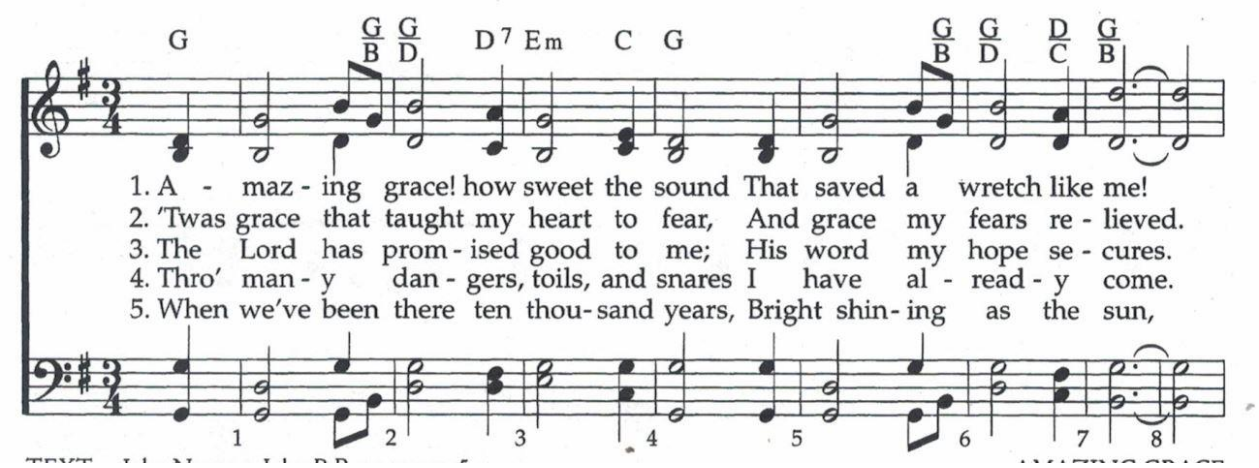
Music Reading for Choral Singers Part 6: Harmony

In part 1, I promised to show you the shape of music. For choral singers, this is called "harmony". Once you know the melody and a little bit of theory, you can pretty well predict what notes the sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses will have. The rules aren't rock solid because music is art, after all. But the basic rules of harmony tell you what to expect.

Let's start with a song everybody knows: Amazing Grace.



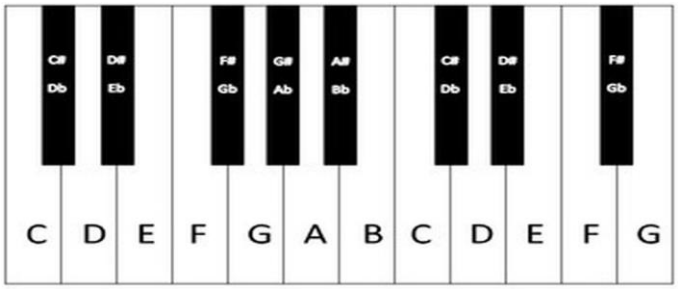
As you know, the top notes (soprano) are the **melody**. If you wanted to whistle "Amazing Grace" those are the notes you would use. The other notes are the **harmony**. Really, the tune would sound pretty thin with just the melody. You need the harmony to fill out the sound, to make it beautiful.

So where do all harmony notes come from? Did somebody just sprinkle little black dots all over the page? Of course not! It turns out there are rules for writing harmony. Yes, composers toss in a couple extras here and there just to make it interesting, but mostly, the harmony part follows rules.

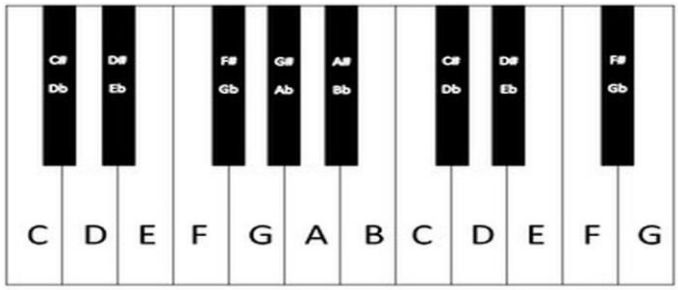
See the letters above the score? Those are **chords**. **Harmony is all about the chords**.

