
MUSIC THEORY FOR MUSICAL THEATRE

John Bell and Steven R. Chicurel



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Introduction

At its most basic level, song literature represents a marriage—a lamination, if you will—of text and music. The combination of these two modes of expression creates a language that is unique and powerful.

Tools for understanding and then interpreting *any* language are diverse. Those for song literature come from the worlds of theatre and music. A composer writes for the theatre the way a playwright writes for the theatre, except the composer uses *musical* language rather than *literal* language. The goal is the same: to capture the essence of character and situation. Just as the playwright uses letters for the theatre, the composer uses tones. The tones form chords (words), musical phrases (sentences), and musical sections (paragraphs). In the same way that a playwright builds dramatic interest through the use of rising action and *dénouement*, a composer uses the tools of dissonance and consonance to transport the listener on a musical journey.

Early methods of musical theatre acting training espoused the notion that singing actors should approach a song as if it were a monologue. Singers were encouraged to speak the text without music and then investigate the lyrics' naturalistic qualities. Then the student was directed to add the music gradually, first as underscoring, and finally return to sung delivery. This technique, while valuable, perpetuates the dangerous assumption that the lyric of a song is the most important component of the song's dramatic expression, and places little or no emphasis on the composer's art.

This book addresses the role and value of music as a contributor to the dramatic *gestalt*, particularly in the musical theatre canon. Currently there is a dearth of literature that focuses on the tools the composer uses to complete the union of spoken word and music.

This book, designed to introduce the musical theatre practitioner to a new paradigm for musical theatre study, has three parts. [Part 1](#) features elements of music theory that are basic for practical application to musical theatre songs. [Part 2](#) contains examples from the musical theatre repertoire that demonstrate the lamination of music and text analysis. A supplementary section, [Part 3](#), provides the educator and the student with practical drills in a workbook format.

It is important to note this book is intended *not just* for actors, singers, and dancers. In fact, based upon the authors' personal experiences using this model for song analysis, this book will be of great value to stage managers, designers, directors, choreographers, and musical directors. The authors believe the result can be a shared and specific working vocabulary that enhances the efficiency of the process (design and production meetings, rehearsal, etc.) and enriches the product (performance).

Most professional musical theatre training programs require that students study music theory. The content of such training, however, varies widely in both depth and rigor. Now that the number of musical theatre training programs has increased, so too has an awareness of the specific educational and skill needs of their students.

The time has come to ask a series of questions. How do musical theatre artists differ from traditional musical and theatre artists? Do the specific, day-to-day tasks in which the musical theatre artists engage require the full complement of music theory training? If not, what should be included? Is there a more logical way to sequence the information to reveal its direct application to the art form?

Some musical theatre students begin their university program of study with less music

preparation than drama or dance training. As such, they find themselves overwhelmed and demoralized as they try to keep pace with their more musically sophisticated peers. This book approaches some of these challenges from the point of view that, while musical theatre artists *may* need the full complement of traditional music theory instruction, a course of study that would apply the information more directly to the art form will better serve the actor, singer, and dancer as well as directors, choreographers, stage managers, and designers.

What do musical theatre artists need, musically? Lawrence Thelan's book *The Show Make* reveals, through a series of interviews with some of the contemporary musical theatre's most prolific directors, that, for many, the ability to read music is not considered a key skill for success in the profession. Additionally, there are other musical theatre practitioners who would also assert the same opinion. After all, that's what the musical director is for, right?

In the authors' experiences, a basic command of musical language and its primary components *is* an essential "survival skill." The ability to read and analyze melody, harmony, and rhythm allows musical theatre artists to explore the composer's contribution to character and plot development. It also allows directors and musical directors to discuss, as partners, musical needs regarding introductions, interludes, and transitional music. It assists actors in preparing excerpts for auditions. It enables choreographers to look at a score and recognize nuances or punctuations that they may want to capture visually. One of the potential and perhaps unexpected values of this text lies in its application to the training of stage managers, who must converse with other musical theatre artists. Stage managers will also benefit from the ability to understand musical language in order to facilitate calling musically specific cues. In short, the musical theatre artist is working in a theatrical form that is, after all, musical. Why would he or she *not* want to speak the language?

Music contains three basic components. *Melody* gives music its voice and shape, *harmony* gives music its aesthetic color or mood, and *rhythm* gives music its movement. These components combine to create the universality that allows music to speak to all people regardless of time or place. Furthermore, when music is combined with words, the dramatic potential intensifies.

The authors approach this text with the assumption that the reader possesses a basic understanding of reading a musical staff, a knowledge base equivalent to an elementary-level course in music theory. Therefore, this book does not provide orientation to note names, clef, and other rudiments of printed music. In a classroom setting, this text can be useful in the study of musical theatre performance and musical theatre script and score analysis. This book will enhance the understanding of any teacher, student, or enthusiast who has an interest in musical theatre literature.

While it would be helpful to be able to play the musical examples on piano, it is not essential. The authors encourage the reader to listen to recordings of the songs from which the examples are taken.

Additionally, the authors believe that the study of music theory need not be intimidating. Armed with a few basic principles of melody, harmony, and rhythm, the musical theatre artist will be successful in creating, "page-to-stage," the world that not only the playwright but also the composer and lyricist have imagined.

It is the authors' hope that this book will prove effective both in independent study and classroom settings.

Rudiments of Music

Melody

Melody refers to the succession of individual pitches used to express musical contour and shape. These pitches have letter names, A to G, and appear on the keyboard below (figure 1.1).

