

Music 262 – Fall, 2015

Pop Chord Notation

The basic chord is in major mode and built on the dominant. Unless specified, triads are major. Similarly, unless specified (M7 or ^o7), 7ths are understood to be a minor 7th above the root. This includes chords such as G13, F#9, or C11, etc. — the 7th is a minor 7th above the root.

Chords with higher factors with major indications such as BbM9 or FM13 (#11) include a major 7th above the root.

Unless otherwise specified (in parenthetical notation), 9ths are a whole step (major 9th) above the root. Thus:

C9 = C, E, G, Bb, D
CM9 = C, E, G, B, D
Cm9 = C, Eb, G, Bb, D (not Db!)
Cm11 = C, Eb, (G), Bb, D, F

Added 6ths are a major 6th above the root whether the triad is major or minor.

Added 9ths are a major 9th above the root.

C6/9 = C, E, G, A, D (**NO** 7th!)
Cm6/9 = C, Eb, G, A, D

Upper extensions of chords (9th, 11th, and 13th) require 7ths; the only exception is chords with added 9ths — meaning add the 9th without the 7th — including 6/9 chords. Assuming the root is in the bass, there upper extensions will be greater than an octave above the root. Thirteenthths are normally (but not always) voiced above the 7th of the chord.

The 11th of a chord is a compound perfect fourth above the root while the 13th is a compound major sixth above the root. Therefore a raised 11th will be a compound augmented 4th above the root. A flat 13th will be a compound minor 6th above the root.

There are some important differences between the figures (Arabic Numerals) in Figured Bass Notation and those in “Pop Chord” Notation. (First of all, keep in mind that figured bass notation is now a “dead” notation — i.e. it is no longer developing — while pop chord notation is living and developing and so continues to undergo change. That is why there are several different ways to notate some of the chords: it depends on the style and period in which the piece was written.)

In figured bass notation: #5 means to place a sharp in front of the note that is a 5th above the bass. This may or may not be the 5th factor of the chord.

In Pop Chord Notation: (#5) means to *raise* the 5th factor of the chord regardless of the voice in which the root occurs.

Summary of Pop Chord Notation Symbols:

“#” = “+” = raise by a half step (applied to a note).

“b” = “-“ = lower by a half step (applied to a note).

Special abbreviations (not always used)

“-” (as in “D-”) = minor (applied to a chord).

Triangle (as in “Eb[△]”) = M7 (applied to a chord).

Remember: The spelling is *not always accurate* in pop (sometimes not in classical either), especially with tritone substitutions and diminished 7th chords. The goal is to be easily played, not to be analyzed. Use your ear as well as a certain amount of “common sense” from your knowledge of theory and progressions.

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