Eb + Gb



Combine both intervals: C + [Eb] + G

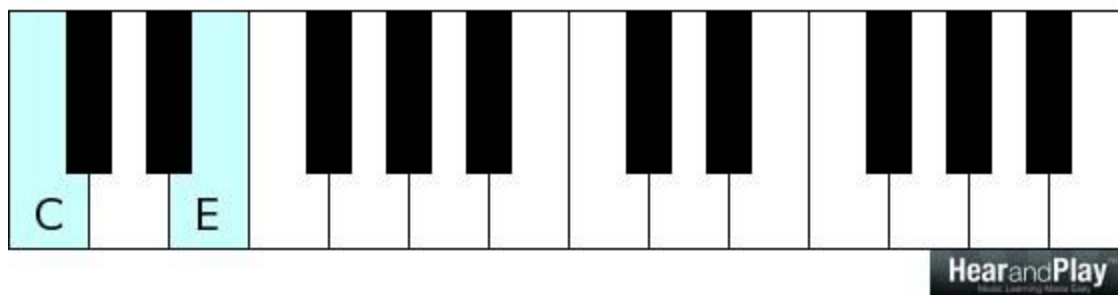


Chord Type: Augmented triad

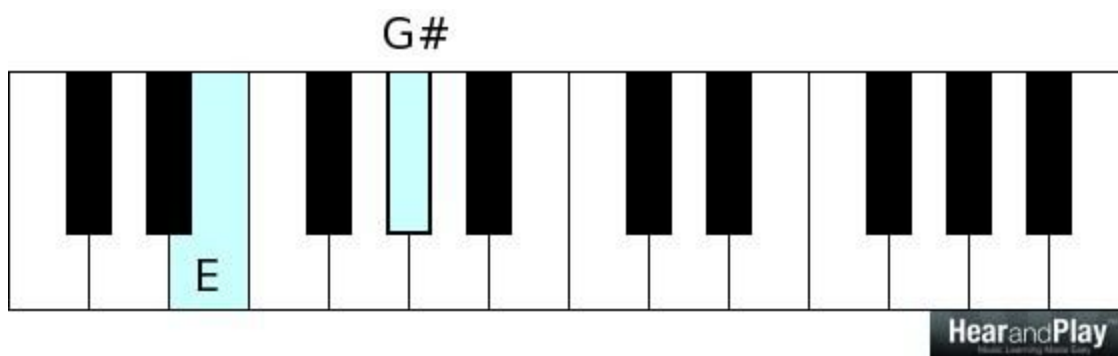
Formula: Major third + major third

Notes in C: C + E + G#

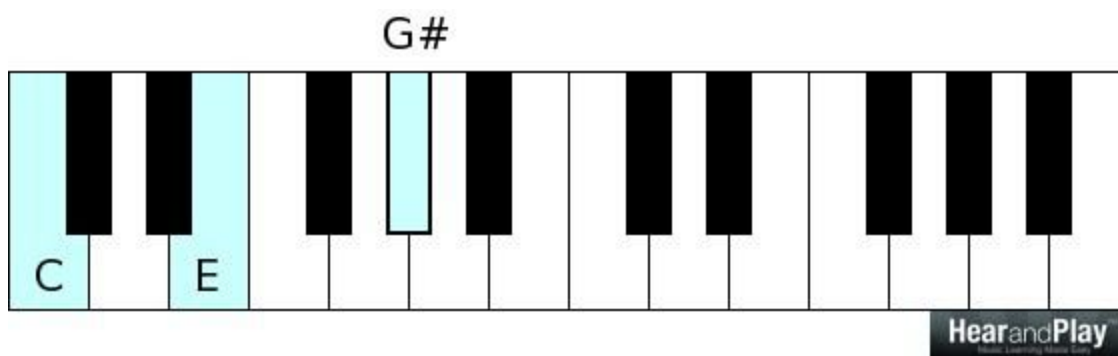
C + (major third) = C + E



E + (major third) = E + G#



Combine both intervals: C + [E] + G#



Seventh Piano Chords – Major Scale & Intervallic Method

Now that you've gotten a comprehensive look at how to form intervals, scales, and foundational chords, let's take it a step further by expanding our chords.

Let's learn:

- Major seventh chord
- Minor seventh chord
- Diminished seventh chord
- Augmented major seventh chord
- Half-Diminished seventh chord
- Dominant seventh chord
- Augmented seventh chord
- Minor-major seventh chord

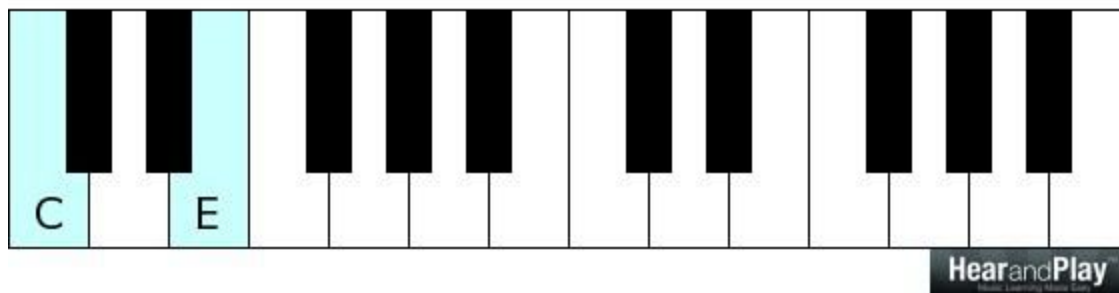
Chord Type: Major seventh chord

Scale Formula: 1+3+5+7

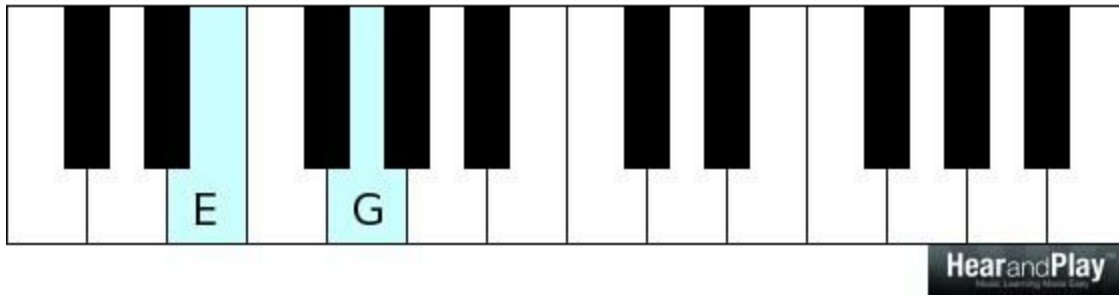
Interval Formula: major third + minor third + major third

