



Triads, Inversions, Figured Bass, and Harmonic Analysis

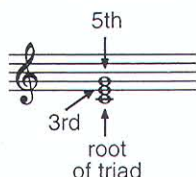
So far our studies have led us through melody and counterpoint. We now move into the third and final building block of tonal music: harmony.

Triads

The combination of three or more different pitches creates a **chord**, the basic unit of harmonic organization in music. Although the combination of any three different pitches can create a chord, certain combinations—specifically those based on the interval of a third—are of special importance in tonal music. Chords that comprise three distinct pitches stacked in thirds are called **triads**, while chords that have four distinct pitches stacked in thirds are called **seventh chords**. We discuss triads in this chapter, seventh chords in Chapter 6.

Triads are identified by the lowest pitch name in a stack (see Example 5.1). When a triad is stacked in thirds as in Example 5.1, we say that the chord is in **root position**, and the lowest pitch is called the **root** of the chord. The note a third above the root is called the **third**; the note a fifth above the root is called the **fifth**.

EXAMPLE 5.1 A Triad on C



Using the diatonic thirds—major and minor—we can build four types (or **qualities**) of triads above a given root (see Example 5.2A). **Major (M)** and **minor (m)** triads are so called because of the quality of the interval between the root and third. Both major and minor triads are **consonant triads**, because they span a consonant interval: a perfect fifth. By contrast, augmented and diminished triads are **dissonant triads**, because of their dissonant fifth: an **augmented (A)** triad spans an augmented fifth; a **diminished (d)** triad spans a diminished fifth (see Example 5.2A). Example 5.2B orders the four triad types from smallest intervals spanned (diminished) to largest (augmented).