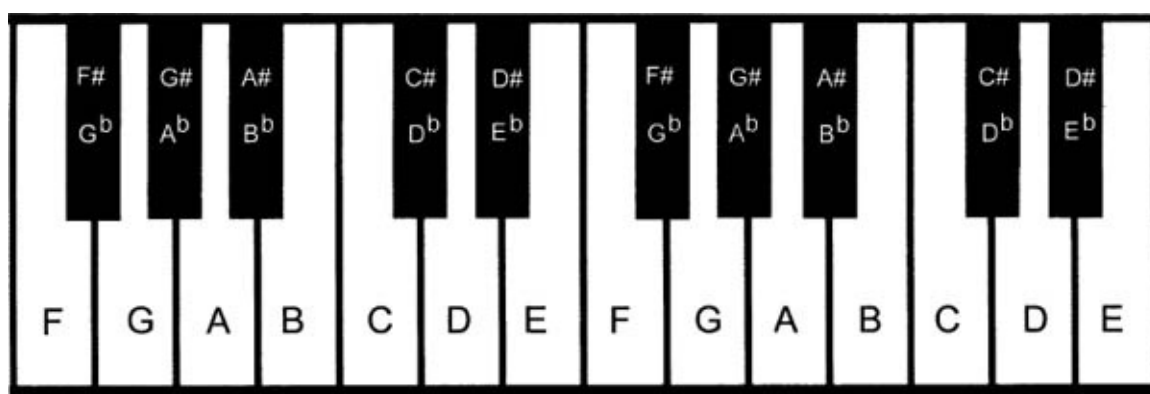


Figure 1.1. Keyboard with pitch names

The distance between any two adjacent keys is a semitone (ST), commonly referred to as a half step. For example, E to F and F to F# is a semitone (figure 1.2). Two adjacent semitones create a whole tone (WT), also known as a whole step. For example, G to A is a whole tone (figure 1.3).

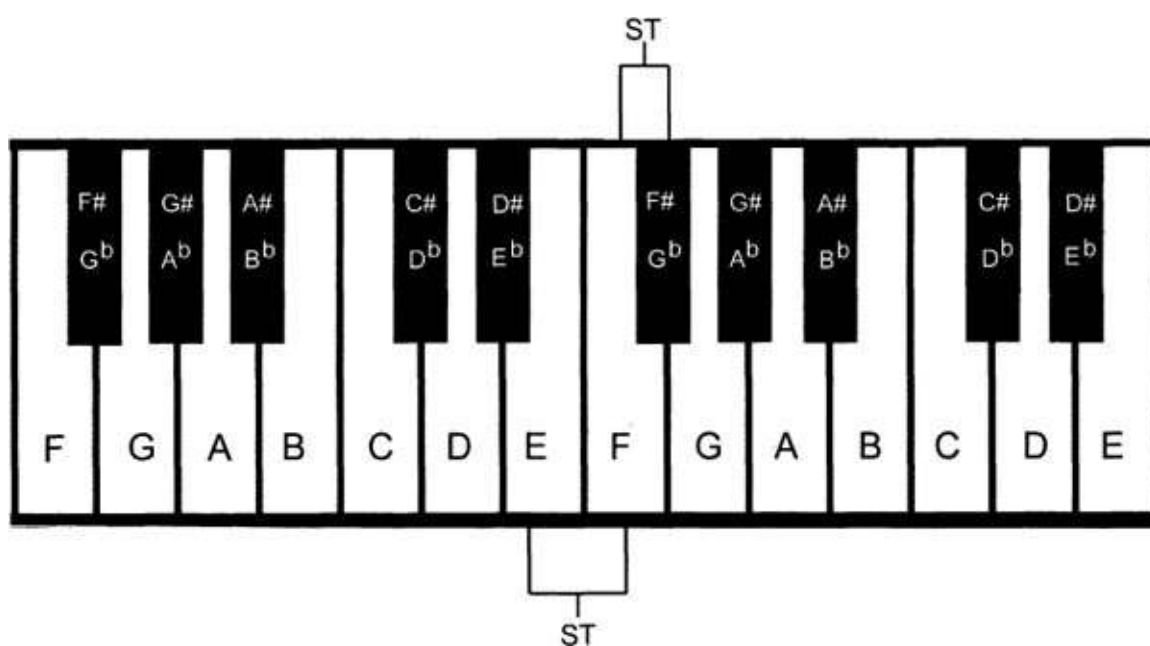


Figure 1.2. Semitones

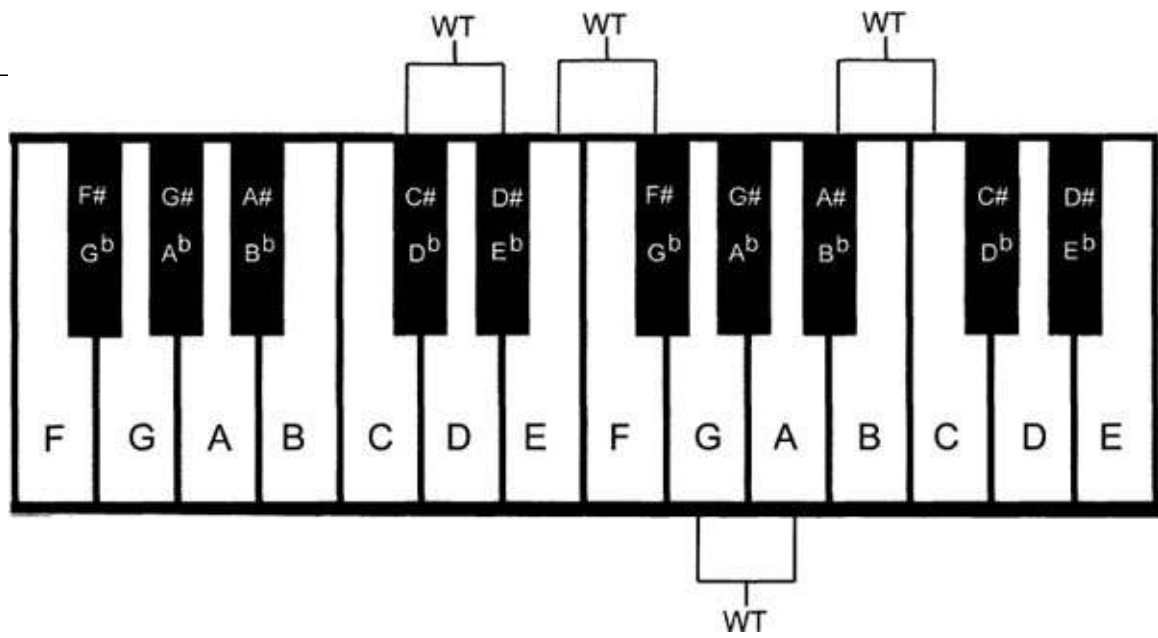


Figure 1.3. Whole tones

Alterations to named pitches are called *accidentals*. A sharp (#) raises a pitch by a semitone. Conversely, a flat (b) lowers a pitch by a semitone. A double sharp (x) raises a pitch by two semitones while a double flat (bb) lowers a pitch by two semitones. A natural (n) cancels a previous alteration. An accidental affects the note that follows as well as all notes of the same pitch within a measure.