Notes in C: C + E + G + B

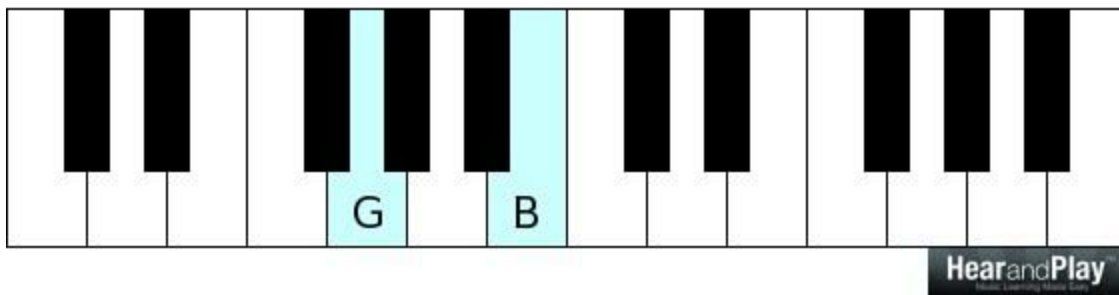
C + (major third) = C + E



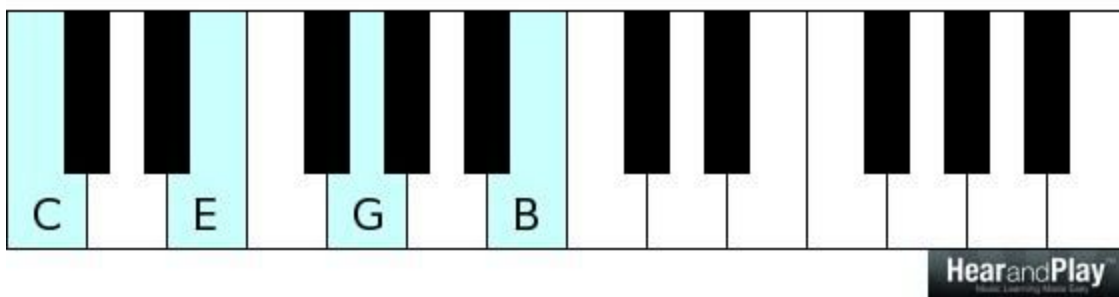
E + (minor third) = E + G



G + (major third) = G + B



Combine all intervals: C + E + G + B



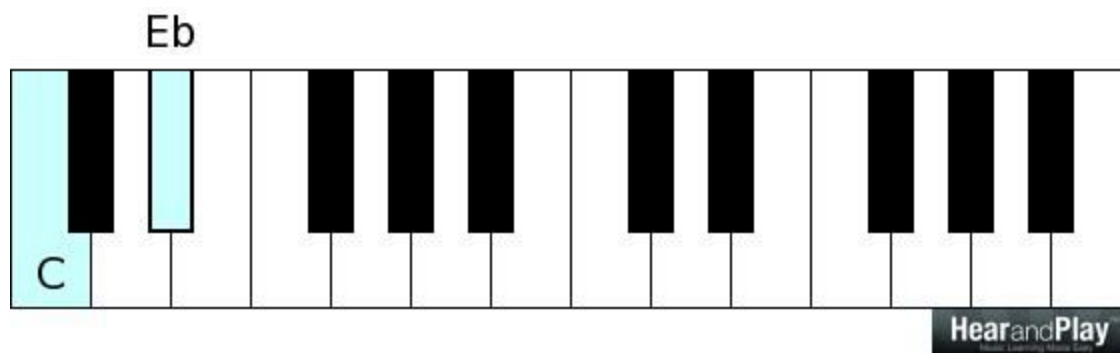
Chord Type: Minor seventh chord

Scale Formula: 1+ ♭ 3+5+ ♭ 7

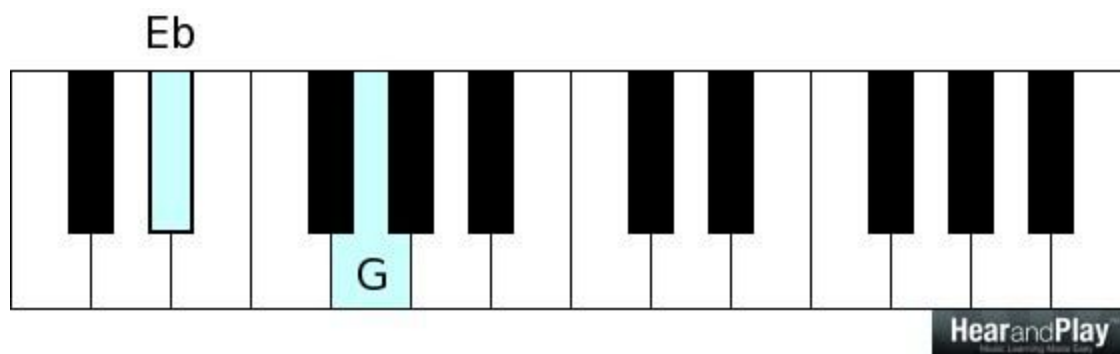
Interval Formula: minor third + major third + minor third

