Common Chord Symbols and Scales

Madison Bohrer

This reference guide, a companion to the reference guides *Major Modes and Chords*, *Basic minor harmony*, and *Melodic Melodic Minor Harmony*, is an easy cheat sheet to help identify common chord symbols found in Jazz and Popular music. These non-transposed chords are shown with a root of C to help illuminate the subtle differences in the note content between them, and are organized into the categories of Major, Minor, Dominant, and Polychords. The chords are shown in root position to demonstrate the relationships of the extensions and alterations, but are not reccommended for performance or compositon. Each chord has one or more suggested scales for melodic content, and transposed versions of all the listed scales can be found in the reference guides above. Not every scale will be the appropriate choice for the given chord in every situation; the different contextual cues of each chord will inform the player or composer's note choices differently. The notes and scales found here only sratch the surface of the harmonic and melodic possibilities and are presented as a starting point and quick check for note content when composing and performing.

To best utilize this guide, try finding the chord quality you are looking for in this guide and then find the appropriately transposed scales and modes in the other reference guides, which are listed in all keys. Composers may also use this guide to explore new sounds. Other reference guides can be found online at:

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Major

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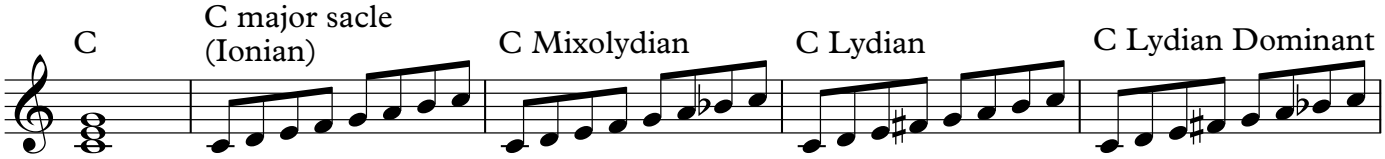
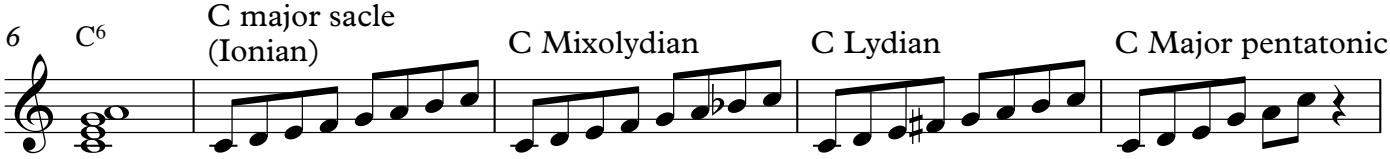
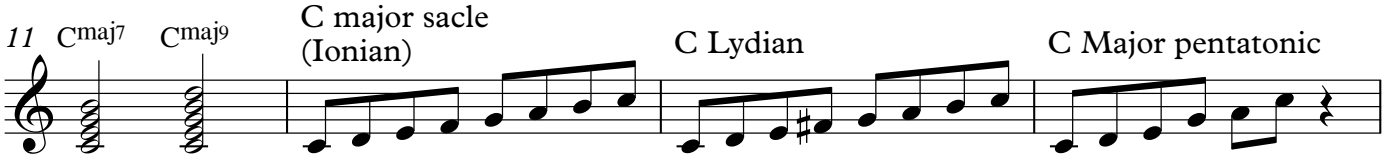


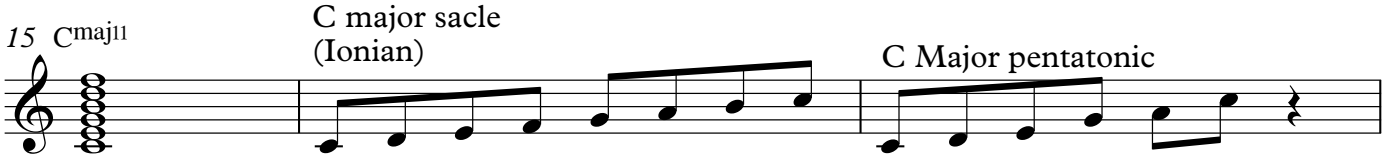
C major Triad is the most basic C major chord, and there are many colors you can use to shade the extensions that are missing. The most common scale used would be Ionian but players may find exploring lydian and mixolydian sounds to be tasteful; depending on the context, they may even be preferable.



