



Make
Your
C. Harmonies
Sing With

Voicing



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One of the things that makes ensembles like The Canadian Brass so effective is their creativity when arranging the notes in harmonies and chords.

All the creative arts refer to something called the “voice.” It means the individual expression of the creator, and it’s often the hardest quality to define. But it’s the voice that makes a work of art—or an expression of an idea—unique and individual. The music world uses the word *voice* this way, too—almost as a metaphor, in the same way that a writer has a voice or a film director has a voice.

But of course in music there are other meanings for the word *voice*. At the most basic level, *voice* refers to the biological apparatus you use to sing. And so a song arranged for men’s voices means just that—a piece calling for the vocal cords of basses, baritones, and tenors.

Voice can also mean the separate lines or paths of music in a piece, even when played by instruments. For example, a “three-voice fugue” means there are three parts, no matter what type of instrument plays them.

Then there’s the word *voicing*, which has a very specific meaning in music. It means how the notes of a chord are distributed within an instrument or ensemble. *Voicing* isn’t merely the verb meaning a singer making a sound; it describes the process of turning the science of harmony into the art of sound.

VOICING MEANS THAT ALL CHORDS ARE NOT CREATED EQUAL

To understand the most basic application of voicing, consider the C major chord. It’s composed of just three notes, C, E, and G, played simultaneously. You can play middle C on the piano, then the E above (two whole steps away), and then the G (a step and a half above that). It’s easily performed with the thumb, middle and little fingers of the right hand (see Ex. 1a).

But you can add to this C chord without changing the harmony one bit. For example, you could add a bass note (played with your left-hand thumb) an octave below the middle C. That’s a four-note chord (see Ex. 1b). Since you have more fingers available on your left hand, try playing an octave below that, with your little finger playing the octave below your thumb (Ex. 1c). All three of these are C chords, but they are voiced differently. And of course, each sounds different, too; Ex. 1c sounds fuller, heavier, and more substantial.

Now look at Ex. 1d to see a really different voicing for a C chord on the piano (you’ll need two hands plus your nose to play this one!). It may not even be easily heard as a C chord at all. There’s a story about the classical composer Igor Stravinsky—a champion of bold new harmonies and a brilliant orchestrator—carefully playing an odd distribution of the notes C, E, and G on the piano (similar to the one in Ex. 1d) for his composition students. The students looked at each other nervously before one of them finally sputtered, “But maestro... it’s just a C major chord.” “Yes,” replied Stravinsky with glee, “but isn’t it *beautiful*?” The students were

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merely analyzing the harmony. Stravinsky was *hearing* the new and unique voicing.

HARMONY VS. VOICING

Voicing is what you do with the harmony when it comes time to apply a chord to your instrument or ensemble. In this way, harmony is the *what*; voicing is the *how*. If the music tells you to play a C major chord with a melody note of C on top, that leaves a lot of room for interpretation. So let's look at some ways that musicians have learned to apply voicing to various situations.

Closed position. This describes playing all the notes of a chord as close together as possible. It's how most people would play a chord on the piano using just one hand. For example, if someone said, "Play a C7 chord," you would probably play middle C, E, G, and Bb, in ascending order, all within the space of an octave (Ex. 2a).

Open position. This is a general description of chords *not* in closed position. That means you can play any distribution of the notes. So on the piano, an open-position C7 chord might have the C played by the left-hand little finger, an octave below middle C. The G could be played by the left-hand thumb, also below middle C. Then the right hand could play E above middle C and the high Bb above that (skipping the G in between the two, because that note is covered by the left hand, as shown in Ex. 2b). Most chords in music appear in open position—that is, without the restriction that the notes be crammed next to each other as close together as possible. On some instruments, like the guitar and violin, it's difficult or impossible to play even simple chords in closed position.

Chorale style. This is where chords are voiced according to what's easiest to play or sing for the instruments performing the notes. Hymns are an example of chorale style. The voices move linearly, in small intervals, making them easy to sing (see Ex. 2c). Many ensembles play in this popular style, including string quartets and brass quintets, and chamber orchestras.

Keyboard style. Similar to chorale style, but where the bass note is separated from the upper voices. In keyboard style, the upper voices are often played in closed position (within the span of an octave, and with all available chord tones played within the right-hand span), but the bass is often widely separated from the next lowest note (which is the lowest note in the right hand, usually played with the thumb, as shown in 2d).

ORCHESTRAL OVERKILL

Voicing becomes particularly interesting in large ensembles, such as concert bands and orchestras. You've got all these instruments, waiting for something to play, and all you have is a lousy three-note C major chord. How do you go about doling out the notes?

This is one of the great, unanswerable questions regarding voicing. There is no right or wrong way to distribute notes. You know that you can use only C, E, and G, so obviously there's going to be a lot of *doubling* (more than one instrument playing

Example 1

Four treatments of a C major triad: a) closed position; b) four-voice; c) five-voice; d) unusual, unique.