A stepwise sequence of semitones or whole tones creates a pattern; whether in ascending or descending order, these patterns create *scales*. A scale that is built entirely of semitones is a *chromatic scale* (figure 1.4).



Figure 1.4. Staff with chromatic scale

Measure 55 of “Chop Suey,” from *Flower Drum Song* features a chromatic scale in the top note of the accompaniment (figure 1.5).



Figure 1.5. “Chop Suey,” mm. 52–56, chromatic scale

A seven-note scale built on a combination of semitones and whole tones is a *diatonic scale* (figure 1.6).



Figure 1.6. Staff with diatonic scale

An example of a melody made up of diatonic scale tones appears in measures 1-6 of “You Are Love” from *Show Boat*. (Notice that the melody is doubled and reinforced in the accompaniment; see figure 1.7).



Figure 1.7. “You are Love,” mm. 1-6, diatonic scale

Mode refers to the resulting color or tonality elicited from scales or melodic sequences. The two most common modes in Western music are the *major* and *minor* modes. They consist of eight notes. For purposes of this book, these two modes will be emphasized.

Typically, the major mode is perceived to be “positive,” “bright,” or “effusive,” while the minor mode is perceived to be “negative,” “dark,” or “reflective.” Reference to the major mode is notated by capital letters. Lowercase letters are used to reference minor modes. Therefore, an uppercase letter represents A-major, and the key of a-minor is represented by a.

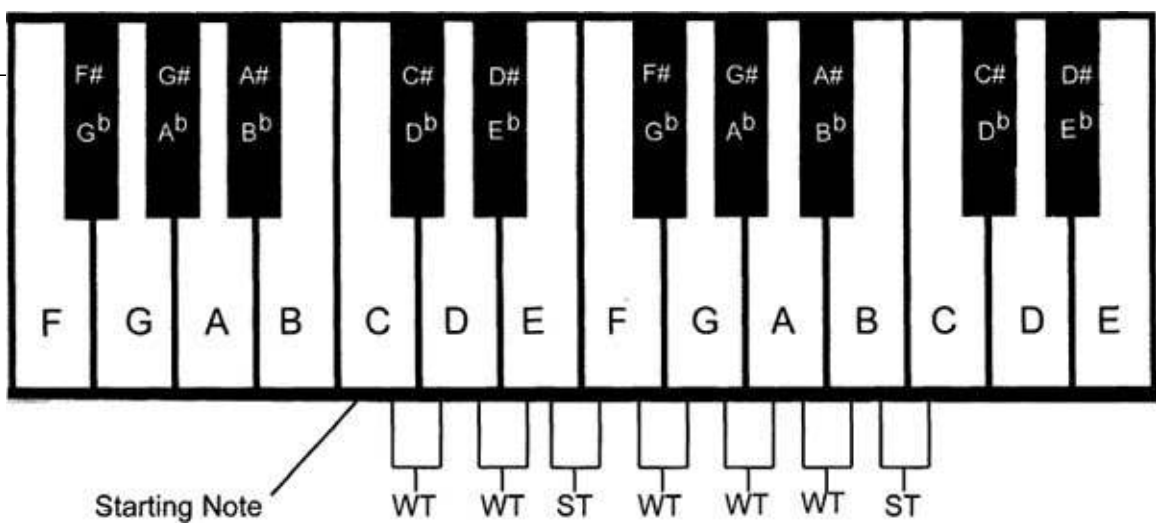


Figure 1.8a. C-major scale

An ascending major scale has the following formula (this pattern is reversed for the descending scale): Starting Note/WT/WT/ST/WT/WT/WT/ST (see figures 1.8a and 1.8b).

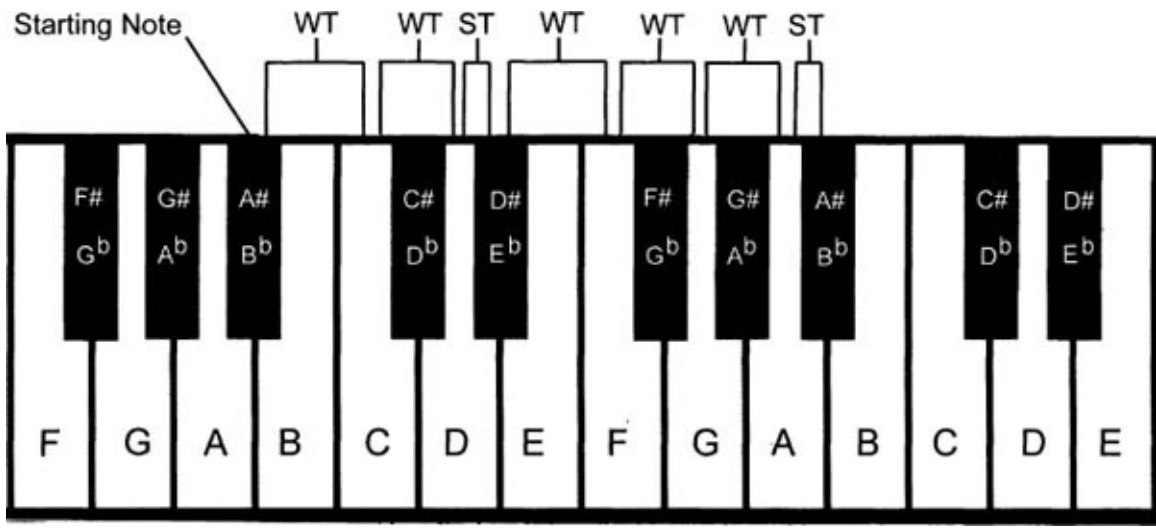


Figure 1.8b. B-flat major scale

Stephen Sondheim outlines an ascending E-major scale in measures 30 and 31 of “The Little Things You Do Together,” from *Company*. The melody begins on the second scale degree, the F#, and ascends to the high E (see figure 1.9).