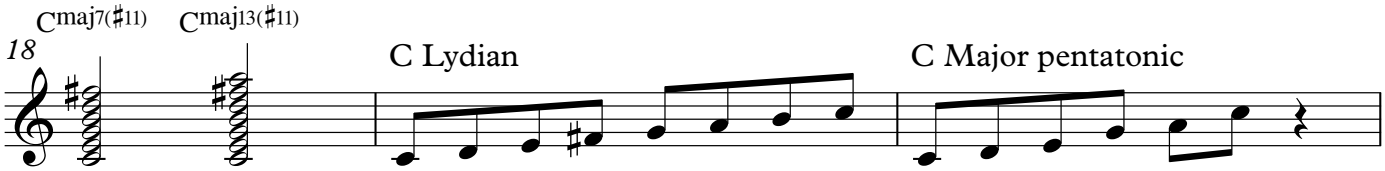
With an added Major 6, C6 has a more tonicized sound when played on its own, but the 6 is also commonly seen as part of a moving harmonic guide tone when seen in a progression. The C Major pentatonic scale captures the sound of the C6 perfectly, as it includes all chord tones.



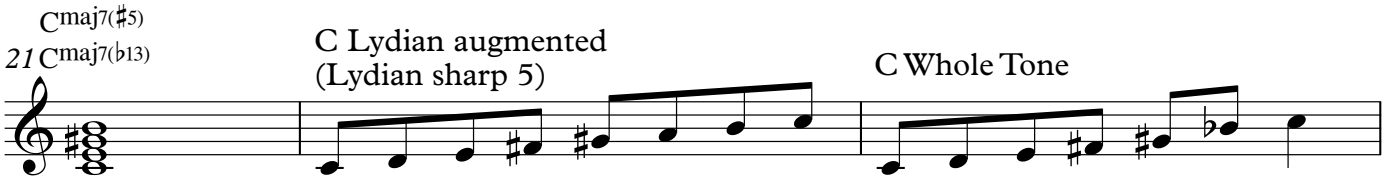
With the full major 7th or 9th notated, the full colors of the major tonality are dictated, which limits the freedom of the 7th. Major 7th and 9th chords are not always tonicized or ionian.



not often seen in root position, adding the 11 takes away the possibility of lydian harmony and is usually played as a color note to thicken the chord.

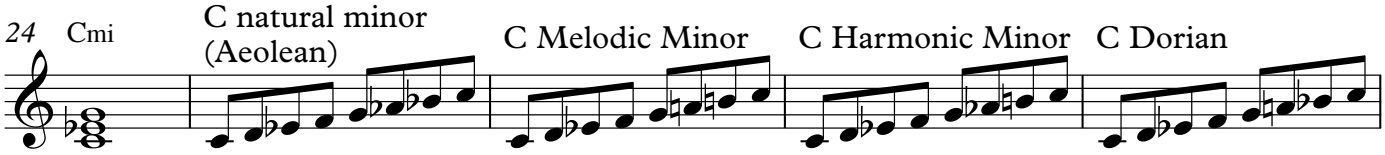


With the addition of the #11 the harmony becomes clearly Lydian Major and limits the appropriate options. The 13 functions in much the same way as a 6 in a C6.

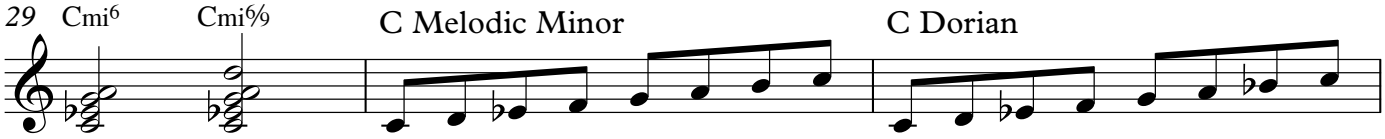


The raised fifth gives this chord an unstable and mysterious sound when tonicized.
The C augmented triad that the chord is built on works well with the whole tone sound, even if the Bb conflicts with the chord. Like a C6, the raised fifth is also is used commonly as part of a moving harmonic guide tone line within a progression.

