

Worship Music – Understanding Chords

By [Peter Lawrence Alexander](#) / May 9, 2008

This article teaches you what the chords are in the major key and how they should be notated. It also talks about if some chords are “Biblical” where others aren’t. Written by Peter Alexander, author, *Writing and Performing Christian Music* which received high praise from *Worship Leader* magazine in the March/April 2008 issue.

In our Western tonality, chords are derived from what the Greeks called the Ionian mode. This later became the major key. All the Greek modes are based on seven tones going up from a first note called the root tone. The eighth pitch is the root note performed an octave higher.

One of the things the early Greeks discovered was that each mode had its own sound and feel. They discovered that when a song was written in a specific mode, it evoked different responses from the listeners.

All the modes, including the Ionian mode (our major scale) are made up of combinations of three minor triads, three major triads and one diminished triad (or what others of us call a MINOR b5 chord since the diminished chord has a flatted fifth compared to the other triads).

NOTE: A triad is a chord with three pitches in it.

It’s important for a worship guitarist to understand these principles. One reason is because harmony is our vocabulary. Remove a chord type, and you remove a part of the vocabulary God gave musically to express what He wants to write through you. Another reason is because outside of our Western culture, all music, is modal and has its own scale sources.

If you listen to the soundtrack of *Memoirs of Geisha* scored by John Williams, you’ll hear that Japanese music sounds different from Michael W. Smith! Indian music (from India) uses scale sources built from quarter tones. Gospel music, which has its roots in Africa, is based on the Pentatonic scale.

I have a friend in England who produced an album of sampled sounds from ancient instruments including a bone flute, which was made from the limb of a bird. After holes were bored into the flute and performed, it was found that the pitches were entirely recognizable and that you could sing them easily. In work done with instruments from ancient Greece, similar to what David played, it was found that the ancients had the same scale sources that we have today.

Early Christian hymns (and I don’t mean Evie) as sung in Paul’s day were modal and had a distinct non-major scale sound.

If you follow the development of harmony, you’ll find that up through Bach, Baroque composers understood these issues and used them in their music. I won’t belabor this here, but I refer you

to the book *Evening In the Palace of Reason* to read about the practices of these composers when writing music for the church, including Martin Luther's on church music.

Sometime in the mid 1700s, modal writing became "fuddy duddy" and was replaced by a new "hip" sound: the major scale and its cousin, the minor scale.

The reason I'm taking the time to write this is because some well intentioned seminaries teach rather fruitcake things about music and harmony, one of which is not to use minor chords in a worship song or worship service.

Well, that's just plain **NUTS**.

Ignore it.

The purpose of music within the body of believers is to EDIFY and to have prophetic impact (the second song in the Bible, written by God through Moses, is a prophetic song). Harmony doesn't edify. Lyrics do. Lyrics matched with effective harmony drills home the content of the lyric.

To the Major Scale – But Not Beyond

Within the major key, chords follow a specific pattern. I'm showing you these with Roman numerals so that you can see the structure of the major scale. A capital Roman number means a major triad. A lower case Roman numeral means a minor triad.

In the chart below, I'm showing you the scale position, whether the chord is major or minor, how to notate it, and the scale source for improvising. All of the chords, for this article, are in root position.

Scale position	Type	Notated	Scale Source
I	Major	MAJ	Ionian
ii	Minor	MIN	Dorian
iii	Minor	MIN	Phrygian
IV	Major	MIN	Lydian
V	Major	MAJ	Mixolydian
vi	Minor	MIN	Aeolian
vii	Diminished	MIN b5	Locrian
bVII	Major	MAJ	Lydian

Right now I'm giving you all the chords in G. Your job is to get a guitar chord dictionary and play these chords in the order given so you can hear the chords in the major key.

NOTE: *Many amateur guitarists ignore the Diminished chord because it's too "difficult" or "uncomfortable" to play. The difficulty in learning a diminished chord doesn't begin to compare to the suffering Christ endured on the Cross. Learn it!*

I = G or GMAJ

ii = A MIN

iii = B MIN

IV = C or CMAJ

V = D or DMAJ

vi = E MIN

vii = F#MINb5

bVII = F or F MAJ

You'll notice that with the Major triads, I wrote, "G or G MAJ." With a triad, when you just write the letter name, it's generally understood you're talking about a Major triad. However, on my lead sheets, I take no chances. I write it out.

Sometimes you'll see G followed by a triangle. This is supposed to mean Major, too. **DON'T USE IT.** Write out MAJ. Others will write a capital M for Major. Don't use that either. In the end, shortcuts create confusion and waste valuable rehearsal time.

With Minor chords, avoid m (lower case) or the dash (-). Again, write it out (MIN). It takes less than a second and clarifies what you want, especially if YOU are the songwriter!

This article was previously published at the SonicControl website.