Notes in C: C + Eb + G + Bb

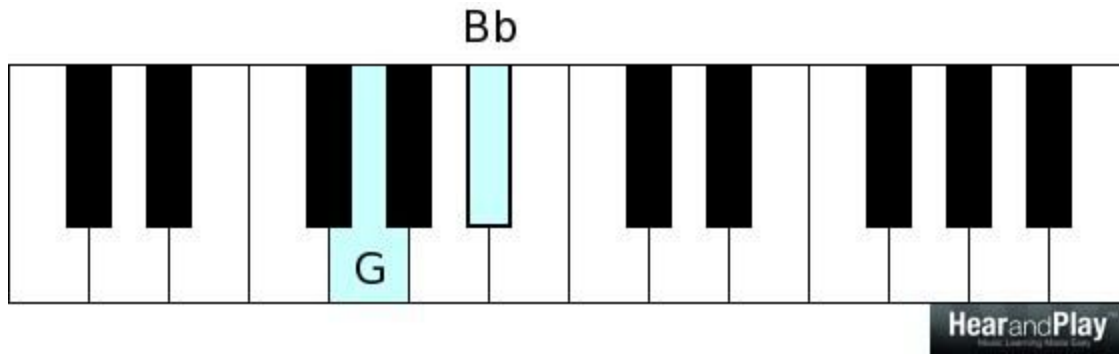
C + (minor third) = C + Eb



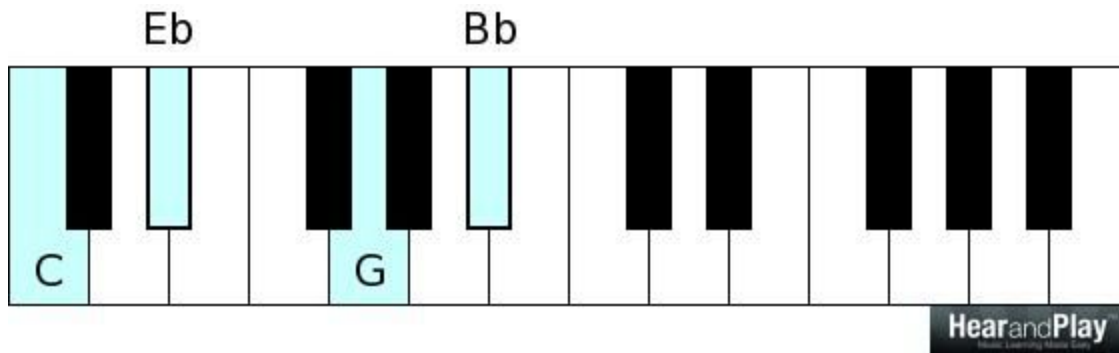
Eb + (major third) = Eb + G



G + (minor third) = G + Bb



Combine all intervals: C + Eb + G + Bb



Chord Type: Diminished seventh chord

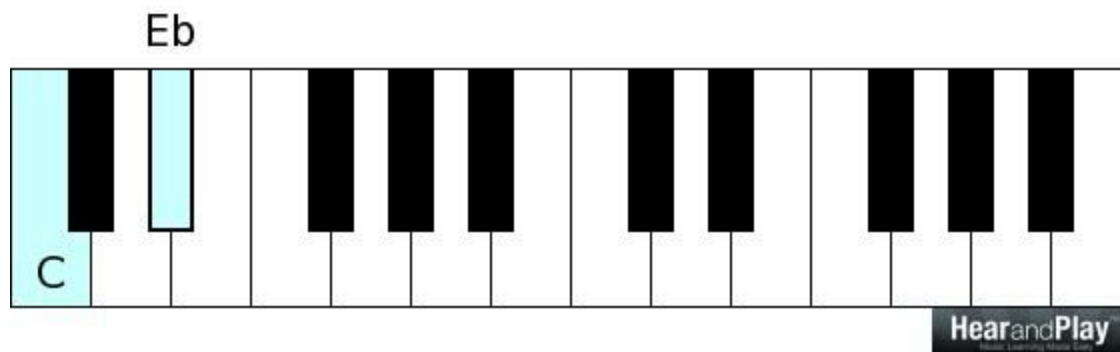
Scale Formula: 1 + \flat 3 + \flat 5 + \flat \flat 7

Interval Formula: minor third + minor third + minor third

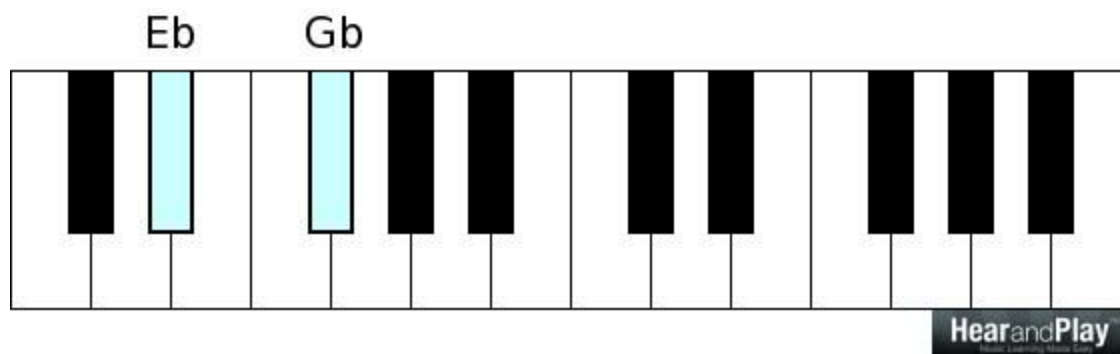
Notes in C: C + Eb + Gb + Bbb

*Don't let the $\flat\flat$ (double flat) throw you off. If one \flat means to lower by one half step, then $\flat\flat$ must mean to lower by how many half steps? You got it, 2. (And because 2 half steps are equal to 1 whole step, you can think of this as one whole step as well). In other words, this formula could really be 1 + \flat 3 + \flat 5 + 6 (although saying "A" instead of "Bbb" would not be correct for generic interval purposes).

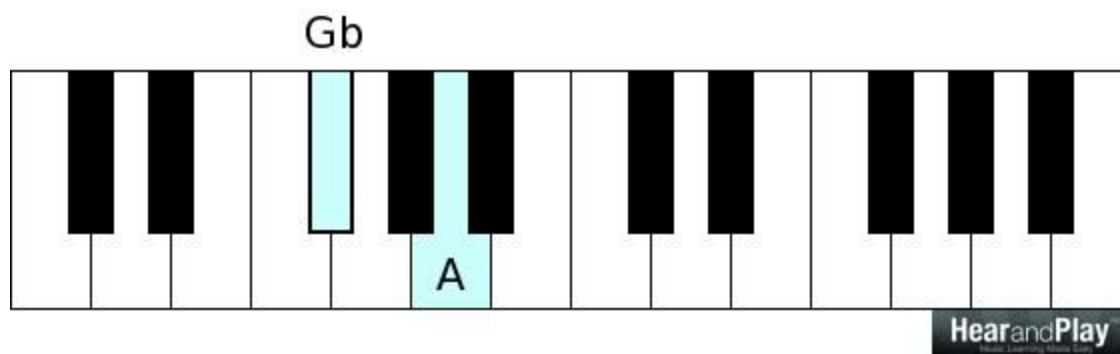
C + (minor third) = C + Eb



Eb + (minor third) = Eb + Gb

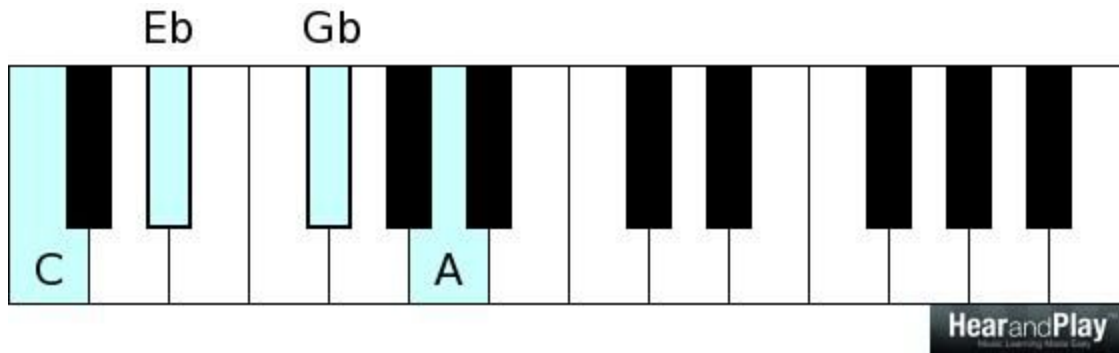


Gb + (minor third) = Gb + Bbb (aka – “A”)



*As funny as it sounds, my piano graphic script does not do “Bbb” so I’m forced to place “A” there.
But you know the truth!!!

Combine all intervals: C + Eb + Gb + Bbb (aka – “A”)



*See note above :-)

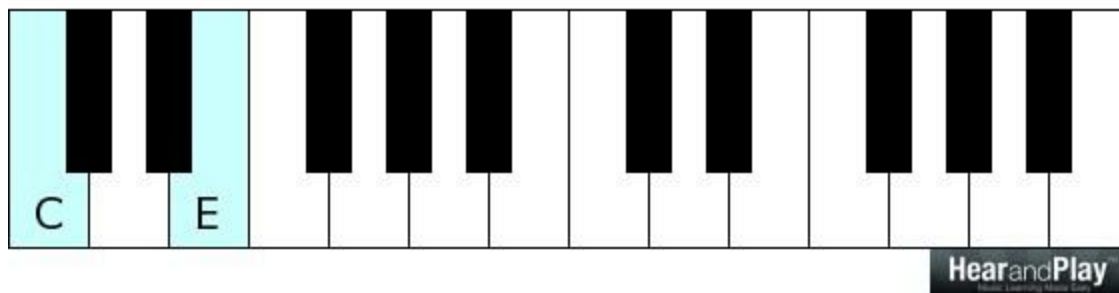
Chord Type: Augmented major seventh chord

