

Chord Spelling Standardization

By Jerry Tachoir

While attending Berklee College of Music from 1973 – 76, there was a campaign underway to standardize the spelling of chords. I became aware of this need while writing charts for classes that contained several international students.

I realized very early that the European symbol for the number 7 (~~7~~), which I was using to represent Major 7, was played as a dominant 7 by the European students; totally unacceptable. Several others were using the letter M and m to represent major and minor. The problem with this is that it was difficult to determine intent until you actually saw another chord to compare the size of the M's. With less than perfect manuscript it was sometimes very difficult to see a difference between a capital M representing Major and a small letter m representing minor, especially when sight-reading.

A standardization is necessary to allow musicians from all parts of the US, Canada, Europe and the world to understand a common chord language.

Here is my attempt at standardization:

Major 7th chords - CMaj7

There is no question as to what this chord is.



Minor 7th chords – C-7

This dash is quicker and more obvious than using a small lowercase m, which as stated above isn't apparent until you can compare to an uppercase M.

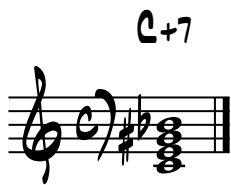


Diminished 7th chords – Cdim7

Again, there is no question as to what this chord is to be. The little zero that some use, tends to get misplaced and is hard to see at times. Dim 7 is the answer.



Augmented 7th chords – C+7
The + sign means #5 (augmented)



Minor 7th b5 – C-7b5
This really makes this chord clear. Some refer to it as half diminished and use the zero sign with a line through it, but this symbol is very obvious.



Dominant 7 – C7
Very simple, and very easy to understand.



Here are some examples that we have to deal with when sight reading music

Cm7 – In this case I can only guess that the intent is minor but not quite sure until I see an example of a major chord to compare to – CM7. Again, with less than perfect

handwriting, the sizes of these m's can get hard to distinguish. C-7 is clearly Cminor 7 and CMaj7 is obviously C Major 7.

C°7 – C diminished 7 can be a bit of a challenge due to the placement of the little circle and if it actually looks like a circle or from a distance a dash which could mean minor, or even a 6 if not complete closed as a complete circle. However, Cdim7 is obvious, clear, without question. Let's use this.

Some will say, well, once you hear the chord you will know whether it is right or wrong, but in a situation where we might not know the tune and are sight reading, our conscious mind is busy reading and looking ahead in the music for the next train wreck and by the time we hear it or analyze it, It's probably too late. We really need to strive for clarity and eliminate as much confusion as possible. Remember, other musicians might not have the same harmonic training or developed ears as others and this could make for a rather nasty sound, not what music is to be.

I know we all have our shortcuts and habits in writing music, however we need to realize the universality of music and our intent to create music that can be performed by anybody and sound similar to the original intent. This standardization of chord symbols is a great start to accomplish this universality, a so-called literacy of musical writing.