

## Harmony Symbolism

There are many systems used to notate harmony, whether that **harmony** is an **interval**, an **arpeggio**, or a **chord**. For example, orchestral music uses staff notation, harmonic analysis uses Roman numerals, and the Baroque era used figured bass. However, the most popular harmony symbol used in today's music is the **macro symbol**, more simply known as a "chord symbol."

Simply stated, a harmony symbol consists of two parts: the **Letter** of the harmony and the **Type**. And although these symbols are seldom used in classical music, they are universally used to specify the harmony of popular music as found in lead sheets, fake books and chord charts. Therefore, a clear and simple understanding of harmony symbolization is essential.

A quick internet search of harmony symbol notation will present you with an overwhelming amount of confusing, incomplete and, dare I say it, wrong information. So, let's clean the slate, start at the beginning and discover that harmony notation isn't overwhelming or confusing at all.

For the examples used in this lesson, we will use the C major scale. Let's begin by presenting the **C major scale** as seven letters and seven tone numbers, also known as scale degrees. In the **first octave** they are **1C 2D 3E 4F 5G 6A 7B**, and in the **second octave** they become **8C 9D 10E 11F 12G 13A 14B**. Now, the first thing we need to realize about harmony is that harmony begins with one sound! To many this just doesn't seem correct, but it is.

Think of it this way. If we were to begin with a complex harmony symbol, say C major 13, which contains the letters and tones 1C 3E 5G 7B 9D 11F 13A, we would probably quit, because as a beginner, that's a frightening chord! However, if we were to "reduce" this complex harmony, by deleting six tones and letters, then, only one tone and letter would remain: 1C. And that isn't complex at all. In fact, it's very simple. Now, you can understand that harmony, no matter how complex, begins with one sound, one letter, and one tone number. Let's continue.

Harmony of **two sounds** is called an **interval**. An interval contain two letters and two tone numbers. For this lesson, we will begin with the following intervals: **Perfect Fifth**: natural 5, the **Diminished Fifth**: flat 5, and the **Augmented Fifth**: sharp 5.

The **Perfect Fifth**, P5, is simply the fifth sound of the major scale, tone 5 letter G. And when the perfect fifth is combined with the first sound of the scale, tone 1 letter C, the perfect fifth interval is the result. The perfect fifth interval may be played melodically, which means one at a time, or, harmonically, which means at the same time. To understand the next two intervals, a simple understanding of flat (♭) and sharp (♯) is necessary. On guitar, flat is one fret lower from any letter or tone number, and sharp is one fret higher from any letter or tone number. That was easy!

**Diminished** means to shrink or make **smaller**. Therefore, the **Diminished Fifth** is simply the fifth sound of the major scale flatted, tone ♭5 letter ♭G. And when the diminished fifth, ♭5 ♭G is combined with tone 1 letter C, the diminished fifth interval is the result. The diminished fifth interval may be played melodically or harmonically.

**Augmented** means to expand or make **larger**. Therefore, the **Augmented Fifth** is simply the fifth sound of the major scale sharped, tone ♯5 letter ♯G. And when the augmented fifth, ♯5 ♯G is combined with tone 1 letter C, the augmented fifth interval is the result. The augmented fifth interval may also be played melodically or harmonically.

Next, let's present the three intervals based on tone 3 letter E. They are **Major**: natural 3, **Minor**: flat 3 and **Suspended**: sharp 3. You will notice that even though we used the flat and sharp signs with third intervals, we did not use the designation diminished and augmented!

The **Major Third**, M3, is simply the third sound of the major scale, tone 3 letter E. When the major third is combined with the first sound of the scale, tone 1 letter C, the major third interval is the result. The major third interval may be played melodically or

harmonically.

The **Minor Third**, m3, is simply the third sound of the major scale flattened, tone ♭3 letter ♭E. And when the minor third is combined with the first sound of the scale, tone 1 letter C, the minor third interval is the result. The minor third interval may be played melodically or harmonically.