Scale Formula: 1+3+#5+7

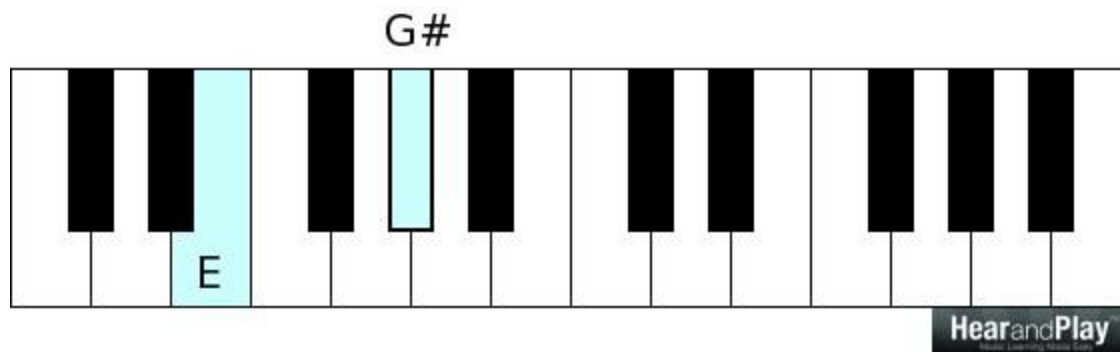
Interval Formula: major third + major third + minor third

Notes in C: C + E + G# + B

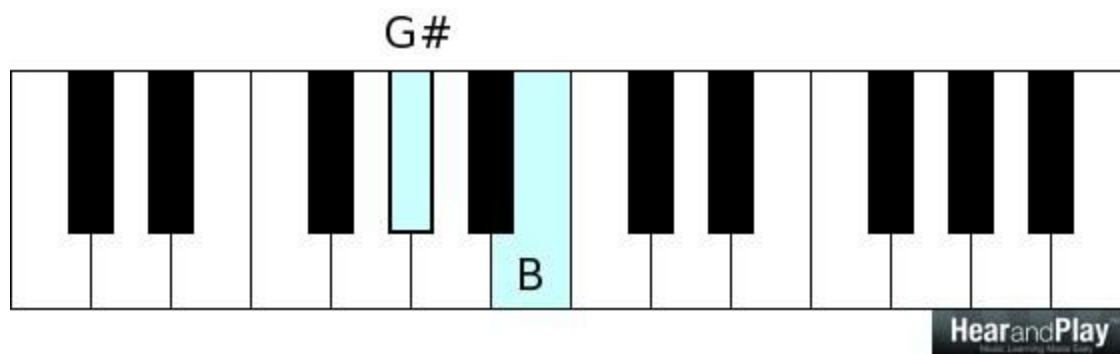
C + (major third) = C + E



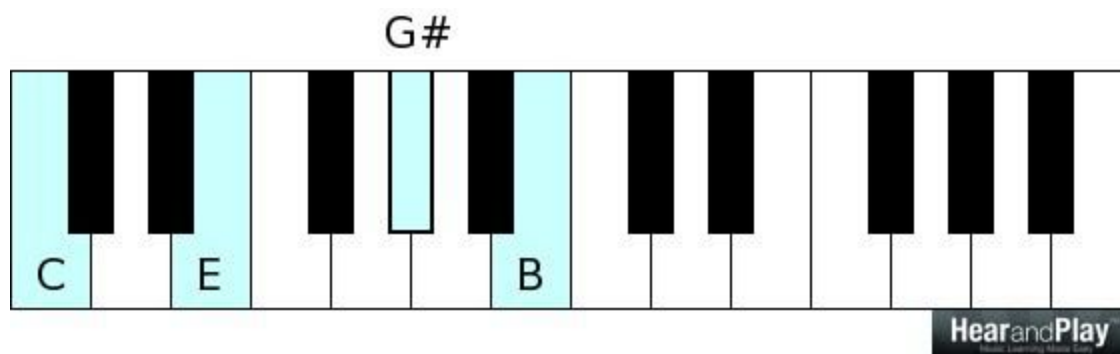
E + (major third) = E + G#



G# + (minor third) = G# + B



Combine all intervals: C + E + G# + B



Chord Type: Half-Diminished seventh chord

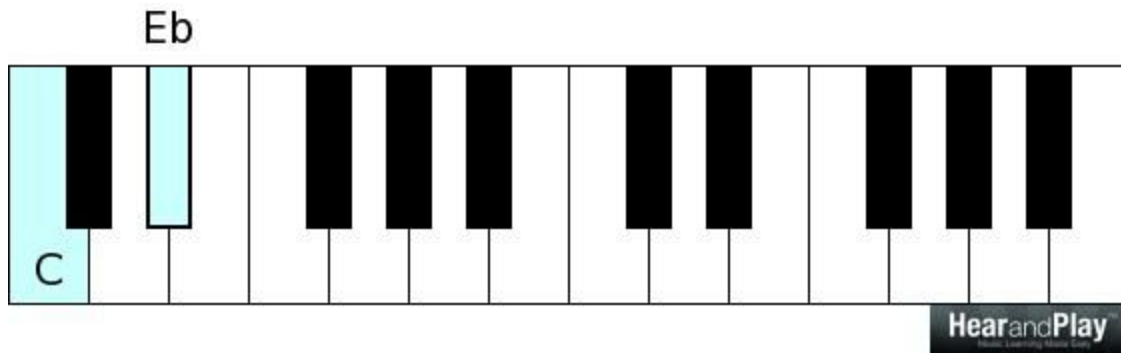
Scale Formula: 1+ ♭ 3+ ♭ 5+ ♭ 7

Interval Formula: minor third + minor third + major third

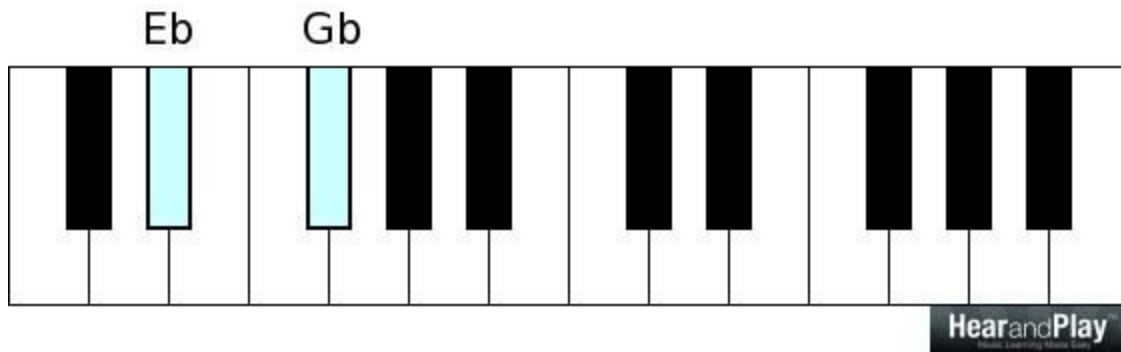
Notes in C: C + Eb + Gb + Bb

*Unlike the Diminished seventh chord, the half-diminished chord is a little more watered down and gets a major third up top (giving us a regular Bb instead of Bbb).