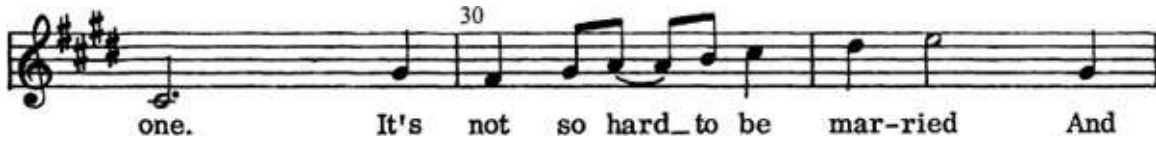


Figure 1.9. “The Little Things You Do Together,” mm. 29–31, ascending E-major scale

There are three common forms of minor modes: *natural*, *harmonic*, and *melodic*. The natural minor scale has the following formula: Starting Note/WT/ST/WT/WT/ST/WT/WT (see figure 1.10).

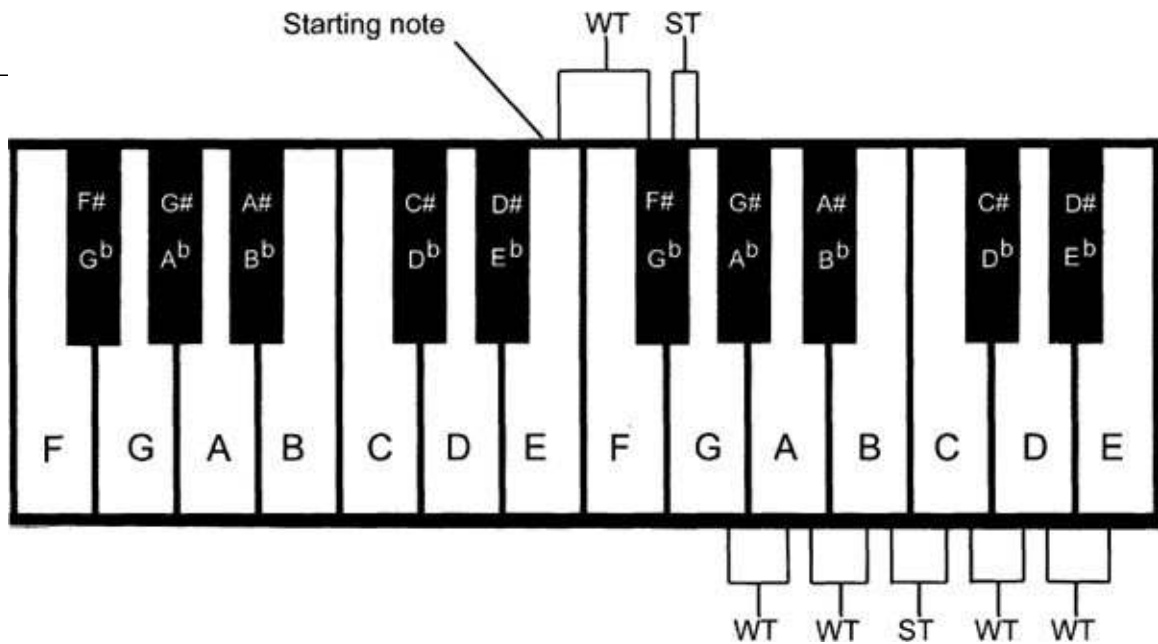


Figure 1.10. e-natural minor scale

The harmonic minor mode raises the seventh scale degree of the natural minor scale. It utilizes the following formula: Starting Note/WT/ST/WT/WT/ST/WT+ST/ST. Notice that the distance of the second-to-last interval in this formula is three semitones (a step and a half). Most Western melodies that are written in a minor mode are in the harmonic form (figure 1.11).

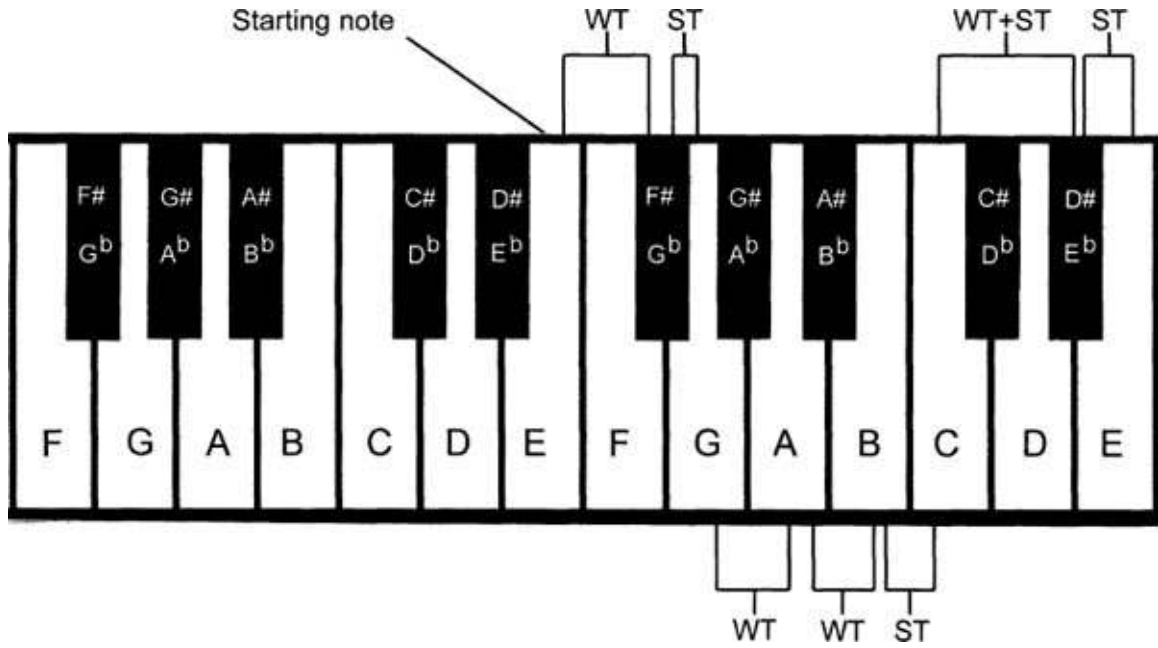


Figure 1.11. e-harmonic minor scale

The melodic minor mode raises the sixth and seventh scale degrees *ascending* by one semitone and then follows the natural minor formula *descending*. The ascending melodic minor scale follows the formula: Starting Note/WT/ST/WT/WT/WT/WT/ST (see figures 1.12a and 1.12b). Therefore, the descending melodic minor scale is the same as the descending natural minor scale.

