

Section 4.1.2

THIRDS AND MAJOR TRIADS

Prerequisites

This text assumes you understand treble clef, bass clef, staves, note names, enharmonic notes, rhythmic values, time signatures, major and minor scales, half steps, and whole steps. For enharmonic notes, see **Appendix 1** in this volume. You can review (or learn) the other topics for free at LearnMusicTheory.net or in **Volume 1: Music Theory Fundamentals**.

Major thirds Minor thirds

An **interval** is the pitch distance (high-low distance) between two notes. The core intervals for jazz are **whole steps**, **half steps**, **major thirds**, and **minor thirds**. For half steps and whole steps, see **Appendix 1**. A **major third** spans three letter names and four half steps. A **minor third** spans three letter names and three half steps.

MAJOR 3RD = 3 LETTER NAMES...

C=1 D=2 E=3

MAJOR 3RD

MINOR 3RD = 3 LETTER NAMES...

C=1 D=2 Eb=3

MINOR 3RD

...AND 3 HALF STEPS

Visualizing thirds on the keyboard

On the keyboard, **major thirds** are four half steps, or two whole steps. **Minor thirds** are three half steps, or a whole step plus a half step. Always count the starting note as zero when counting half steps for intervals.

C to E = major 3rd	G \flat to B \flat = major 3rd	C to E \flat = minor 3rd	F \sharp to A = min. 3rd
0 2 4	1 3	0 2	1 3

Triads
Major triad

Root, third, fifth

Triads are three-note chords built with a stack of two thirds. A **major triad** uses a major third on the bottom and a minor third on top. Scale steps 1, 3, and 5 in a major scale form a major triad. The bottom note in the stack of thirds is the **root**, the middle note the **third**, and the top note the **fifth**.

MAJOR SCALE STEPS:

1 (2) 3 (4) 5
4 HALF STEPS 3 HALF STEPS
C
ROOT, 3RD, 5TH

All major triads

Play the twelve major triads shown below. The major triads must be memorized. Learning them in groups makes this much easier:

- 1. Feed Cows Grass:** F, C, and G major are all white keys (natural notes). Feed Cows Grass, because cows are very natural.
- 2. BEAD raise third:** Major triads on **B, E, A, or D** (natural or flat) always have a “raised” accidental on the third of the chord. Flats are “raised” to naturals for B flat, E flat, A flat, or D flat chords, and naturals are “raised” to sharps for B, E, A, or D. For B chords, see the next group.
- 3. B Bumps Both:** Major triads on **B or B flat** have “raised” accidentals for **both** the third and the fifth.
- 4. F sharp=black keys:** F sharp is the only major triad with all black keys.

FEED COWS GRASS F C G

BEAD RAISE THIRD Eb Ab Db E A D

B BUMPS BOTH Bb B

F# ALL SHARPS F#