

Major and Minor 11 Chords on Guitar

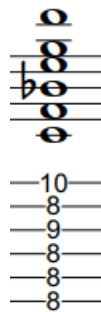
by Dennis Winge

Part I: The Major 11 chord

When you see a chord such as C11, the notes intervals to be played are the root, major 3rd, 5th, flat 7th, 9th, and 11th. In the key of C that's c e g bb d f. On a keyboard or piano those may be easy enough to play, but on guitar some decisions need to be made.

First of all, it's nearly impossible to play the notes in the order presented above, but that is nothing new to guitar. After all, many chords are played with the notes out of their natural sequence in order to make the fingering much easier. For example an open D chord, whose notes are d, f#, a, are played typically on the top 4 strings in the order d, a, d, f# (from 4th to 1st strings.) This open chord is thus spelled 1, 5, 1, 3 instead of 1, 3, 5.

That is straightforward enough for a chord with 3 notes, but what about a chord with 6 notes such as the C11? In order to play them all you'd have to use all six strings in a voicing like this:



There are several problems with this voicing: a) you can only play it in 1 position per key b) the ninth is on top, thus highlighting that rather than the 11th, and most importantly c) having all fourths on the lower strings makes it sound a bit muddy.

To solve these, most guitarists simply leave some notes out, and play only the 'choice' notes of not only the 11 chord but any more complicated chord. So as we discuss possibilities for the 11 chord, realize the process will be the same for more complex chords which is:

1. Understand the intervals suggested by the chord
2. Assess the context in which the chord is being played
3. Choose a voicing that is accessible, fits in the context, and highlights the 'choice' voices for that chord

Since we have already done step 1 above, we are now going to talk about the context. Most of the time if you are playing the C11 chord in a band, the bass player will be holding down the c note, at least for the first beat or two of that chord's duration, and even if he or she plays other notes, the c will be prominent. So that frees you up to play the other notes of the chord. In a band setting, the root is the first thing to go! This can be a little counter-intuitive at first, but let's look deeper.

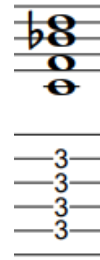
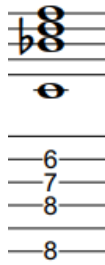
The remaining notes are now e g bb d f. Do you see other chords in those notes? How about Em7b5 = e g bb d. This would not be an ideal choice because it would make the overall chord sound like C9, a totally different sound than C11. Since you're likely going to have to choose, go for the f (the 4th note of the key of C) rather than the e (the 3rd).

[Side note: there is always a factor of 7 between an extension note (9, 11, 13) and its position in the scale (2, 4, 6). This is because two c notes an octave apart are 7 notes away from each other. When you have 3 objects in a row, and someone asks you how many objects away number 3 is from number 1, you would say "two." In other words you don't start counting at number one, you start counting when you move from number 1 to number 2, and you'd only count to two even though there are 3 objects. Similarly, when you count up a C major scale to get to the next c you start counting at d, not the first c. Thus the octave c (note 8 in the scale) is 7 notes away; the d note (9th in the scale) is 7 notes away from the lower d (the 2nd), the f is 7 notes away (i.e. the 11th = the 4th) and the a note is, you guessed it, 7 notes away (i.e. the 13th is the same as the 6th).]

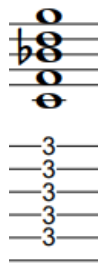
Going back to our C11, you could just take a C7 chord and change all the e notes to f's, which would give you a C7sus, such as:

The unfortunate part of this choice is that you have two g's and no d's. The ninths of the chord (d) is more colorful than the 5th any of the week. In fact, after the root, the 5th is the next interval to go! It doesn't add much character to a chord, so let's get rid of the g and now we are left with bb d f.

You could treat the C11 chord therefore as Bb/C, such as:



These would both be acceptable C11 voicings, and, even though we were just saying that the 5th can be eliminated, it would be very easy to add the g note on top of the voicing in the left-hand diagram above, like this:



Notice that the notes of the above voicing are (apart from the c root) g bb d f. These are the same notes as Gm7. Therefore, you can very successfully play a Vminor7 chord for any 11 chord when you don't have to hold down the root. In other words, for A11, play Em7; for E11, play Bm7. [A word of caution so you don't get dirty looks from your bass player: higher string sets are better if you know voicings on those sets of strings. If you don't, at least be gentle instead of hammering out barre chords whose roots are on the 5th or 6th strings.]

Notice also that the notes here in this latest voicing for C11 are c f bb d and g, which is the same as C9 with the e moved to f, so you may see this voicing written as C9sus. So from now on, be aware that C11, C9sus, Gm7/C, Bb/C, C7sus all mean similar things.

