Chords and degrees: How to find suitable chords for a tune?

There is a very simple technique which will help you to find the right chords in any key you want to play. We are going to study the degrees of the C major scale, which has no sharps and flats, as an example that can be transposed in any key.

Example in C major

First of all, what are the degrees? It is the position of the 7 notes in the scale within one octave, excluding the accidentals. It looks like this, on a C major scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The intervals between the degrees on a major scale are like this:

1 1 tone ½ tone 1 tone 1 tone 1 tone ½ tone

As you can see, each note has a number, and this is the degree. F is the 4th degree of the scale of C, and G is the 5th degree. This is what the “1 4 5” chord sequence, also known as the “Three chords trick” refers to, in C it is C F G. This three chord trick is used a lot in Irish traditional music, so it is important to know well each degree of the scale.

Now, how do we calculate the chords in this scale? Here is a simple method I use:

Write down the degrees:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
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<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

Then the C major scale underneath it:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>III</th>
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<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
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</tbody>
</table>

After this is done, write the full C major scale under each degree, starting with the first note of each degree:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>IV</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
<th>VII</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
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<td>G</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Now, it is time to compose chords. Chords can have a lot of notes but we will just stick to the four sounds chords, as this is more useful for accompanying Irish traditional music.

To build our 4 sounds chords, we need the 1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th degree. Take each degree and put together the 1st, 3rd, 5th and 7th note of the scale of each degree. Starting with the first degree, the notes we will use are colored in green:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I</th>
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<th>III</th>
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<th>V</th>
<th>VI</th>
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</table>

The first degree of the C major scale is a chord built with the notes CEGB.

Apply this to every degree of the C major scale and you will get this:


Now that we have the notes of each chord, we need to find out how to call them. To do that, we are simply going to calculate the intervals between each note.

I: C to E=2 tones, which is a major 3rd, C to G= 3 tones and a half, which is a perfect 5th, C to B= 5 tones and a half, which is a major 7th.

So the first degree of the C major scale is a CMaj7

Using the exact same system we can calculate what the other chords are:

II: DFAC= minor 3rd, perfect 5th, minor 7th = Dm7
III: EGBD= minor 3rd, perfect 5th, minor 7th = Em7
IV: FACE= Major 3rd, perfect 5th, Major 7th= FMaj7
V: GBDF= Major 3rd, perfect 5th, minor 7th= G7
VI: ACEG= minor 3rd, perfect 5th, minor 7th= Am7
VII: BDFA= Minor 3rd, Diminished 5th, minor 7th= Bm7/b5
Thanks to this system, you can find all the chords for each key that will be given to you in the Ionian mode (Major). To find the chords belonging to the Aeolian mode (Natural minor), just use the minor relative for each Major scale (Ex: Am is the minor relative of C major), and you will have exactly the same chords, starting from the 6th degree of the major scale.

Example:

C D E F G A B=C major
A B C D E F G=A minor

So the chords belonging to the Am scale are, if we refer to the system above, Am7, Bm7/b5, CM7, Dm7, Em7, FM7, G7.

What should you remember about all this?

Don’t worry if this is not clear in your mind yet, it will be with practice. What you should remember from this system is the intervals, and the chord quality for each degree.

Major scale:

I  II  III  IV  V  VI  VII
M7  m7  m7  M7  7  m7  m7/b5

Minor scale:

I  II  III  IV  V  VI  VII
m7  m7/b5 M7  m7  m7  M7  7

Going further

The guitar is a very versatile and polyvalent instrument. The possible ideas and ways of playing it are endless, and you can really develop a personal style, which will allow you to express yourself. The biggest part of the work you need to do, in order to develop an original and rich style, is to listen as many different types of music as you can. Listen to what you like, to what you don’t know, as you might discover some things that you will
really enjoy; and even to what you dislike, so you will know precisely what you don’t want to sound like. Spend a lot of time practicing your tone; try to get rid of any buzzing sounds or notes that don’t sound nice in your chords. If you want to sound nice while playing with other musicians you must also learn how to sound nice on your own.