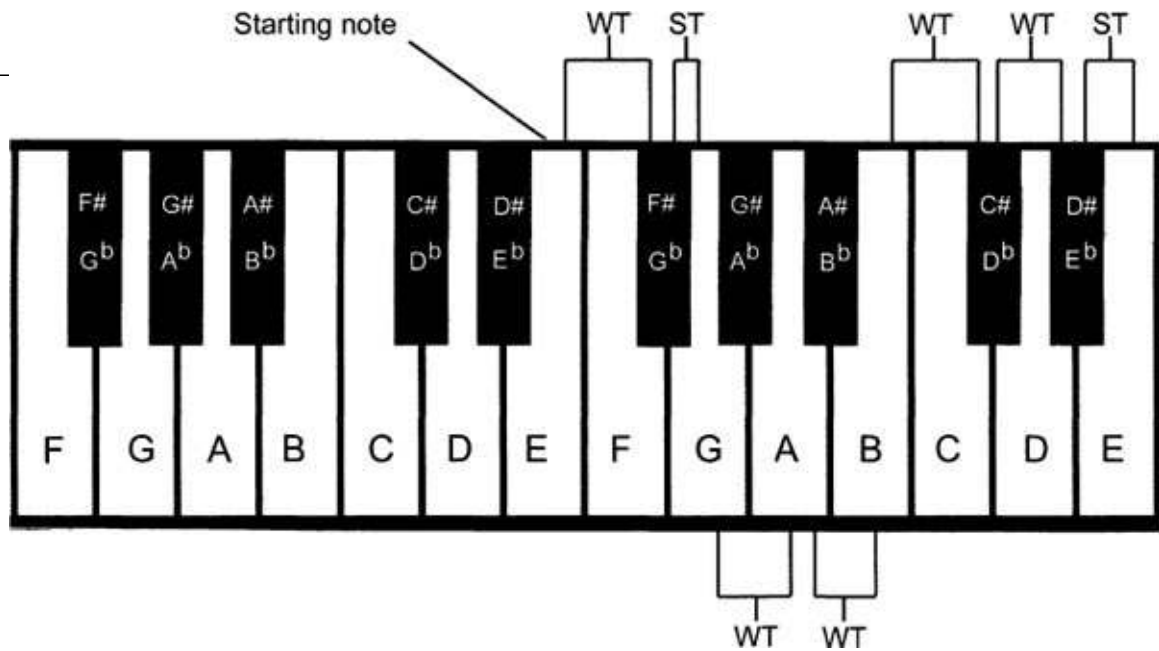


Figure 1.12a. e-melodic minor scale (ascending)

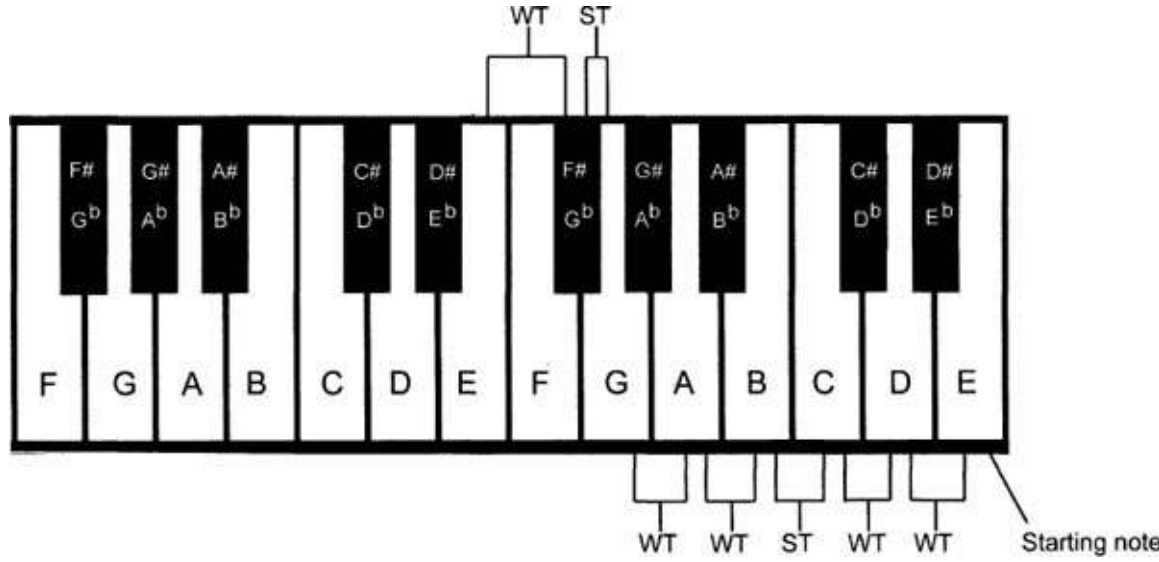


Figure 1.12b. e-melodic minor scale (descending)

In any key, scale degree notes have specific names. The first scale degree is the *tonic*, the second the *supertonic*, the third is the *mediant*, the fourth is the *subdominant*, the fifth is the *dominant*, and the sixth is the *submediant*.

In a discussion of scales and modality, special notice should be taken of the mediant. This third scale degree is important because it establishes either major or minor mode.

The seventh degree of major and the various minor scales is “variable.” In some cases, the distance below tonic is a semitone, while in others it is a whole tone. In the major mode, the seventh scale degree is the *leading tone* because it is a mere semitone from the tonic, which gives it a feeling of leading to or resolving to the tonic. The same is true with the harmonic minor and the ascending melodic scales. In the natural and the *descending melodic* scales, the seventh scale degree is the *subtonic* because this *now-lowered* tone is a whole tone below the tonic. Finally, the eighth scale degree is the *octave* or *high tonic* (figures 1.13a and 1.13b).