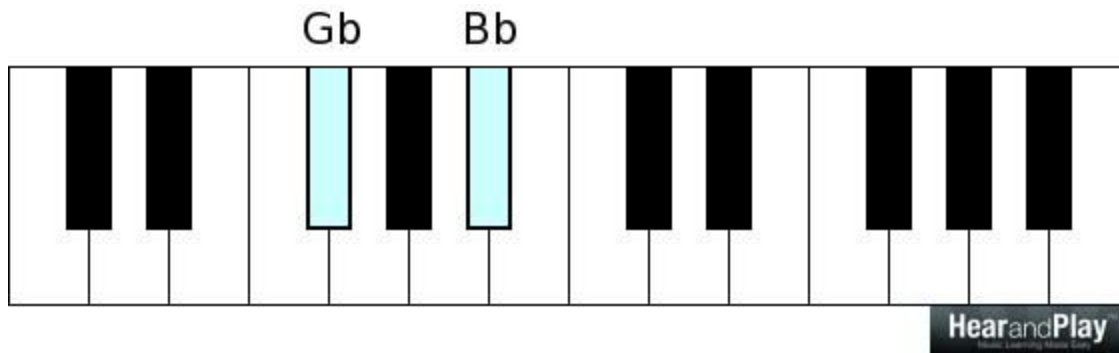
C + (minor third) = C + Eb



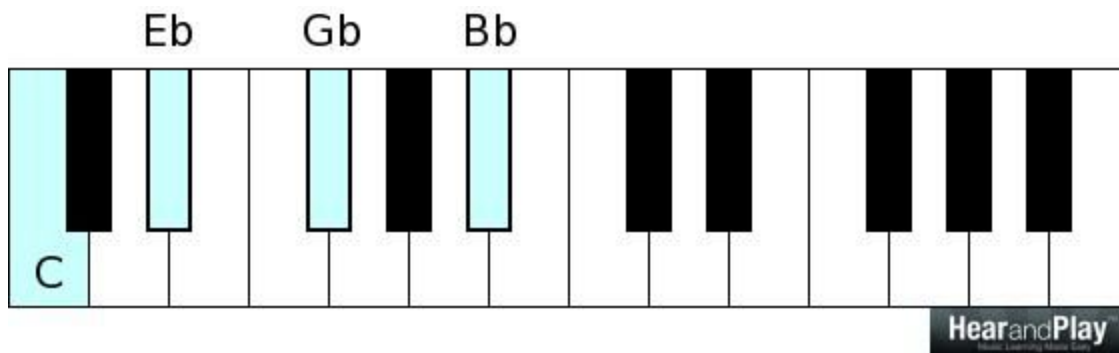
Eb + (minor third) = Eb + Gb



Gb + (major third) = Gb + Bb



Combine all intervals: C + Eb + Gb + Bb



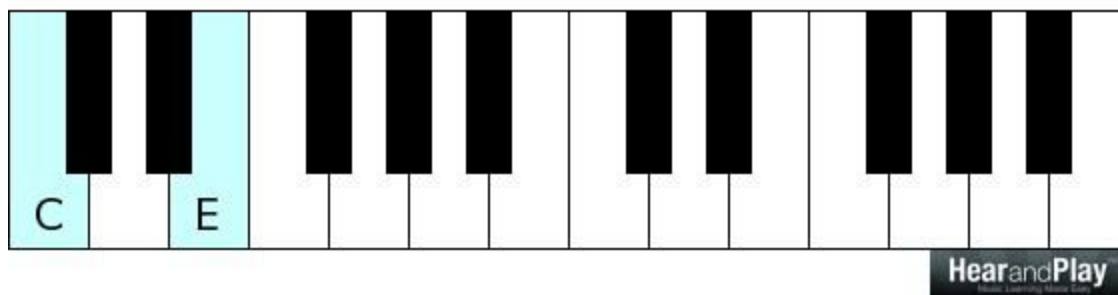
Chord Type: Dominant seventh chord

Scale Formula: 1+3+5+b7

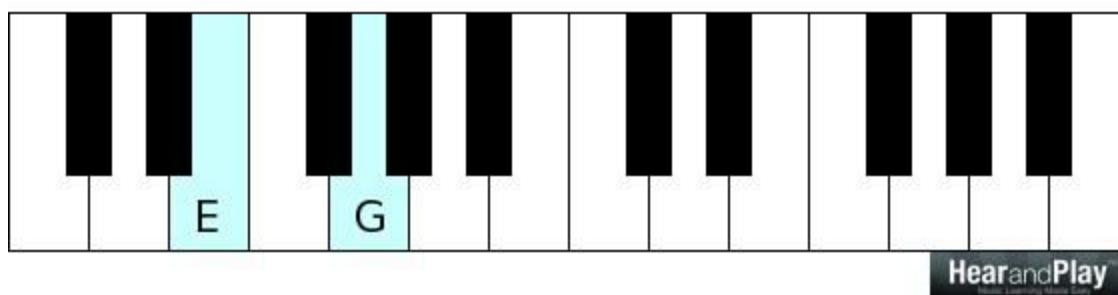
Interval Formula: major third + minor third + minor third

Notes in C: C + E + G + Bb

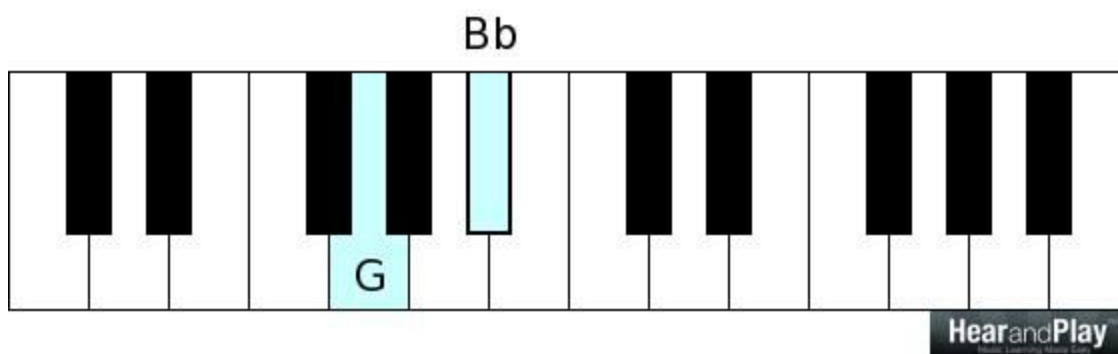
C + (major third) = C + E



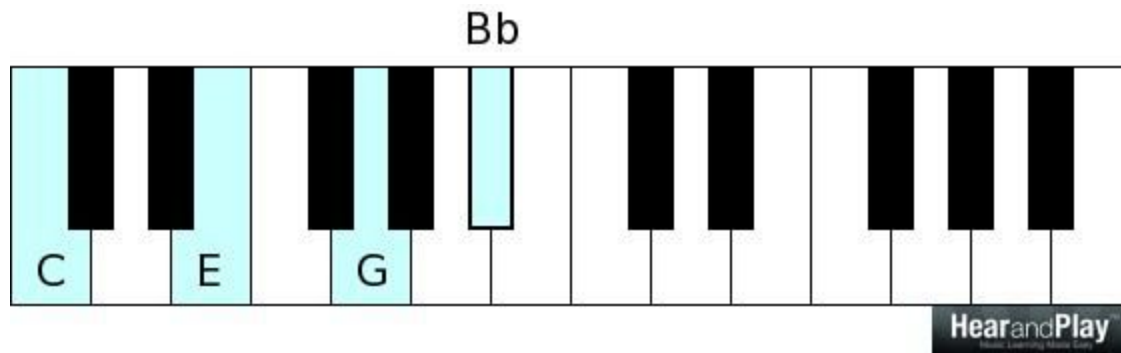
E + (minor third) = E + G



G + (minor third) = G + Bb



Combine all intervals: C + E + G + Bb



Chord Type: Augmented seventh chord (aka – “Augmented dominant seventh chord”)

