

Diatonic Triads

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A simple definition of the word diatonic is ‘pertaining to the notes of a specific major or minor key’. Therefore the notes that are diatonic to the key of C are C-D-E-F-G-A-B. Any other note when playing in the key of C would not be diatonic.

Diatonic Triads are simply chords constructed of diatonic notes. Using the key of C major as an example, the following is the series of diatonic chords built on each degree of the scale:

The image displays a musical staff in 4/4 time with a treble clef, showing seven diatonic triads in C major. The notes are C4, E4, G4, F4, E4, D4, and C4. Below the staff, a guitar fretboard is shown with strings labeled T (Treble), A, and B. The fret numbers for each chord are: C major (0, 2, 3), D minor (2, 3, 5), E minor (2, 4, 5), F major (1, 2, 3), G major (3, 2, 3), A minor (0, 2, 4), and B diminished (0, 1, 2).

Now, let's examine these chords.

The first triad is C-E-G, our basic C chord. How is it constructed? Root, 2 whole steps to E, and half + whole step to G. It is the location of the whole vs. half steps in the triad that makes this a MAJOR chord. More specifically the two whole step distance from C to E. This is a major third.

The second triad is D-F-A. How is it constructed? Differently. Root, a whole + half step to F, 2 whole steps to A. It is the location of the whole vs. half steps in the triad that makes this a Minor chord. More specifically the whole + half step distance from D to F. This is a minor third.

If we analyze the remaining triads in the above example we will find that:

The third Triad is an E minor

The fourth Triad is a F MAJOR

The fifth Triad is a G MAJOR

The sixth Triad is an A minor

The seventh Triad is a B diminished (a root followed by two minor thirds)

When writing these chords using Roman numerical convention they look like:

I – ii – iii – IV – V – vi – vii^{dim} (my word processor does not have the symbol for dim available)

In plain English the sequence is:

Major – minor – minor – Major – Major – minor – diminished.

All this is fine and well but what ever do with this information ??
We incorporate it into our never ending quest for what sounds good !

There are millions of songs in the world that are based on diatonic chord construction.

Blues progressions typically employ the I, IV & V chords. Many country and blue grass songs employ the same. Next time you play a song see if you can identify chords that are diatonic vs. non diatonic.

In the key of C, the chord progression in the verse of Bob Dylan’s classic “Like a Rolling Stone” starts out:

C – Dmin – Emin – F – G. Look familiar ?

The verse continues on to:

F – G F – G –

F- Emin – Dmin – C -

F- Emin – Dmin – C -

F – G

The chorus ?

C – F – G

“Like a Rolling Stone” is just one example of millions of songs that are built on diatonic structures. As Dylan did in the above classic, if we are writing a song in the key of C major, we might use our knowledge of diatonic chords to develop a bridge or a hook. Or maybe what Dylan did in the above example was write something that sounded good (arguably great) and it turned out to be a comprised of diatonic structures.

Play various combinations of diatonic chords and undoubtedly some patterns will sound familiar – songs you have heard many times.

Diatonic Harmonies

Diatonic harmonies can be full triads, triads with particular tones doubled, or outline harmonies where we leave out one note of the triad. There are other types of harmonies but we won’t go into that discussion right now.

Harmonies based on diatonic triads can be used as passing chords to get from one chord to another. For instance we could ‘walk’ from the C chord to an F chord using the linear tones C – D – E – F but we could also use diatonic harmony by ‘outlining’ the I – ii – iii – IV progression:

In the above, the first walk is simply C (chord) - D – E – F (chord)

The second walk ‘outlines’ the ii chord with the F & D tones and the iii chord with G & E tones.

The third walk ‘outlines’ the ii chord with the A & F tones and the iii chord with the B & G tones ending on an F chord playing as a D “shape” at the fifth fret.

The fourth walk is an octave up from the second walk. It takes us out of the open position into a very movable grip moving from the top of a C bar chord through the ii using the F & D tones and the iii chord with the G & E tones and landing on the top of an F bar chord.

Try using these examples to play the melody of Al Greens classic “Lean on Me” in diatonic harmony.

One of the guitar lines in Van Morrisons classic “Brown Eyed Girl” uses the fourth walk above and moves it over the I & IV chords. In the key of G it is something like this:

This move is very common. Get to know it. Listen for it and all of it’s variations. Use it. Have fun with it !

When exploring diatonic harmonies, remember a basic rule pertaining chords – it doesn't matter how you 'stack the notes'. They can be in any order and they are still the chord, or the outline of the chord. For instance, we used the F&D tones to outline the ii (or D minor) chord in one example above and the A & F tones in another. Try voicings that stack these and D&F and F&A respectively. Different voicings will work in different situations. Often times we will use an entire triad instead of an outline, or mix and match. There are no right or wrong ways to stack the notes. Let your heart and ear be the judge. Play what sounds good. Once you find it, explore and see if you can find other harmonies that will sound good in the same situation.

Enjoy !