

# Fundamentals of Vocal Harmony

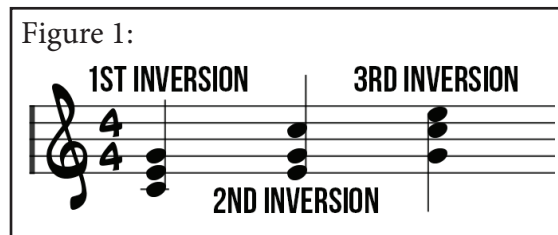
## A Basic Look at Building Chords for Vocal Harmony

Vocal harmonies can be a bit mysterious until the basics of music theory are understood. This could be because so many can sing harmonies “by ear”, which can be a great tool to have. In addition, the terminology is not standard, so terms are often used without understanding what is really being said. With that in mind, let’s dive into basic vocal harmony.

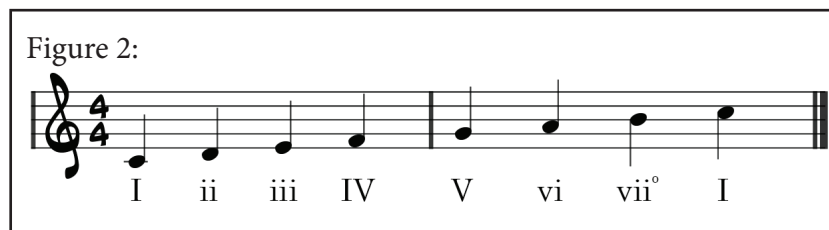
### Chords: The building blocks of harmony

In order to grasp vocal harmony, you have to understand how chords work.

Essentially, good vocal harmony is achieved when a chord is sung. A chord is made up of 3 notes. For example: a C major chord is C-E-G. You can play those three notes in any order, and it is still a C major chord. When the order in which those notes are played is changed, we call those inversions. There are 3 basic inversions for a C chord. For example, in C major the 3 inversions would be 1st inversion: C-E-G, 2nd inversion: E-G-C, and 3rd inversion: G-C-E. (see Figure 1).



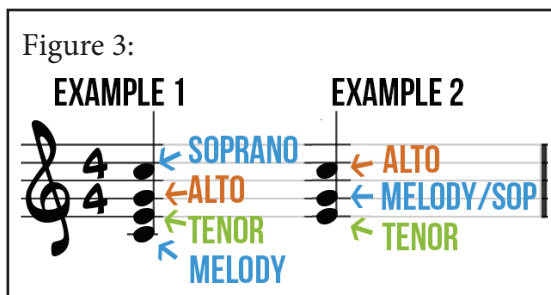
You may have learned that a chord is made up of the “1st”, “3rd”, and the “5th”. This is true when you are speaking of scales (see Figure 2). However, we also use similar terminology for intervals. An interval is the distance between two notes. If you refer to Figure 1, the interval between the C and E in the 1st inversion is a major 3rd. However, the interval between the C and the E in the 2nd inversion is now a minor 6th.



So, if you were to ask, “What is the 3rd of a C major chord?,” the answer is E natural because it is the 3rd note in a C major scale (see Figure 2). Things can get confusing if you try to use the interval terminology when speaking of the notes in a chord. For example, you may say, “I sing the 3rds”, meaning you sing the note above the melody. However, the 3rd in the chord is not always the 3rd above the melody. In the key of C major, your melody may actually be the 3rd, as in the case of the 2nd inversion example (Figure 1).

### How do you build vocal harmony?

First, establish where your melody falls in vocal range. You may be singing with a male lead vocal whose range is around middle C. In this scenario it would be possible to put the tenor position above the melody, the alto above the tenor (and the soprano doubling the melody an 8<sup>va</sup> higher than the lead). However, if your lead vocal, (either male or female) is singing in the range around F above middle C then it would be better to keep your tenor below the melody and your alto above the melody.



Once this is established, simply fill the chord out. So, in Example 1 of Figure 3 the melody is on the bottom. If your melody is a C, then the tenor would be on an E and the alto would be on a G (above middle C).

However, if the melody is being sung in a higher range you would fill the chord out slightly differently. As in Example 2, if the melody were a G (above middle C), the tenor would sing an E below the melody while the alto would sing the C above the melody. In this case the soprano would be out of their normal range to sing melody, so they would double the melody in the same  $8^{\text{va}}$  as the leader.

**PLEASE NOTE:**

Thus far we have been using basic harmony examples -- when the melody falls on a note within the chord. Often, the melody will not land on one of the notes from a chord. When this occurs there are many options, but they are more advanced and we will not get into them here. I will say this, it's OK to follow the melody outside of the notes in the chord for brief moments, but whenever possible it's best to stay within the notes of the chord. Otherwise, the notes in your vocal chord could clash with the notes the instruments are playing.

In addition, the "rules" for harmony need to be a bit stricter when you have multiple people singing harmony. For example, the tenors sing a tenor line, the altos sing an alto line and the 2 shouldn't cross. However, if you only have 2 vocals (melody and harmony), the person singing harmony could sing any note in the chord without the normal concern for singing another persons part and could easily switch between tenor and alto.