So to understand harmony, you first need to know how to make chords. But before we make chords, we need to learn about **musical intervals**. So we go right back to the piano keyboard. Or a piece of the keyboard in this case.

Fire up your phone / piano / whatever because you have to hear what's coming.



Intervals:



Intervals are the number of steps (e.g. piano keys or musical distance) betwen any two notes.

In Part 5 you learned about half steps and whole steps on the keyboard. A **half step** is just going from one piano key to the next key, whether it's white or black. The technical name for a half step is a **semitone**. Some folks might call it a **minor second** So half step = semitone = minor second. You'll hear all three terms. I think they do it just to make music theory sound like it's difficult. It isn't.

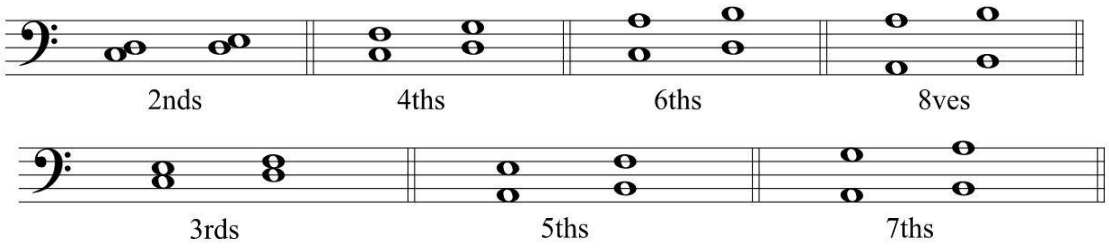
Moving two semitones (piano keys) apart is a **full step**. And yes, a full step might also be called a **whole tone**, or a **major second**.

Move three semitones and you get a **minor third**. Move four steps and it's a **major third**.

Move five steps and it's a **perfect fourth**. Move six steps and it's a **diminished fifth**. What??? Hey, I don't make the rules; I just report them, okay?

Move seven steps to get a **perfect fifth**. And so on and so on ... Confused? Join the club. I'm including these names because you will hear the director mention them during rehearsals. Check Wikipedia "interval (music)" for way more details than you would ever need to know.

It might make more sense if you look at where the notes are printed on the musical staff. Seconds are the next note on the staff. Thirds are the third note from where you started, and so forth. Note that "8ves" means "octaves".



Aha. Now we're getting to the parts that are important for a singer to know. And that would be **chords.**

Fire up the keyboard and play a half step. Just start with any key and then play the key right next to it. How does it sound? Pretty bad.

Play a whole step. Doesn't sound great.

People singing a half step or a whole step apart at the same time would sound awful.

Now try this: Play any note, then count up 4 keys and play that note. For example, this might be C and E, or D and F#, F and A, and so forth. Okay, that sounds pretty good. This is because you played a **major third**.

Now instead of counting up 4 keys, only count up 3 keys. For example, C and D#, or D and F. That sounds pretty good, too. Kind of creepy but not bad. This is called a **minor third**.

Play a perfect fourth (that's five steps). Not bad. It's the first two notes of "Here Comes The Bride". And a perfect fifth (seven steps) is "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star".

Go for three notes: play a major third and a perfect fifth. That's 4 steps and 7 steps from the first note. For example, C, E, and G. **WOW!** That sounds pretty good! It sounds good because you just played a major chord. That was **C Major**, in fact.

But now play a minor third and a perfect fifth. That's 3 steps and 7 steps from the beginning note. For example, C, E flat, and G. Pretty good. That's **C Minor**.

Now play D, F#, and A (4 steps and 7 steps). That would be **D Major**. To play **D minor** ... you guessed it: Go 3 steps and 4 more steps from the start: D, F, and A.

