

# OVERVIEW OF CHORDS AND CHORD SYMBOLS

**M**uch of what gives gospel music its unique sound is the way it uses harmony and chord progressions. This quick overview of chord construction and chord symbols will help you to get the most out of the following chapters. This chapter assumes that you know your major and minor scales (along with their key signatures), and understand intervals (i.e., major third, minor seventh).

## Basic Three-note Chords (Triads)

Gospel music is like much other Western music in that it uses **triads** (three-note chords) as the smallest “complete” unit of harmony. Single notes (unisons) and two-note chords (dyads) are certainly possible, but they always constitute incomplete versions of larger chords with at least three notes (and very possibly more). Because of this, the gospel pianist must be well versed in triads; they are the building blocks of more complex chords.

### Triad Formation and Inversions

We create triads by adding a third and a fifth above a fundamental note (called the root). This can be done with each note in a major or minor scale. Here we see triads built on each note of the C major scale. You can also think of this as “stacking” two thirds, one atop the other.

**Root position:**



In each of the eight triads above, the bottom note is the root, the middle note is the third, and the top note is the fifth. This arrangement, with the root on the bottom, is known as **root position**. It's also possible to “flip,” or **invert** the order of the notes as follows:

**First inversion:**



We've moved each root up an octave, while leaving the third and fifth where they were. This arrangement, with the third on the bottom, is known as **first inversion**. With a three-note chord we can invert the order one more time:

**Second inversion:**



Now both the root and the third are an octave higher than where they started. This arrangement, in which the fifth is on the bottom, is called (you guessed it!) **second inversion**. If we tried to invert this one more time, we would simply be back to root position again (but with everything an octave higher than before).

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