You may also find that in a voicing of Gm7 such as the one to the left below where you have two d's, you can lower one of them to play c, such as the one on the right, which now gives you every note you need except the e (which is not a big deal to leave out in this case because the f is more essential to the sound of C11 than the e.) In general, the 3rd, 7th and extensions are the 'choicest' notes for any chord but in this case we'll choose the f as the suspended 3rd of the chord since C11 is a kind of sus chord as we have already seen.

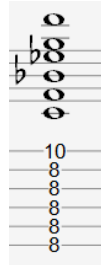
The one combination we have left out so far is the notes e bb d f, which could be called Bbadd#11/C. Try different possibilities and you may get some interesting voicings, such as the one on the left below. When experimenting, make sure you sing a low C or have some kind of drone of the root C against which to hear the chord. However, not all the voicings will sound good, such the one on the right.

Is your head spinning yet? For now, if you want to keep it simple, below are the most common voicings. I could have just shown you them right away, but *thinking through the process* will not just give you a fish, but teach you how to fish, so that your chord vocabulary can grow for life.

Part II: The Minor 11 chord

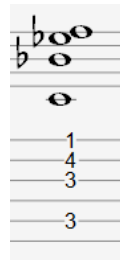
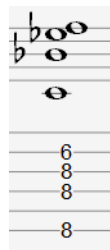
The chord Cm11 consists of the notes c eb g bb d f. These are the 1, b3, 5, b7, 9 and 11 of C. These 6 notes may be easy enough to play on piano, but guitarists have some decisions to make about which notes to play and which notes to leave out.

You could play all 6 notes as in:



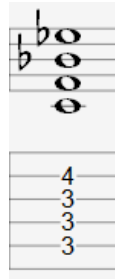
This might sound pretty but it's a bit limiting to only have one voicing for a chord. If you were nowhere near the 8th fret when that chord came up, you'd have to stop what you were doing in whatever position you were in, go play that chord, and then come back to where you were again.

An easy way to voice the minor 11 chord is by adding the 4th note of the scale (which is the same as the 11th), in this case f, to a Cm7 where the 5th has been removed (because it's not generally a particularly colorful interval and can be left out):



If you only memorize these two voicings, you'll be prepared for min11 chords whenever they show up. But if you want to dig deeper into a process that will serve you to be able to dissect and make decisions about voicings for lots of different chords for the rest of your life, read on.

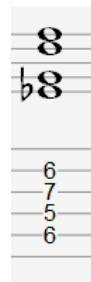
Notice in the above voicings, the f note, the 11th, is as far away from the root, C, as possible. You can play the f in a lower octave such as the following two diagrams, but putting the 11th on top highlights it more and is potentially a little less muddy than these:



Exploring Cm11 further, if you just play C7sus that would give c, f, g, bb which would be ok except that it omits the important 3rd of the chord. You could play Bb/C which would yield c d f bb, which again omits the 3rd. You could play Gm7/C which yields c d f g bb and thus has the same problem.

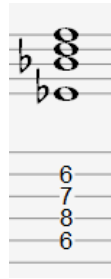
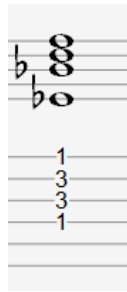
Let's assume for now that the root is going to be played by a bass player. (If there is no bass player and you need to hold down the C yourself, you'll be limited to the voicings above.) Apart from the C root, the Cm11 leaves us the notes eb g bb d f.

The first 4 of these is the same as an Ebmaj7 chord. So when Cm11 comes up, can you play Ebmaj7? Yes, except that the actual 11th (f) is left out. If you add it back in you get Ebmaj9. Voicings for this could be:



(Make sure to sing or have a drone of a C note so you can hear the overall minor effect of the chords.) The above are not particularly easy to play, they are kind of dense, and I had to leave the high bb off of the one to the right because it's too difficult to grab, so these can work but there are more options.

Suppose we move the g of the Ebmaj7, (which as we pointed out is the 5th of the Cm11 and the 5th is not a very colorful interval) to f, the 11th, perhaps the most colorful note in the whole voicing. This would yield eb f bb d. Another way of stating this is Ebmaj7sus2, or even simpler, Bb/Eb, and the voicings could look like:



So now you have some possibilities for any m11 chord. Again, the second and third ones presented in Part II above are probably the most common voicings, but now that you understand the method for creating voicings, be creative! Come up with ones you like, and keep a log of them in a notebook. Beyond that, you now understand the process of dissecting a chord into its intervals and making decisions based on sound & accessibility. Try the process with other more complex chords you see.