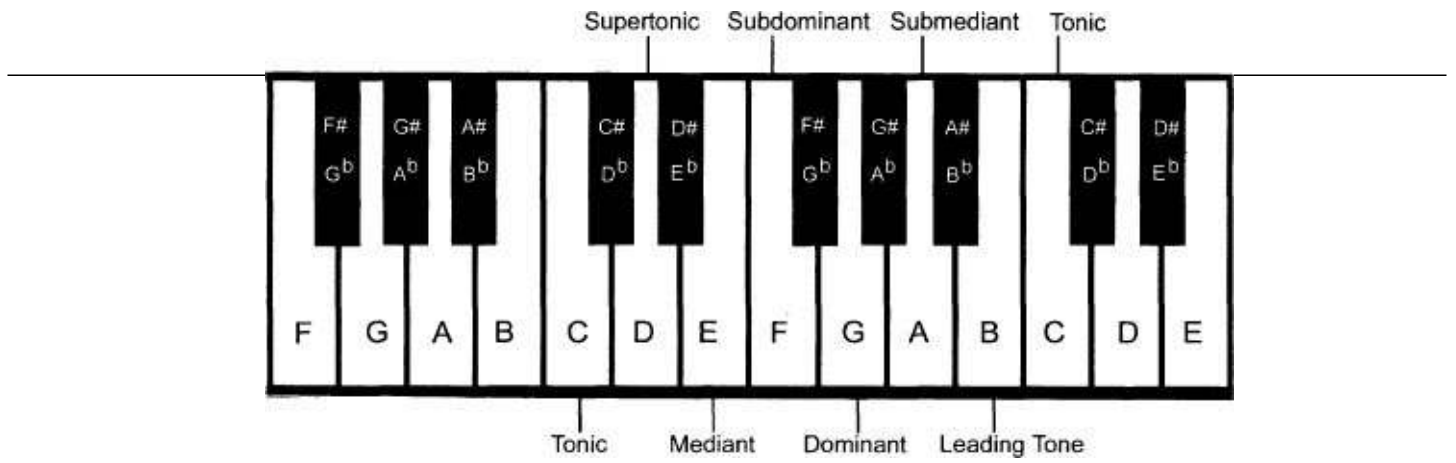


Figure 1.13a. Major scale with scale degree names

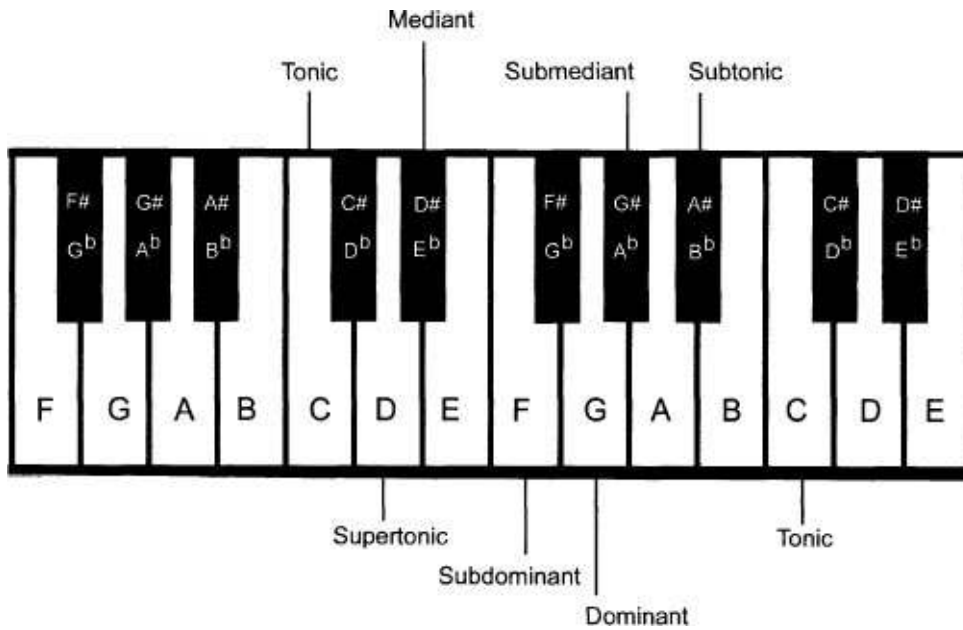


Figure 1.13b. Natural minor scale with scale degree names

When any two pitches sound consecutively or simultaneously, the distance between each is an *interval*. Intervals are defined by two components—size and quality. They can be perceived aurally as well as visually. In order to determine interval *size* visually, start with the bottom note and count lines and spaces to the upper note. Be sure to count both the starting and ending notes. For example, on the staff below, starting on C and ending on the same C is a unison. Starting on C and ending on D, the interval is a second. The distance from C to E is a third, and so forth. An interval of an eighth is an octave (figures 1.14 and 1.15).



Figure 1.14. C-major intervallic scale



Figure 1.15. c-minor (natural) intervallic scale

Notice on the major and minor scales above that the thirds, sixths, and sevenths would sound different, depending upon the mode. In addition, the specific distance (number of semitones or whole tones) has changed. These variances represent the interval *quality*. We define these interval qualities as major, minor, *perfect*, *diminished*, and *augmented*. Perfect intervals are intervals that are the same in major and minor modes. These intervals are typically described as “open” and “hollow.”

The interval size and qualities from the tonic are labeled on the C-major scale above (figure 1.14). Notice that the unison, fourth, fifth, and octave are perfect (P), and the second, third, sixth, and seventh intervals are major (M).

The interval size and qualities (again from the tonic) are labeled on the c-natural minor scale above (figure 1.15). As is the case in a major mode, the unison, fourth, fifth, and octave remain perfect. Likewise, the second remains major. However, the third, sixth, and seventh intervals are now minor (m). Considering the intervals of the third, sixth, and seventh in both scales, the major interval is “bigger,” while the minor interval is “smaller.”

The word “augment” means to increase, and “diminish” means to decrease. When a perfect fourth is augmented or a perfect fifth is diminished they create a *tritone*. A tritone is three whole tones (figure 1.16).



Figure 1.16. Augmented fourth or diminished fifth

An augmented fourth and a diminished fifth sound the same. *Enharmonic* equivalents are pitches that sound the same but are written differently. For example, a D-sharp and an E-flat are the same pitch, but with different spellings. The same is true of F and E-sharp. Actually, each tone can be written in one of two or three ways (figure 1.17).

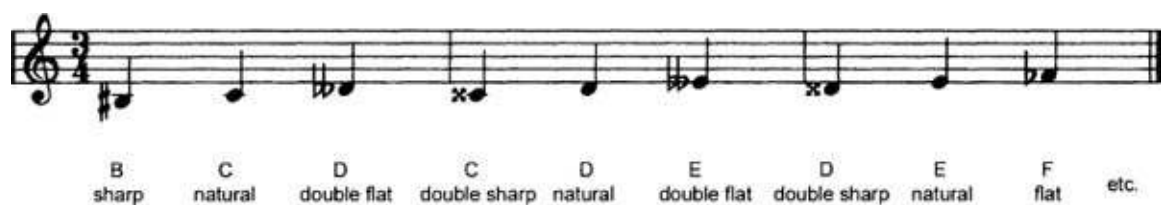


Figure 1.17. Enharmonic equivalents

In the context of a major or minor scale, the tritone does not appear as an interval above or below the tonic, but it can be embedded within the scale. For example, in a major scale, the distance between the subdominant and the leading tone is an augmented fourth (figure 1.18).