Here's the golden rule of triad chords:

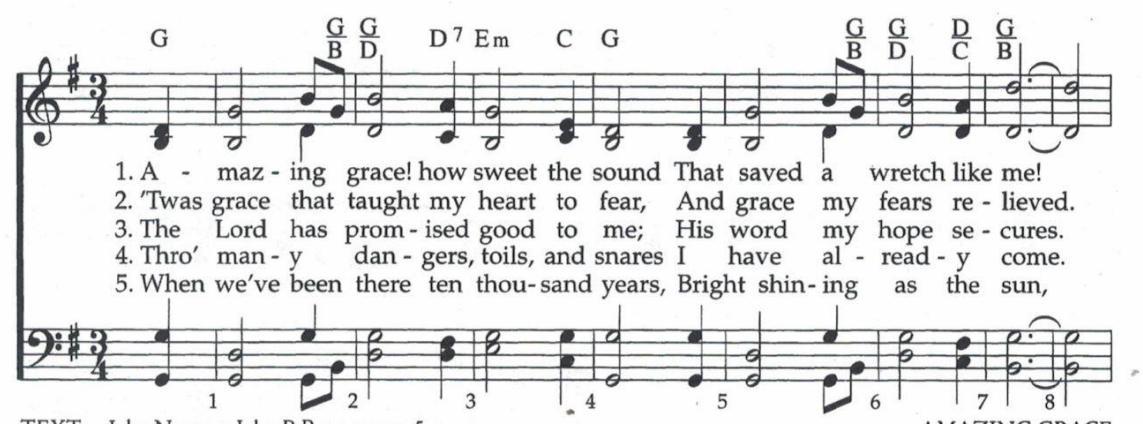
- To make a **major chord**, start with any key, go up 4 steps and then 3 steps more. In other words, a major third followed by a perfect fifth.
- To make a **minor chord**, start with any key, go up 3 steps, then 4 more steps. In other words, a minor third followed by a perfect fifth.

This always works, but you don't have to play the notes in the same sequence. For example, a C Major chord is made of C, E, and G. But **you can use ANY C, E, or G ANYWHERE on the piano keyboard**. In other words;

- you could have the basses sing a low C, the altos could sing a middle E (like E5), and the sopranos sing a high G.
- Or you have basses sing low G, sopranos a high E, and altos a middle C.
- Or any other combination that strikes your fancy, as long as there is a C, an E, and a G somewhere.

This is the basis of voice leading choral harmony. As long as you include all the right note names, you can give the notes to anybody in the chorus.

Let's go back to "Amazing Grace" on the next page.



Dig out your Grand Staff diagram from Part 1 and look at the four notes in the first measure. Starting with the basses and moving up, they are: G2, G3, B4, and D4. If you play them on the keyboard and keep them in the same octave, you start with G, then go up 4 keys to B, and then 3 more steps to D. WOW! That's a **G Major** chord! With one extra G note.

Hmm. There's a capital G printed right above those notes. **Do ya think** that might be a clue as to what the chord is?????

Okay, so I told you that a triad chord has 3 notes. But our singers are in 4 sections (Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass). So ... obviously it's okay to use some of those notes twice as long as they are notes in the chord.

But wait. The next four notes don't have a chord name printed above them. What's up with that? Okay, look at the note names: G, D, B, and G. Hah. It's just the same old G Major chord, only in a different order.

In fact, all the notes for the words "a - maz - ing grace" are all G Major chord notes, just rearranged.

This is where they get almost all your notes in the music you will sing. The arranger just starts with the chord, then shuffles the notes between Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. Then a few extra notes get tossed in here and there just to make the music sound more artistic.

Okay, what about the chord for "how"? It's called a D7. It has D, F#, and A to make D Major, but it also has a C note stuck in there. It's cool. I just never told you about 7th chords. Or a dozen other kinds of chords. You can learn them later. Not important right now.

In terms of BASIC music theory, all you really need to know is major chords, minor chords, and that **when all four parts of the chorus sing together, we are simply singing chords**.