

A Short Excursion into 4 Part Guitar Chords

Book 5 of *Guitar Fundamentals* by George Arvola and Tony Bradan is more or less entirely dedicated to the science of 4 part guitar chords. Those players wishing to delve into this are urged to spend the time on that study. The science is relatively simple and will be laid out briefly in the following lessons. These chords will be possible on a keyboard but would demand two hands. Therefore the above title is a forewarning for piano players and others who might look at this documentation.

The chords which are examined here are of the type where the four notes occur on adjacent strings. This type of chord voicing is the most convenient for pick style players in that using four adjacent strings, eliminates the need to mute or skip a string.

I have used a Cmaj7 chord to demonstrate the guitar players dilemma.

In close voicing, the Root Position chord is sometimes available but the other inversions are mostly impossible to finger due to the standard tuning of the guitar. I would suggest that you don't change the tuning of the guitar as that has been well researched and yes, the standard tuning is the best in most circumstances. Because the other inversions are only available in some kind of open voicing, we will consider open voicing as the norm and most other 4 note chord forms can be said to be "chords of occasion." Depending on the key, an open string can occasionally be used to produce some sort of interesting cluster but is usually restricted to a particular chord. There is nothing wrong with inventing an interesting chord for an "occasion" but remember that if you have to play the same thing in another key, your only option may be the use of a capo.

Cmaj7

The diagram shows two staves of musical notation for the Cmaj7 chord. The top staff is labeled 'Close Voicing' and shows four chords: Root pos. (C4, E4, G4, B4), 1st inv. (E4, G4, B4, C5), 2nd inv. (G4, B4, C5, D5), and 3rd inv. (B4, C5, D5, E5). The bottom staff is labeled 'Open Voicing' and shows the same four chords: Root pos. (C3, E3, G3, B3), 1st inv. (E3, G3, B3, C4), 2nd inv. (G3, B3, C4, D4), and 3rd inv. (B3, C4, D4, E4). Vertical lines connect the notes between the two staves to show the intervallic structure.

Root pos. 1st inv. 2nd inv. 3rd inv.
Close Voicing

Root pos. 1st inv. 2nd inv. 3rd inv.
Open Voicing

The first staff shows the close voicing of the Cmaj7 chord inversions. As mentioned above, only the Root Position chord is playable on the guitar in this format.

The solution is to raise the second lowest note of the open voicing up an octave. Now all of the chords, even though the 1st inversion is somewhat awkward to finger, are playable. The 3rd inversion having the maj7th at the bottom, is harmonically very tense. A common solution is to substitute a Maj6 chord as shown in the 3rd staff.

C6

The diagram shows a single staff of musical notation for the C6 chord in open voicing. It shows four chords: Root pos. (C3, E3, G3, A3), 1st inv. (E3, G3, A3, C4), 2nd inv. (G3, A3, C4, D4), and 3rd inv. (A3, C4, D4, E4). The notes are arranged on adjacent strings.

Root pos. 1st inv. 2nd inv. 3rd inv.
Open Voicing

The Maj6 chord of course can come across as being a Min7th chord of a different name. C6=Am7. How the chord sounds to you will be partly determined by the bass note. With a bass note C, the chord will sound like a C6 chord in any inversion. With the bass note A, the chord will tend to sound like an Am7 in any inversion.

The diagram shows three chords on a single staff: Am7 (A3, C4, E4, G4), D7 (D3, F3, A3, C4), and G6 (G3, B3, D4, E4). The Am7 chord has a natural sign under the A, while the D7 chord has a sharp sign under the D.

Am7 D7 G6

Generally, if all of the 4 part chords use the same type of voicing, relatively good voice leading can be achieved. However, don't count on this because in sectional style harmony, the other voices usually are chasing the melody note, be it what it may.