Figure 1.18. Augmented fourth in a major scale

For each scale, *key* is the means of identifying the tonal center (*root* or tonic) and mode. Sharps and

flats indicate the *key signature* at the beginning of a composition. Key signature can change at any point as *modulations* (or shifts in tonal center) between keys occur. As already stated, key signatures may contain accidentals.

The order of sharps in a key signature is always the same (figure 1.19).



Figure 1.19. Order of sharps

The order of flats in a key signature is always the same (figure 1.20).



Figure 1.20. Order of flats

The number of accidentals in a key signature identifies the key's tonic. For example, one sharp (F#) is the key signature for G-major. So, if one begins a scale on G and then follows the formula for *major* scale, one finds that the leading tone is F-sharp. The major key signatures follow (figure 1.21).

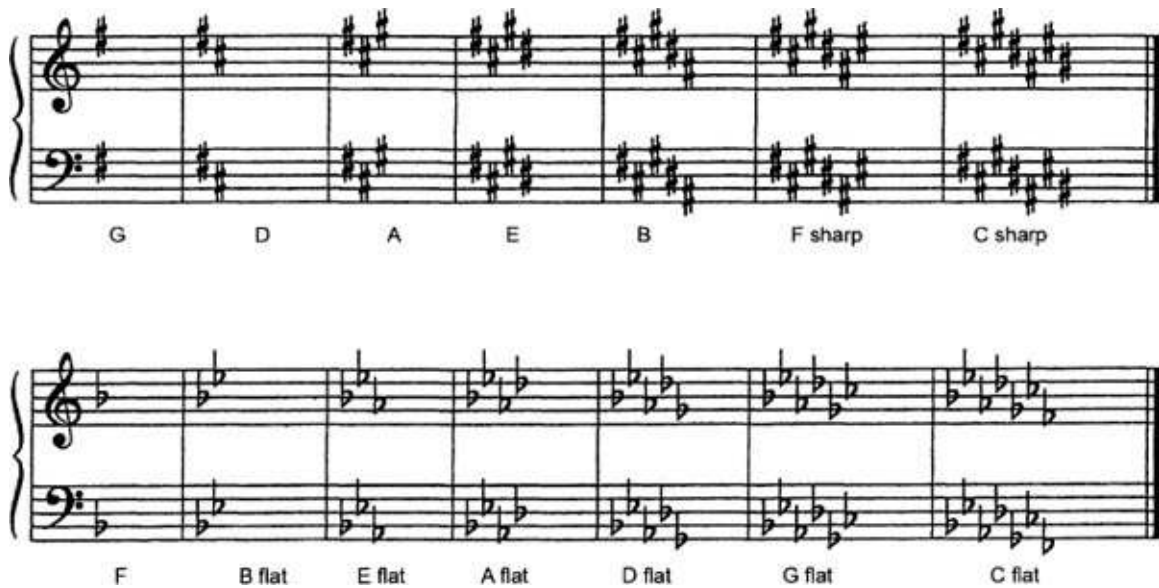


Figure 1.21. Major key signatures

The *circle of fifths* is another system of key identification. It considers the increasing number of sharps or flats in the signatures. Starting with C-major (no sharps or flats) and moving clockwise by ascending fifths, one reaches G-major (one sharp). Ascending a fifth again, one reaches D-major (two sharps), and so on. After twelve steps, one returns to C-major. Likewise, starting with C-major (no sharps or flats) and moving counterclockwise by descending fifths, one reaches F-major (one flat). Descending a fifth again, one reaches B-flat major (two flats), and so on. After twelve steps, one returns again to C-major (figure 1.22).

