

Chord Construction

There is a relationship between keys and chords. Chords are made using the notes of the key you are playing in and each start on a specific note of that key. The actual notes will change depending on the key but the position within the note sequence of the key remains constant no matter what key you are using. It's the same with any instrument. Notice the roman numerals here as they are often used in music theory and avoid confusion with the normal numbers. We will use the key of D as an example of how to work out the actual notes of the chords for the key of D. First write out the notes in order as in the first line below, then write out the other 2 lines as shown.

D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#	D
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii	I
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	1

For any of the other keys all that will be different is the top row of note letters. Notice the last note is the same as the first as the note sequence wraps around on the ends. If you don't know the notes of a key just, refer to your tuning chart for the actual note names. Notice that some of the roman numerals are upper case and some are lower case. The upper case ones are major chords and the others are minor chords.

Now lets find the actual notes used in the key of D that make up these 3 note chords. First is the 1 chord, often called the root chord. Look at the little table above and notice the roman numerals I in the middle row. That's where this chord starts. From above, the chord is every other note across a 5 note spread starting with the note directly above the 1, so starting at D we get the 3 notes D F# and A. Next is the 4 or IV chord. Doing exactly as we did for the root chord but starting above the IV is a G so the chord is G B and D. The 5 or V key starts with the letter above the V. That's A so the chord is A C# and E. Chords are normally played from the low note to the high note so that E in the V chord should come from the octave above the one where the root chord was played. The 6th or vi chord starts above the vi. In this case its B D E. The last 2 notes should normally come from the next higher octave also. As the chords go up in number the overall sound of them should do the same even though by definition a chord is any of the 3 notes from any octave.

Notice that some of the roman numerals are upper case and some are lower case. The upper case ones are major chords. Therefore the 1, 4, and 5 ones will normally start on a marker. The 6 one is a minor so it will normally start on the course above a marker. Most music uses only 3 or 4 of these chords, usually called the 1 (I) or root chord, the 4 (IV) chord, the 5 (V) chord. Sometimes the 2 (ii) and the 6 (vi) chord will be used also.

Major and minor chords work exactly the same. That fact makes finding the starting points far easier. Its not even necessary to remember any of this about chords on a hammer dulcimer as its all mapped out right in front of you on the hammer dulcimer once you learn how to "read" it.

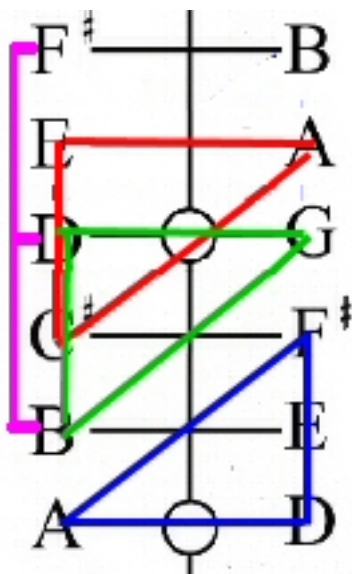
I recommend you do memorize this though as its invaluable knowledge if you happen to be working with other players who don't know chord theory or playing some other instrument.

This is extracted from part of *Music Theory For The Hammer Dulcimer* at <http://dulcimers.us/Theory.htm>. This file also includes the basics of reading sheet music and music theory. Well worth a read if you want to understand how to apply ANY music theory book to a hammer dulcimer.

The “No Thinking Required” way to play chords

The only requirements to do chords on a hammer dulcimer are the ability to hear the chord changes, knowing what key the song is in, and memorizing the small pattern below. You do not even need to know the actual notes of a chord or the chord name either. In addition you don't even have to know the location of any note on the dulcimer other than the marker notes!

A chord is just 3 notes in a 5 note spread starting on some note. Its actually the 1st, 3rd, and 5th note starting on some specific note. The 8 notes in a key are laid out with the low 4 to the right of a bridge and the high 4 to the left. This is the normal way of thinking about it, BUT notice that to the right going straight up 6 courses gives the lower 6 with the last 2 in the normal position. Look at the drawing below and ignore the colored part for a minute. This starts on the D marker. Now starting at the D, play that D, skip a course, the E, and play F sharp, skip the next course up, the G, and play the A. Notice you skipped EVERY OTHER course or note! That's the 1 3 5 note pattern. Normally you would have picked up the lower left A if the chord was done using the triangle pattern. Going straight up the right makes the every other note thing clearer and you don't even have to know the notes either, just the 1 3 5 pattern.



If you look closely at the drawing again and notice that the lower A and B to the left of the D marker repeat ABOVE the G marker to the right. This pattern of duplicated notes in relation to the markers is the same across most of the dulcimer. Now look at the colored triangles. The blue one is the normal way to do a chord. The lower right first, the upper right second and the one to the left of the starting marker last. That gives the notes in the normal low to high sequence.

Now look at the green one. Its also a triangle but in a different way. The notes are still in a 1 3 5 pattern BUT that middle B is picked up on the left of the bridge instead of the normal 2 up from the G position. SAME exact note but in a different position taking advantage of the duplicated notes.

Here is how this little pattern works. From the chord discussion on the other side the root or 1 chord for the key of D is D F sharp and A. Look at the points of the blue triangle (consider the corner a point) and they're on the required notes. The 4 chord played normally would start at the marker ABOVE the key marker using that blue pattern. Here it is the green triangle. Either way works, as it's the SAME notes. As this chord starts on a marker, it's a major chord.

The 5 chord is the 3 notes starting on the marker BELOW the key marker using that blue triangle pattern, again another major chord. Played below the key marker this chord will actually sound lower than it should. Playing it using the red triangle puts it in the correct tonal position as normally going up in chords should give a higher pitch sound. The pink pattern is the 6 chord. In the key of D the 2 chord starts with the E. Just shift that blue triangle up one course and you have it. As proof of this look at the other side for the actual notes of the chords in D and compare them with the positions in the drawing.

Now here is the real beauty of the above pattern, it WORKS IN ANY KEY starting on the marker for that key! All that changes is just the actual notes used. The pattern starting on the key marker DOES NOT CHANGE! The key marker is the lower right marker in the pattern. If you think in terms of chord numbers instead of names, then it becomes easy to play any song you know in one key in any other key. You don't have to think anything like “this is in D so the first chord is a D. That's D F sharp and A then hunt down the notes”. It also keeps movement down to a tight pattern of 6 courses and both sides of the bridge. It also works between the 2 bridges too.

There are other ways to do chords so don't think this is the only way. Also don't use this as an excuse to not learn where all the notes are either. You will learn them as you continue playing. Use this as a way to actually start playing fast and have some fun while learning.....