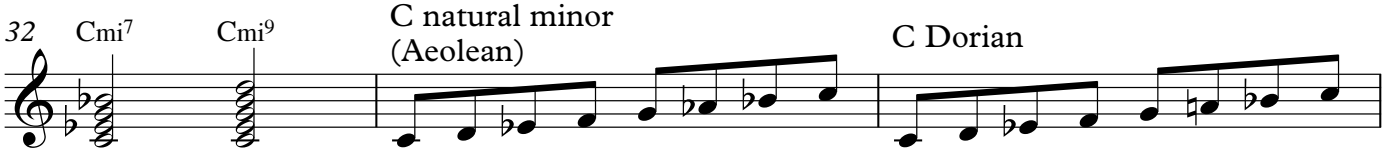
Minor



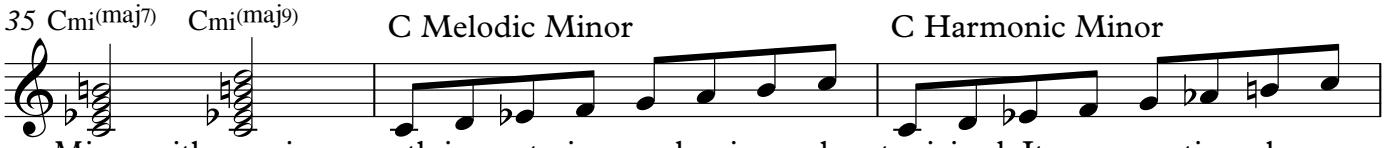
The minor triad is full of possibilites and is used in many differennt contexts. there is much to be explored by altering the sixth and seventh to find different sounds.



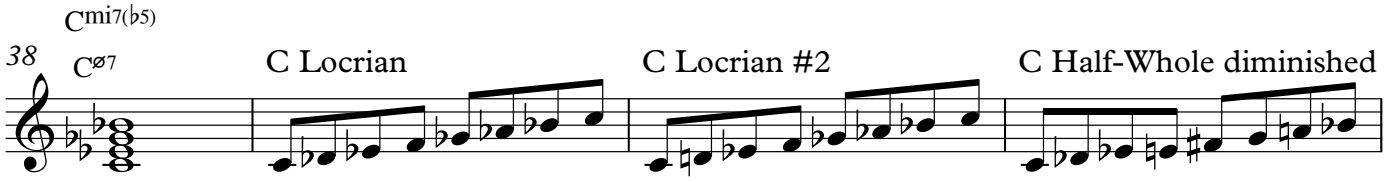
The addition of the major 6 to a minor triad helps to define the harmony and brightens the chord. The sixth can also be used as part of a harmonic guide tone line within a progression. Minor 6/9 is often used to tonicize Dorian.



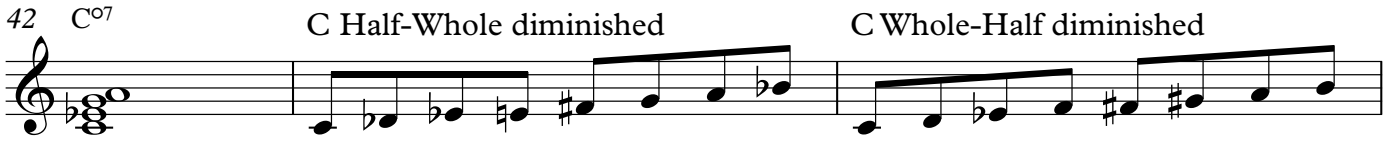
The minor seven chord is quite possibly the most common chord in jazz. The lack of dissonant intervals between any of the pitches means it is very stable, yet its full color can be used in amazingly creative ways. Add the 9 for an expansive sound.