Have fun making up your own chords, you will very quickly find out what chords you want to use and what are those which don’t work with your voicing. Practice every day and try to have a global idea of a sound you want to go for. Listening to other guitar players is, of course, a necessity, but listening to other instruments as well is a great way to get different ideas.

Don’t forget to listen to the musicians you will be backing. You can find some very nice ideas, a great chords progression or riff that will sound gorgeous on its own but that does not fit any tune. Or sometimes, the simplest chords progression is what fits the best a tune. If you really like a chord progression, however, you can still compose a tune to fit it; that is a very interesting way to go as well.

Think about dynamics and volume while playing. As a guitar player, you can have a great control on the atmosphere and the tension in a tune, but it is very easy to ruin everything as well if you don’t pay attention to the general sound. Tunes also have an identity, an atmosphere already present, and it is important to take this into consideration before creating anything over it.

Finally, keep your curiosity and your passion alive. It will be a great motivation to improve. Don’t only rely on what you already know, but always try to get a better sound, and to make a better music. Technique is a very important matter in music, but technique without any feelings won’t sound nice, to you nor to the audience. Don’t forget that expression is the key, expression of your feelings; but do remember that a poor technique, or a bad control of your instrument will reduce the impact and beauty of your emotions and you will fail to express with other people the way you would like to. Technique and emotions are, in my opinion, a good recipe to play a music that you will love and that other people will love too.
Full chords chart

Here is a chord chart of every main key played in Irish traditional music, to give you a few more tools for accompanying it.

Note: This is a non-exhaustive list of chords, but those are the one I am using the most for Irish traditional music accompaniment.

D major

[Chord diagrams for D major, Dm, D5, Dmaj7, Dsus4, Dmaj7, etc.]
D minor

Dm

Dm7

Dm7/C

Dm7/D

Dm7/A

Dm7/E

D5

D5/E

D5/F
E major

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**EM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>G#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>G#</td>
<td>B</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**Emaj7**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
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<td>X</td>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>D#</td>
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**E7**

<table>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>G#</td>
<td>B</td>
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</table>

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**E9**

<table>
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<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>G#</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>B</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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**Emaj7/9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
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<th>3</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>B</td>
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</table>

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**Eadd9**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F#</td>
<td>G#</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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**Eadd2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>E</td>
<td>G#</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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EM/A

E minor

Em

Em7
G major

```
G M
1
G B D G D G

G M
X
7
G B D G B

G M
X
8
G B D G B

G M
X
10
G D G B D

G
X
7
D G B

G
X
X
X
X
7
G G B

Gmaj7
1
G G B

Gmaj7
X
9
G D F# B D

G7
1
X
X
G F B D
```
A minor
B minor

Bm

Bm

Bm

Bm

Bm

Bm

Bm
C major

Bm
\[
\begin{array}{c}
10 \\
D F# B D
\end{array}
\]

Bm
\[
\begin{array}{c}
11 \\
D F# B F#
\end{array}
\]

Bm7
\[
\begin{array}{c}
1 \\
B F# A D F#
\end{array}
\]

Bm7
\[
\begin{array}{c}
2 \\
F# B D A
\end{array}
\]

Bm7
\[
\begin{array}{c}
7 \\
B F# A D F# B
\end{array}
\]

Bm7
\[
\begin{array}{c}
7 \\
B D F#C#
\end{array}
\]

C major

CM
\[
\begin{array}{c}
1 \\
C E G C E
\end{array}
\]

CM
\[
\begin{array}{c}
1 \\
C E G C E
\end{array}
\]

CM
\[
\begin{array}{c}
1 \\
C E G C E
\end{array}
\]

CM
\[
\begin{array}{c}
5 \\
G C E C
\end{array}
\]

CM
\[
\begin{array}{c}
7 \\
C E G C E
\end{array}
\]

CM
\[
\begin{array}{c}
7 \\
C G C E G
\end{array}
\]

Cmaj7
\[
\begin{array}{c}
1 \\
C G B E G
\end{array}
\]

Cmaj7
\[
\begin{array}{c}
5 \\
G C E B
\end{array}
\]