The **Suspended Third**, sus3, is simply the third sound of the major scale sharpened, tone #3 letter #E. And when the major third is combined with the first sound of the scale, tone 1 letter C, the suspended third interval is the result. The suspended third interval may also be played melodically or harmonically.

One more thought. The definition of **Enharmonic** is one sound with **more** than one symbol. Therefore, it's important to point out that tone #3 letter #E sounds like tone 4 letter F, but they are two different symbols. See page 102 of **Guitar Fretboard Facts** for further clarification of this important concept. <<http://www.12tonemusic.com/guitar/facts/>>

Okay, it's now time to use the above information to create **Nine Triads of Three Types**.

**Tri** is Greek for three. Therefore, **triads** are **arpeggio** and **chord** harmonies which are spelled with **three different letters** and **three different tone numbers**. Here's the essential point. There are only nine

triads upon which all arpeggios and chords are based. These nine triads are created by combining three types of thirds: major, minor and suspended, with three types of fifths: perfect, diminished and augmented. In the following examples, C is **tone 1**, which is also known as the **root**, **tonic** and the **fundamental**.

Here is something very important. Notice that the **type symbol** for **major** is **nothing**. In other words, there is a harmony letter for major, but there is no harmony symbol seen for major. Said a different way, when you see nothing, and yes, you can see nothing, it means something, and in this case, when you see no type symbol after the harmony letter, it means major! Another way of saying this is, when reading the harmony symbol C, you think and say **C major**.

You will also notice that each of the nine triads only have one **Type**, one **Name**, one **Tone Spelling** and one **Letter Spelling**. However, since there is no standardization of harmony symbolism, some of the nine triads have **more than one Harmony Symbol**. This really shouldn't be the case because, more often than not, it leads to confusion. But, oh well, that's the way it is.

So, 'til next time, have some **nine triad** fun... I'll be listening! And don't forget to drop me a line at <[frets@12tonemusic.com](mailto:frets@12tonemusic.com)> to let me know how you liked this lesson.

| Type                          | Name                 | Tones   | Letters | Harmony Symbol   |
|-------------------------------|----------------------|---------|---------|------------------|
| <b>Major</b><br><b>3</b>      | Major                | 1 3 5   | C E G   | C                |
|                               | Major Flat Five      | 1 3 ♭5  | C E ♭G  | Cmaj♭5           |
|                               | Major Sharp Five     | 1 3 #5  | C E #G  | Cmaj#5, Caug, C+ |
| <b>Minor</b><br><b>♭3</b>     | Minor                | 1 ♭3 5  | C ♭E G  | Cm, C-           |
|                               | Minor Flat Five      | 1 ♭3 ♭5 | C ♭E ♭G | Cm♭5, Cdim, C°   |
|                               | Minor Sharp Five     | 1 ♭3 #5 | C ♭E #G | Cm#5             |
| <b>Suspended</b><br><b>#3</b> | Suspended            | 1 #3 5  | C #E G  | Csus, Csus4      |
|                               | Suspended Flat Five  | 1 #3 ♭5 | C #E ♭G | Csus♭5           |
|                               | Suspended Sharp Five | 1 #3 #5 | C #E #G | Csus#5           |

Grammy Award nominated Music Educator, **Mike Overly** easily combines the worlds of deeply-rooted academic study with a well-textured performance resume. His pathbreaking **12 Tone Music Publishing** products, including the newly released **Tone Note® Music Method for Guitar**, provide valuable illuminating insights while simplifying the learning process. Join Mike at [www.12tonemusic.com](http://www.12tonemusic.com) to explore and expand your knowledge of these two iconic instruments through a variety of tips, tricks and free lessons of remarkable originality. Mike's publications are available from Bass Books.com, Amazon.com, JK Lutherie.com and many other fine music and book retailers around the world - just ask for them!