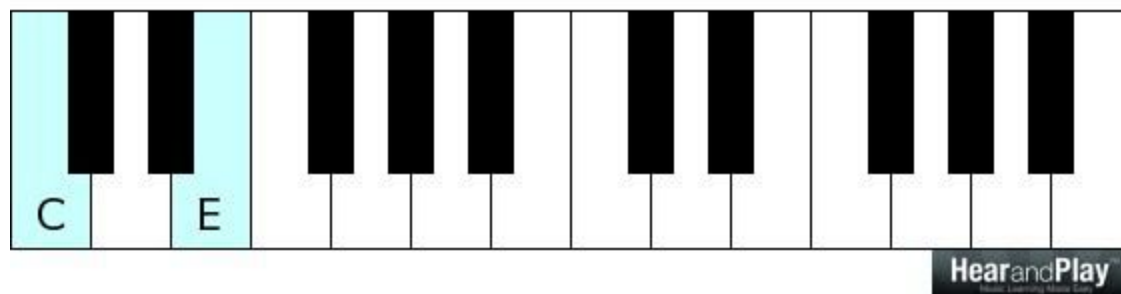
Scale Formula: 1+3+#5+b7

Interval Formula: major third + major third + diminished third

Notes in C: C + E + G# + Bb

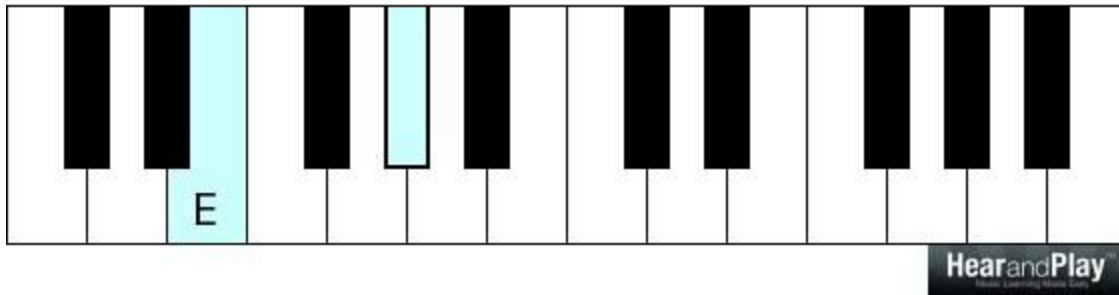
*This one is very similar to the dominant seventh chord, except the 5th degree is raised. This chord is not to be confused with the major augmented seventh chord. A diminished third takes a minor third and lowers it once again. This is where understanding generic intervals really helps you.

C + (major third) = C + E



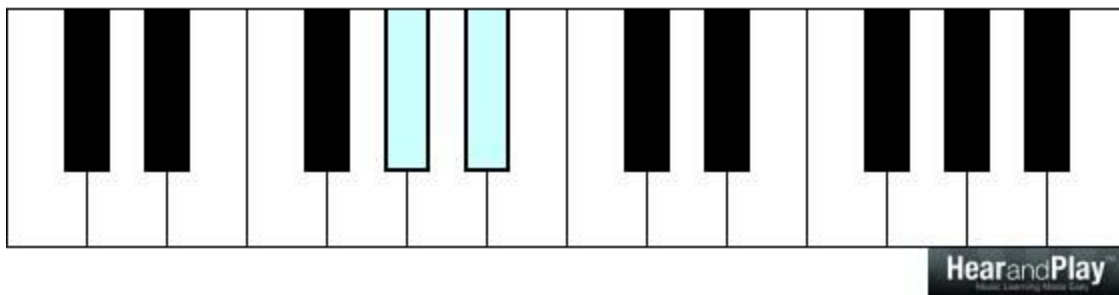
E + (major third) = E + G#

G#



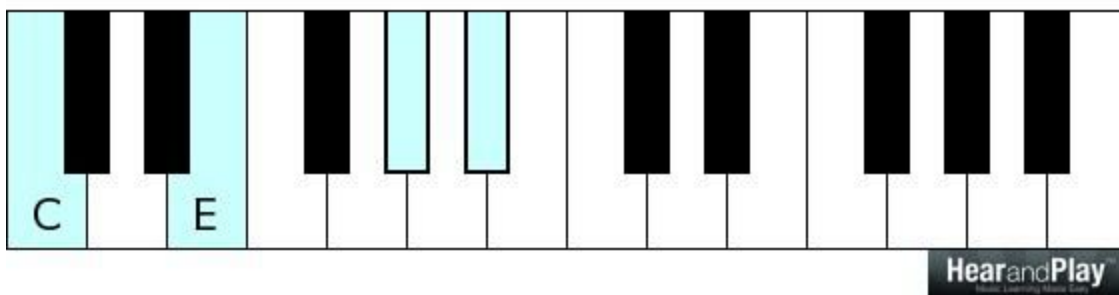
G# + (diminished third) = G# + Bb

G# Bb



Combine all intervals: C + E + G# + Bb

G# Bb



For a bonus, let's cover this rare chord:

Chord Type: Minor-major seventh chord

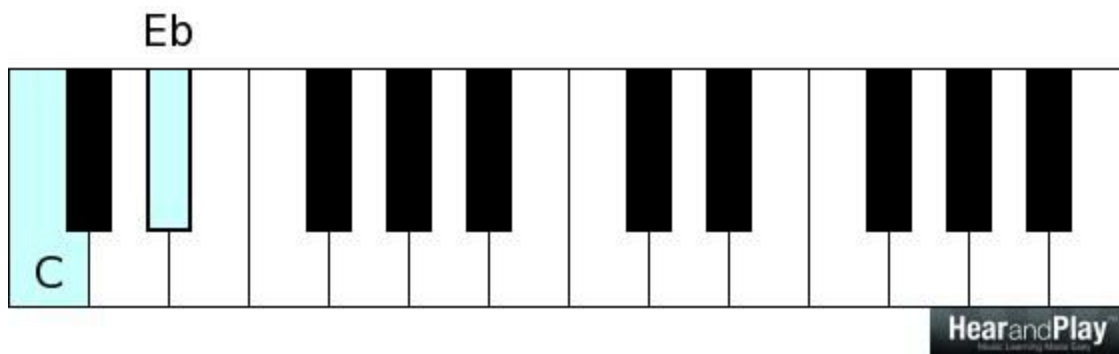
Scale Formula: 1+ \flat 3+5+7

Interval Formula: minor third + major third + major third

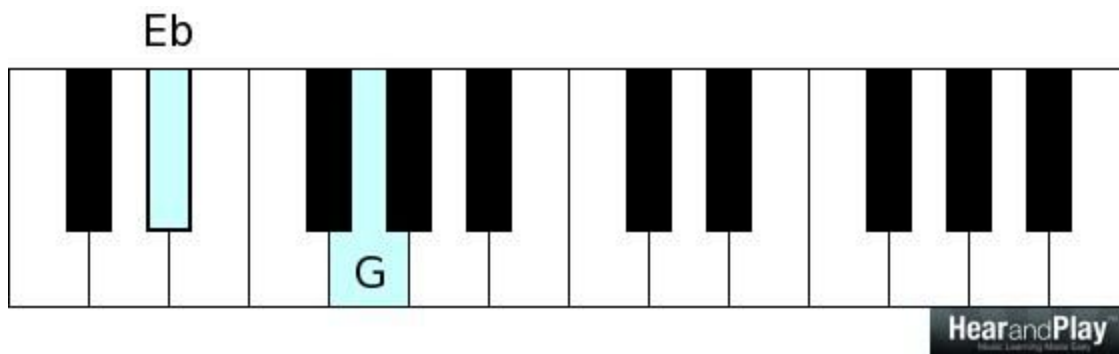
Notes in C: C + Eb + G + B

*This chord gives you the beginning of a minor triad (C+Eb) but the ending of a major seventh chord (G+B).

