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Harmonic Ear Training

Lesson 5:
Inversions of the I Triad

This lesson is excerpted from an online course. While the navigation links on each page are not active, all of the multimedia interactions are. Have fun!

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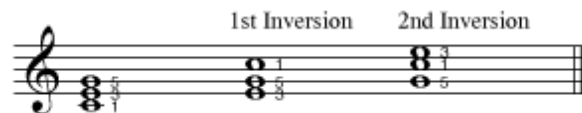
Inversions of the I Triad



Up to this point, the root of the chord has always been present in the bass line. If this were always the case in the musical “real world,” our chord progression work would simply be to recognize the bass line. For example, if Mi is the bass note, I might then assume that the chord is III- or III-7. However, if Mi is in the bass, it’s possible that the chord is an inversion of the I chord. Let’s investigate.

What is an inversion?

An inversion is the name given to any chord whose root is not the bass note. Here are the inversions of the C major triad:



Now let’s explore inversions in the “friendly” key of C.

Hearing first inversion with the I Chord

First inversion occurs when the third of the triad is in the bass.

Especially now that we’ve trained our ears to identify a chord by listening for the bass note, it can be tricky to distinguish the III- or III-7 chord from the first inversion chord, I/3. Both have Mi in the bass.

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Inversions of the I Triad



Listen to these two chords: III-7 and I/3. Look at the chords and note that they have several notes in common.

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is in treble clef and contains the notes Sol, Re, and Ti. The bottom staff is in bass clef and contains the notes Mi. The notes Sol and Mi are common to both chords. The chords are labeled III-7 and I/3 below the staves.

Click the image above to listen.

When you hear these chords, how do you know if the above sounds are the root position III- or III-7, or the first inversion of the I triad, I/3? Follow these steps.

1. Does the chord sound major or minor?
2. If you're not confident of your answer to step 1, use the horizontal approach, and listen for what notes of the key are present. If you hear Do of the key, then you have the inversion of the I triad. Do can be considered the special "guide tone" to listen for in the case of I/3.
3. Do would clash with the sound of the III-7 sound. Listen.

Note: Are you a more advanced player? If so, you can also listen for the tensions. If you know what tensions are allowed on different chord types, this would also be helpful information. For example, tension b13 (C) would not be allowed on a minor 7th chord (E-7).

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Inversions of the I Triad



Hearing Second Inversion with the I Chord

Second inversion occurs when the fifth is in the bass, like this:

The I/5 chord shares one tone in common with the V triad. Making it more complicated, both the I/5 and the V are major triads and both have 5 (Sol) in the bass.



How can you easily distinguish the second inversion I chord from the V triad?

Well, it's a bit more challenging to distinguish the second inversion of the I triad, I/5, from the V triad in root position, because both triads have the overall sound of major. Taking the horizontal approach here might help. Follow these steps:

Listen for Do of the key. Do would suggest the I triad, where Ti of the key would tell us the triad is V.

Inversions will give us the opportunity to put our horizontal approach to good use. You'll also be getting a good workout with the translation process, converting solfege in the key to what it means on the individual chord.

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