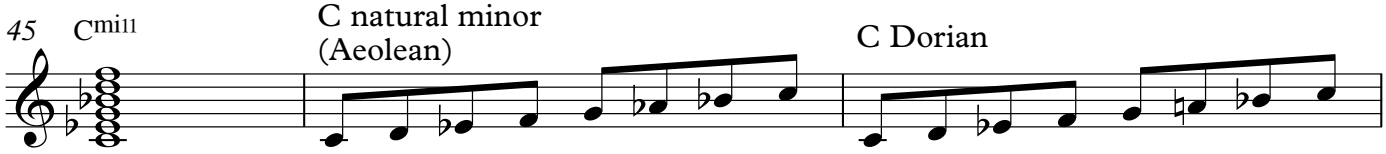
Minor with a major seventh is mysterious and unique when tonicized, It can sometimes be seen as part of a moving harmonic guide tone line.



Often called a Half-Diminished chord, the flat 5 creates a tri-tone with the root that gives this chord a unique sense of anticipation and direction. It can be found in the 7th mode of the major scale, but is most commonly seen as a ii chord in a minor ii-V-i

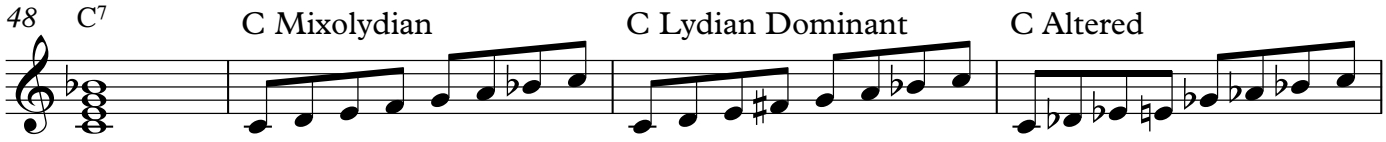


C diminished 7 is made up of exclusively minor thirds, and as a result has some unique properties. It is perfectly symmetrical in that you can build a fully diminished seventh chord using any of the chord tones as the root and the chord will be identical (i.e. Cdim7 has the same notes as Adim7 and Ebdim7). Half-whole is more often used as more of a dominant functionality, Whole-half is more common when the chord is used as a passing chord.

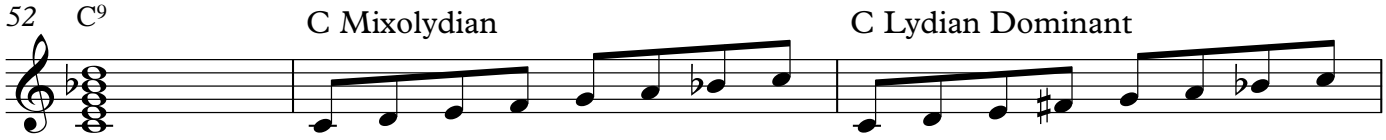


While Cmi11 has the same tonality as a minor 7 or minor 9, the added 11 (usually not in root position) adds richness and color and deepens the minor colors.

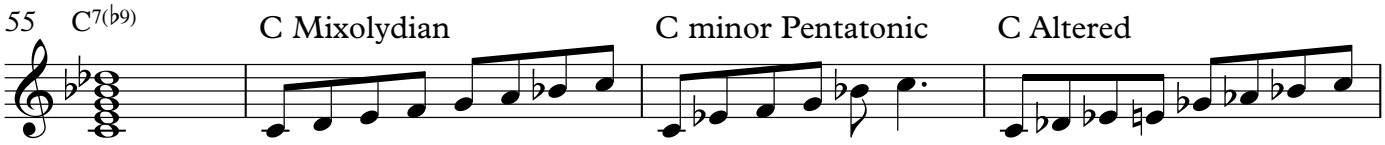
Dominant



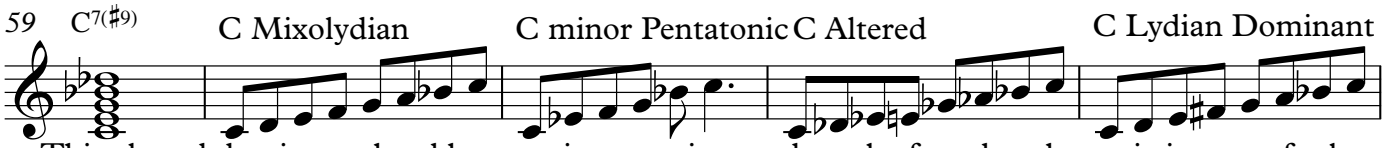
The basic dominant chord comes from the 5th degree of the major scale. The tri-tone found between the 3rd and the 7th defines the characteristic sound found in all dominant chords. Dominant V chords have a unique pull to the I chord that is the basis for much of western harmony. The lack of extensions allows for many possibilities.