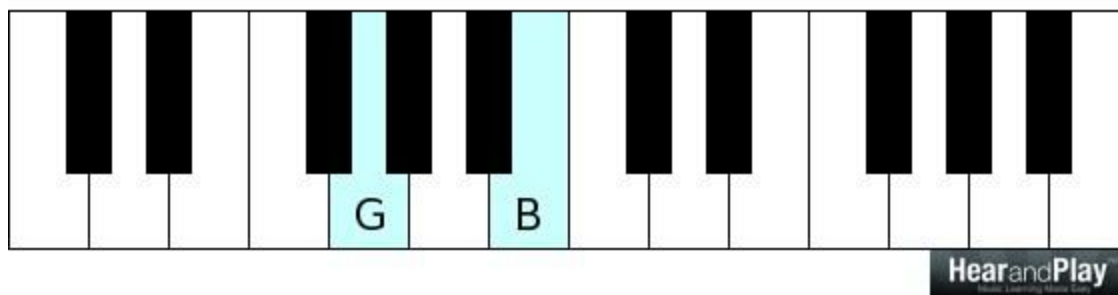
C + (minor third) = C + Eb



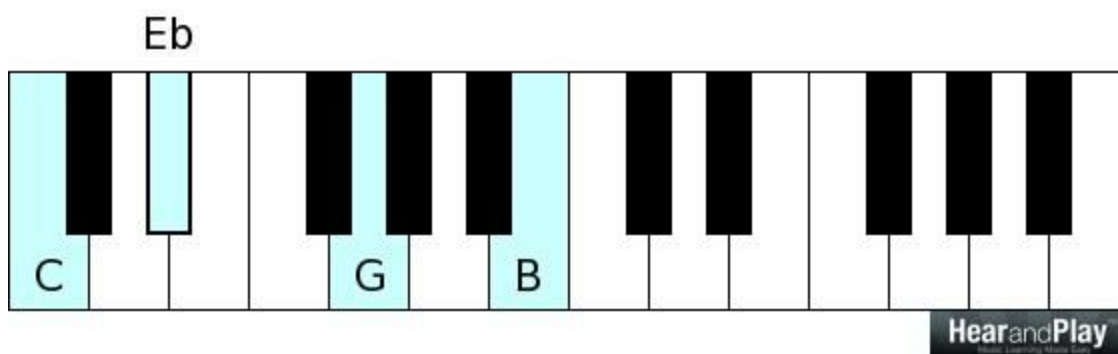
Eb + (major third) = Eb + G



G + (major third) = G + B



Combine all intervals: C + Eb + G + B



Piano Chords Method #3 – “Polychords”

While we won’t cover extended chords (ninths, elevenths, thirteenth; See my [“4 Steps to Next Level Growth”](#) course), it’s important to understand what [polychords](#) are.

This is when you combine smaller chords to create bigger chords.

For example, since we’ve already explored major, minor, augmented, diminished, and dominant seventh chords above, here’s another approach.

Remember when I said the fantastic four chords (major triads, minor triads, diminished triads, augmented triads) can be used to learn just about any other chord?

That still holds absolutely true. I just had to show you the major scale and intervallic approaches FIRST.

Keep in mind: This approach requires that you know ALL four foundational chords in ALL 12 keys. That's 48 chords (4 x 12 keys) but once you know them, you have the key to play literally hundreds of other chords.

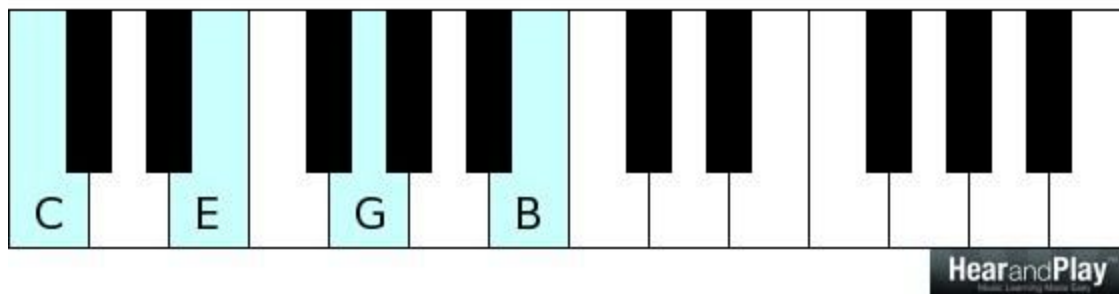
So here are other ways to get the same chords:

Chord Type: Major seventh chord

Polychord formula: 1 + 3-minor triad

Notes in C: C + E minor = C + [E + G + B]

**What this means is: Play the 1-tone in your bass (the 1 tone is the title or keynote of the chord, in this case C). Then, go to the third tone and play that tone's minor chord. So we'd simply hit C in our left hand and an E minor triad (E+G+B) in our right.*

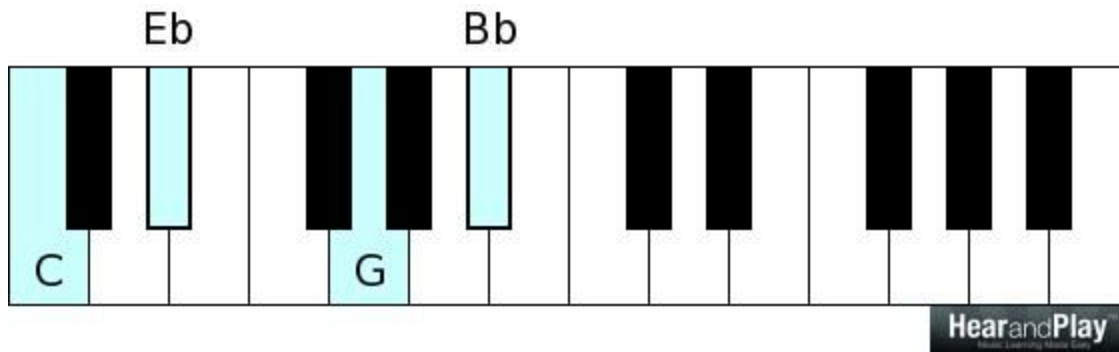


Chord Type: Minor seventh chord

Polychord formula: 1 + \flat 3-major triad

Notes in C: C + E \flat major = C + [Eb + G + Bb]