Example 2

Classic voicing approaches to a four-note C7 chord: a) closed position; b) open position; c) chorale style; d) keyboard style.

Example 3

The final, full-orchestra chord from *The William Tell Overture*.

Example 4

A barbershop harmony excerpt from "Lida Rose," from *The Music Man*.

the same pitch). But there are guidelines. For example, whichever note is the melody should go to the high instruments (flutes, trumpets, violins). The low instruments (bassoons, tubas, double basses and cellos) take the root (C) or the fifth (G). You should have more instruments playing roots than fifths in your chord, and you don't want the low instruments to be too heavy or have their low notes too close together.

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A good orchestral voicing looks like a pyramid: the bigger blocks (wide intervals) are on the bottom, and the smaller blocks (narrow, closed-position intervals) are on top. It's similar to the way keyboard-style harmony works. Even by following these guidelines, you still have a lot of room to move, and the very best orchestrators—including Richard Wagner, Gustav Mahler, Maurice Ravel, and Igor Stravinsky—followed these guidelines but introduced inspired touches that turned an exercise into art. Example 3 shows how the notes are distributed in the final E major chord of Rossini's grand orchestral epic, *The William Tell Overture*. Remember, it's just three notes that the entire orchestra has to play—including the percussion!

DOING MORE WITH LESS

Voicing can also be very effective just by playing only a couple of notes of the chord and *implying* a harmony.

Like the orchestration approach, there are guidelines for which notes to drop first (the fifth, followed by the root, etc.) while still preserving the quality of the chord. The Shins, known for their distinctive harmonies, often use just two singers to outline chords. But it's their choice of which two notes to sing that makes them interesting. Listen to "We Will Become Silhouettes" to hear a clever, stripped-down approach to voicing the underlying chords of the backing tracks using just two voices. It has a loose feel, much less structured-sounding than other two-voice harmony singers, like the Everly Brothers and Simon and Garfunkel.

Another example is the rock "power chord." To create a punchier sound, guitarists will often mute the third and emphasize the root and the fifth.

HARMONY GETS A SHAVE AND A HAIRCUT

Contrasting the open, implied style of voicing as exercised by the Shins and jazz pianist McCoy Tyner (who often plays his chords using fourths, not thirds), a tight, highly dense harmony

A Voice By Any Other Name

In music, as in art, the words *voice* and *voicing* are often used in a generic sense. For example, on the piano, voicing refers to the brilliance or mellowness of the different registers, which is often influenced by the hardness of felt on the hammers. On the guitar and bowed-string instruments, you can play a combination of notes in several different positions—down low on the high-pitched skinny strings or up high on the lower-pitched fatter strings. The difference in tone is obvious and used for expressive purposes, but the pitches and harmony are the same no matter which position is used. Voicing to an orchestrator can also mean *tessitura*—a term referring to where the range of notes falls in a part for a given instrument. For example, both a flute and a baritone sax can play middle C. But middle C is the flute's lowest note, so it will sound soft, mellow, and breathy. For the sax, it's in the upper part of its range, so it will sound more intense and brilliant.



Using keyboards and three vocalists lets the rock band Keane create distinct voicings.

is also effective. The vocal group Take 6, for example, uses six singers to produce complex and jazzy chords. And one of the most recognizable and formal approaches to voicing for pop music occurs in *barbershop quartets*, which often use jazz-like harmonies as well. These four-voice ensembles follow a strict set of rules:

1. There are only four voices to produce any chord—even if the harmony calls for five- and six-note chords. The voices are usually closely spaced, except for the bass (similar to keyboard style).
2. The melody is sung by the second-highest voice (called the "lead"). The highest (the tenor) voice sings the harmony note immediately above the lead.
3. The lowest voice (the bass) almost always sings the root or the fifth of the underlying chord.
4. The baritone makes up the missing note of the chord, even if it means singing above the lead (but staying below the tenor).

Barbershop quartets were wildly popular in the 1800s and early 1900s, and evoke a sense of folksy Americana. There's a barbershop quartet in the musical *The Music Man*, and you can usually see them at state fairs and amusement parks. Singing barbershop arrangements is excellent training, especially if you're studying jazz and *voice leading* (the practice of changing chords by moving the separate voices by steps—or the smallest interval possible—to the notes of the new chord). Example 4 shows an excerpt from the barbershop-style song "Lida Rose," from *The Music Man*. Note that the treble clef parts sound an octave lower than written, making the note cluster quite dense. (The parts are written in treble clef for easier reading.)

VOICE ACTIVATED

Voicing is a subtle art. Listen to different ensembles, and identify how they handle chords and the transitions between them. Start by listening for major and minor triads. Then try to determine how many members are participating, and who's playing which notes. It helps to read a score while listening along, but the ear is the best guide of all. **T**