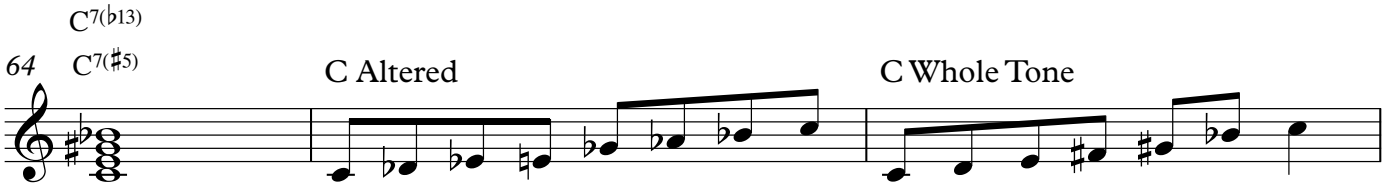
The 9 makes a dominant chord sound bright and open, it also removes the possibility for altered dominant harmony. Use the #11 in for a bright twist.



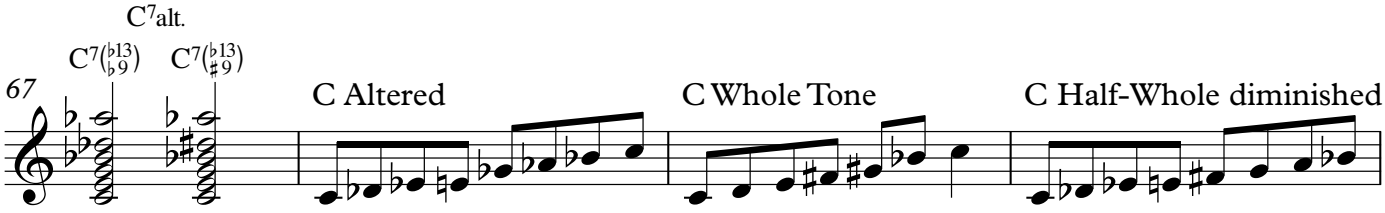
The b9 comes from the dominant of a minor tonic, as this chord is often seen in a minor ii-V-i. The b9 is dark, unstable, and one of the simplest altered dominant chords.



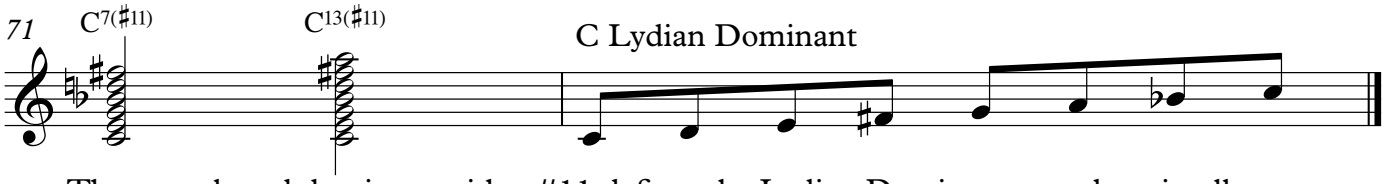
This altered dominant chord has a unique tension, and can be found as the tonic in some funk and rock music as well as being used as an altered V chord. Because the #9 is the same note as the minor 3rd, this chord has the shadow of a minor 7th chord.



The #5 makes the root triad an augmented triad, which gives this altered dominant chord a mysterious twist. The specificity limits the possibilities a bit as you may want to avoid the natural 5th.



While there are many ainterpretations of a fully altered dominant chord, two of the most commonly used are the b13b9 and the b13#9. These are extremely crunchy and have an extremely rewarding release when they appear in a V - I.



The non-altered dominant with a #11 defines the Lydian Dominant sound, an intellegent twist on a dominant chord. Lydian Dominant chords are often seen as dominant chords that do not resolve to their respective I. sometimes the #11 can be part of a moving guide tone line.