*What this means is: *Play the 1-tone in your bass (the 1 tone is the title or keynote of the chord, in this case C). Then, go to the flat-third tone (Eb) and play that tone's major chord. So we'd simply hit C in our left hand and an Eb major triad (Eb+G+Bb) in our right.*

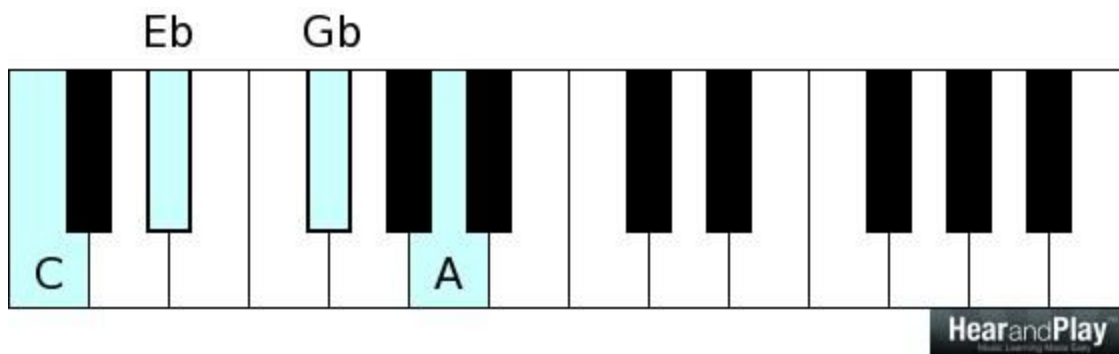


Chord Type: Diminished seventh chord

Polychord formula: 1 + b 3-diminished triad

Notes in C: C + E b diminished = C + [Eb + Gb + Bbb]

*What this means is: *Play the 1-tone in your bass. Then, go to the flat-third tone (Eb) and play that tone's diminished chord. So we'd simply hit C in our left hand and an Eb diminished triad (Eb+G+Bbb) in our right.*



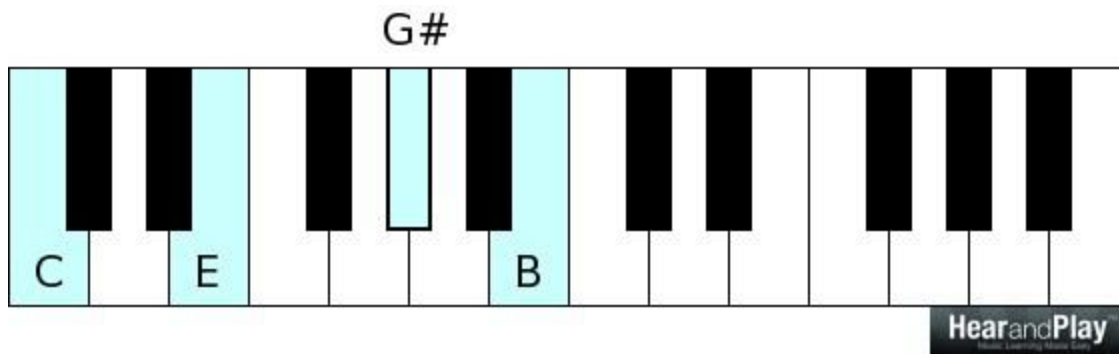
*"Bbb" is [enharmonic](#) with ("makes the same sound as") "A" but my graphics program won't illustrate Bbb.

Chord Type: Augmented major seventh chord

Polychord formula: 1 + 3-major triad

Notes in C: C + E major = C + [E + G# + B]

*What this means is: *Play the 1-tone in your bass. Then, go to the third tone (E) and play that tone's major chord. So we'd simply hit C in our left hand and an E major triad (E+G#+B) in our right.*

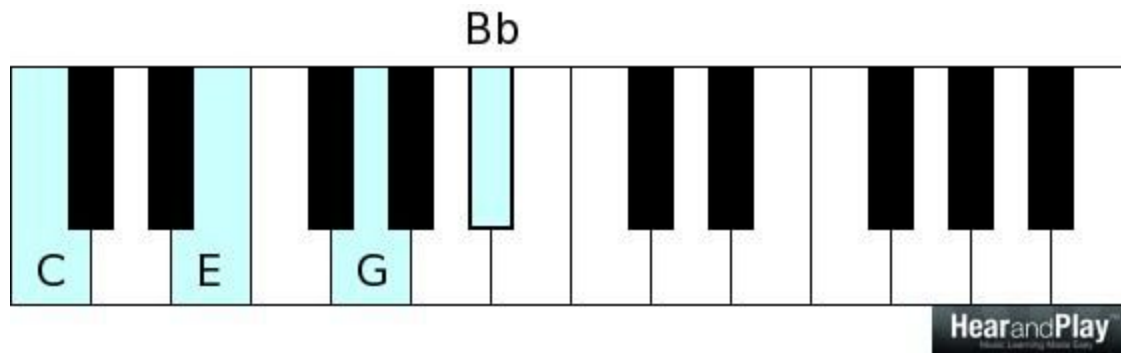


Chord Type: Dominant seventh chord

Polychord formula: 1 + 3-diminished triad

Notes in C: C + E diminished = C + [E + G + Bb]

*What this means is: *Play the 1-tone in your bass. Then, go to the third tone and play that tone's diminished chord. So we'd simply hit C in our left hand and an E diminished triad (E+G+Bb) in our right.*

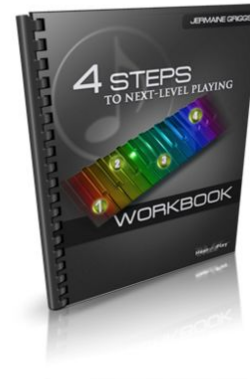


Taking Your Piano Chords Studies A Step Further

Wow, you've learned a lot in this blog guide (and I hope you've enjoyed it). But if you're serious about learning even more (plus extended chords, progressions/patterns, how to find the key of a song, etc), you'll want to consider my ["4 Steps To Next Level Playing"](#) workbook.

"4 Steps To Next Level Playing" Course

If you're looking for a concise method on learning to play by ear, this workbook has got you covered. From how to find the key of any song to scales, number systems, chords, and patterns, you'll get a comprehensive understanding of the "playing by ear" process.



Every concept and principle is broken down, illustrated, and charted in multiple keys with no details left out. Everything is documented in plain ink and accessible with the flip of a page. You'll be using these chords and patterns to play your favorite songs in no time!

- If you need to reference the fantastic four chords and the formulas that instantly create big, extended chords, you'll find that right on page 52.
- If you need help with the "minor chord trick," you'll find a reference chart in all 12 keys listed on pages 13-17.
- If you're looking for the diatonic chords of the major key, you'll find the triads on pages 78-80 and the bigger seventh chords on page 83.
- If you need help transposing anything into all 12 keys, my cool "chord transposition" chart on page 43 will make it drop-dead simple.
- If you're struggling with the number system, the tips on page 28 will make you a number system champ in just minutes after reading.
- Need a refresher on inverting large chords? Pages 49-51 will break it down with tons of details and illustrations.
- My best explanation in history of the circle of fifths and common patterns starts on page 91. Just this section is worth the entire price of the workbook.
- And much more!

[Click here to learn more](#) or [Buy now](#)

There you have it. A complete guide to piano chords from yours truly.

Until next time.