

Some basics on creating a "chord solo" (harmonizing a tune)

No attempt will be made here to write the definitive step by step process for creating a chord solo. Some examples will be given but to compose a book with all harmonic possibilities even if restricted to only one key, would require a massive effort never minding the massive size of the book.

All of the following information assumes that there is a bass player in the ensemble, providing a fundamental bass line using at least the chordal roots.

Let's begin by examining close voiced triads. On the guitar, these triads will always be on three adjacent strings making them the most convenient forms for pick style playing. Opening the triad voicing will force a pick-and-finger technique or a totally finger style approach.

In a guitar chord solo, and the same would apply in most musical situations even on other instruments in chordal settings, the melody note will generally be the highest voice of the chord. If the melody is "inside" the chord, it will usually be hidden because the highest note, being the most "excited note", will stand out.

This triad is in 1st Inversion and notice that in this arrangement of the chordal tones, the Root of the chord is at the top.

In a 2nd Inversion triad, the 3rd of the chord is the highest voice.

In a Root Position triad, the 5th of the chord appears as the top voice.

Non-chordal (not belonging to the triad) tones are most easily dealt with in this manner.

Notice that the non-chordal tone replaces its closest chordal tone neighbour which is lower in pitch than the non-chordal tone. This same procedure would be true regardless of the triad type. (maj, min, dim or aug.) The resulting chord will lose some of its integrity because one chordal tone will be missing.

Keyboard players tend to stuff that replaced chordal tone into the mix, sometimes producing a very clustered chord.

Even non-chordal chromatically altered notes are dealt with in this same manner.

The #2 and the #4 will produce triads that under most situations will be a bit tough on the ears.

The #2 will argue with the 3rd of the chord and similarly, the #4 will do battle with the 5th of the chord.

Some solutions to these problems should become self-evident in the following lessons.



Regarding keyboard chords: Just like guitar players, when a "4th" is added to a major triad, it would replace and eliminate the third. Trying to sound a 3rd and a 4th in the same major chord is harmonically incompatible. Most other tensions are possible but "sus 4" is truly unique.

Observations on open voicing for guitar chords.

The most common method of opening the chord voicing in guitar music is to raise the middle note of the triad inversion by an octave. Playing these chord inversions would require either a fingerstyle method or a pick and finger technique. Another option is to mute a string because the chord will span at least four strings.

D

Root Position
1st Inversion
2nd Inversion

Four part triads can be created with the following process shown below. Notice that the 3rd is generally not doubled. Perhaps the easiest explanation is that the 3rd is the colour note and becomes overpowering if it is doubled.

D

Root Position
Double up on the Root
1st Inversion
Double up on the 5th
2nd Inversion
Double up on the Root

Non-chordal tones can be treated in the same manner as with closed voiced chords.

D

Notice that now the Root Position chord harmonizes the 3rd and 4th.
The 1st Inversion harmonizes the 5th, 6th and 7th.
The 2nd Inversion harmonizes the Root and 2nd.

Guitar players attempting the chords in the above example will soon find that yes indeed, the project under their left hand fingers may in some situations be more or less impossible. A five string span might be the answer.

In most situations, the **addition of a fourth note will not** simplify the process. See the example below.

Eb

Root Pos.
1st Inversion
2nd Inversion

Notice that the chord has been shifted up a semitone. This was done to eliminate the use of the open string on the Root position four part triad. Piano players attempting these chords with one hand will also find that their next project would be a valiant attempt to grow longer fingers.

Perhaps the thing to be said here is that on the guitar, three part harmonies are best played in close voicing rather than trying to do the impossible. Some solutions to these anomalies will be forthcoming in the following lessons. These solutions will mostly use the logic of "substitute triads." Just keep in mind that there is no one perfect solution and there are no absolute rules. If absolute rules existed in music, we would all be writing and playing exactly the same stuff.