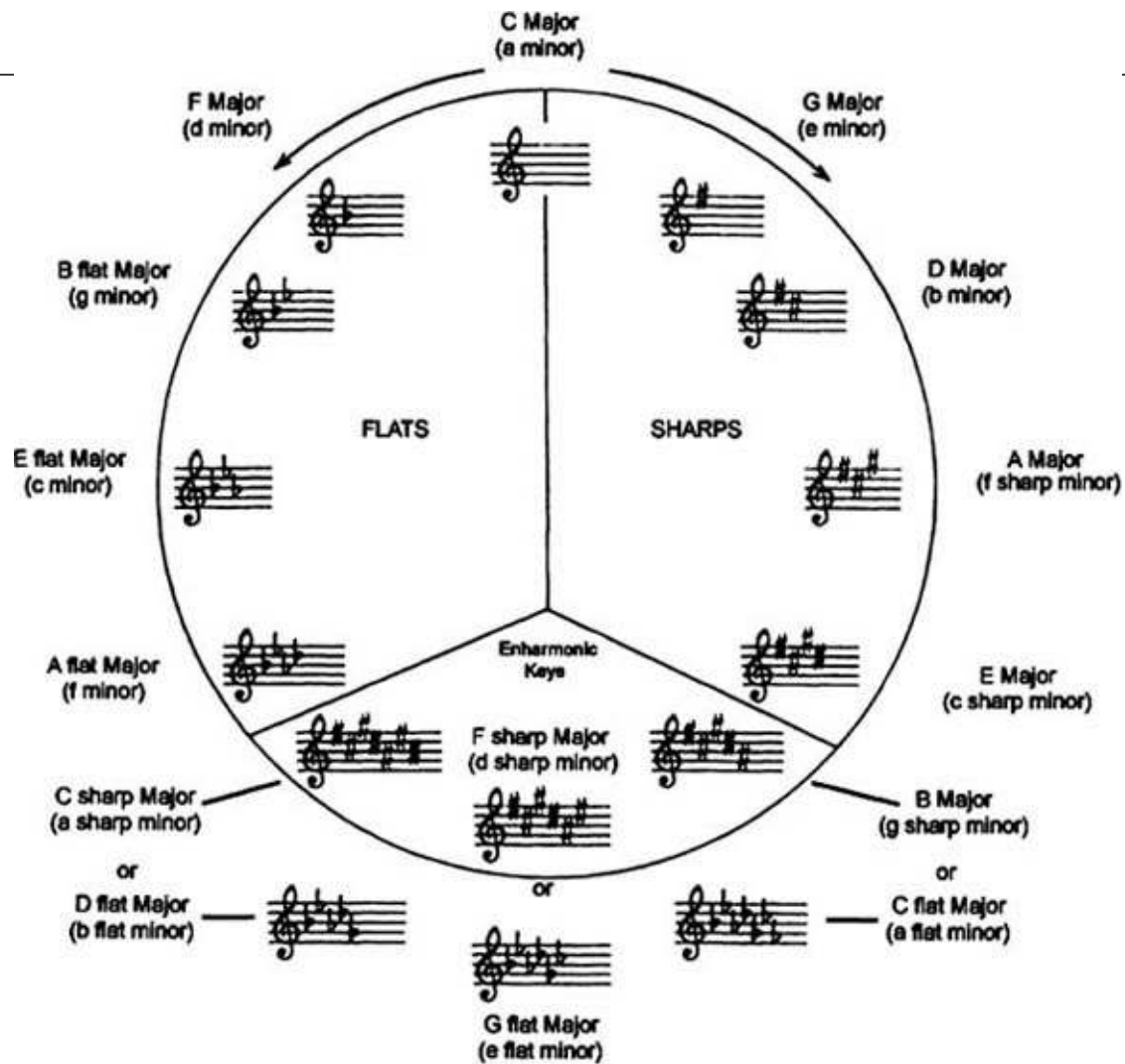


Figure 1.22. Circle of fifths

The astute student will memorize key signatures. As an aid in retention, the following tips may prove helpful.

To determine a major key in a key signature containing sharps, simply name the sharp farthest to the right in the key signature and go up one letter name. Then add the word “major” and that is the key. For example, in the key of E-major, the sharp in the key signature that is the farthest right is D. Therefore, if one goes up one letter name, one arrives at E, hence E-major.

To determine a major key in the key signature containing flats, simply name the flat second from the right in the key signature and add the word “flat” to its letter name. Then add the word “major” and that is the key. For example, the key signature of E^b -major shows an E^b as the second from the right.

The exception to the system above is that if there is only one flat in the key signature, the key is F major. If there are no flats or sharps in the key signature, the key is C-major.

Key signatures apply to minor scales as well. Each major key has a *relative* natural minor which begins down, intervallically, a minor third. That is, C-major’s relative minor key is A-minor. Therefore, the key of A-natural minor has the same key signature as C-major; it simply begins on A rather than on C. Using that key signature, one merely adds the appropriate accidentals to construct the harmonic and melodic variations of the minor mode (figure 1.23).



Figure 1.23. C-major scale and its relative minor

In “King Herod’s Song” from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Andrew Lloyd Webber begins the song in sharp minor. At measure 9, the relative key, A-major, is established and evident in the shift from a darker, ominous quality to one that is brighter (figure 1.24).

Figure 1.24. “King Herod’s Song,” mm. 1–4 and 9–16, relative key relationship

Note that in measures 15 and 16, A-major is reinforced with the descending major scale in the melody.

One other key relationship is the *parallel*. Parallel key relationships have the same tonic but different key signatures and notes. For example, d-minor is the parallel minor of D-major.

Notice on the scales below, C-major has no sharps or flats in the key signature (figure 1.25a). A d-minor scale has three flats (figure 1.25b), reflected in the key signature (figure 1.25c). If those three flats are translated into the key signature for the appropriate major key, it would be E-flat major.

(figure 1.25d). Note that E-flat major's relative minor, then, is c-minor (an interval of a third below)



Figure 1.25a. C-major scale



Figure 1.25b. c-natural minor scale



Figure 1.25c. c-natural minor scale with key signature

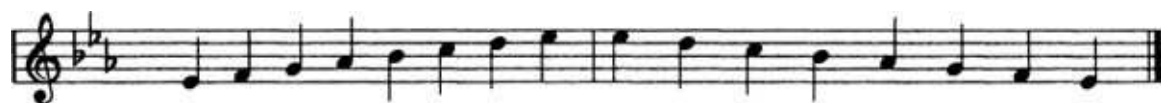


Figure 1.25d. E-flat major scale with key signature

Composers can use the device of *mutation*, or changing mode to a parallel major or minor, without altering the key. The song “Far from the Home I Love” from *Fiddler on the Roof* provides a clear example. The song begins in the key of c-minor. At measure 12, through the use of accidentals and an ascending C-major scale in the accompaniment, the parallel major key is established to reinforce the happy recollection (figure 1.26).

Another example of mutation appears in “I Enjoy Being a Girl,” from *Flower Drum Song*. In this instance, the key shift is from D-major to d-minor (figure 1.27).

The musical theatre examples quoted thus far are evidence of the potency of melody as a guide for the listener and to the performer. When one considers harmony as an extension of the melodic expression, an infinite number of musical possibilities unfold. Harmony can reinforce emotion and dramatic action, and sustain a mood.

5

How can I hope to make you un - der - stand Why I do what I do?

10

Why I must trav-el to a dis - tant land, Far from the home I love.

15

Once I was hap - pi - ly con - tent to be As I was, Where I was,

pp

The image displays a musical score for the song "Far from the Home I Love," spanning measures 5 to 16. It is presented in three systems. Each system consists of a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are: "How can I hope to make you understand Why I do what I do? Why I must travel to a distant land, Far from the home I love. Once I was happily content to be As I was, Where I was,". Measure numbers 5, 10, and 15 are indicated above the vocal line. The piano accompaniment features a steady bass line in the left hand and a more active melody in the right hand. A dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo) is present in the second system. The score concludes with a double bar line and repeat dots at the end of measure 16.

Figure 1.26. "Far from the Home I Love," mm. 5–16, mutation

55
just lap it up like hon - ey, I en -

60
joy be - ing a girl. I

flip when a fel - low sends me flow - ers, I

Figure 1.27. "I Enjoy Being a Girl," mm. 53–63, mutation

Harmony

Harmony refers to the simultaneous sounding of two or more pitches or tones. This coupling of tones begins to characterize sound just as a coupling of people begins to characterize a conversation or relationship. Primarily, harmony references music vertically, while melody suggests a linear or horizontal orientation.

Harmony is organized in many ways, but the underlying principle behind harmony is *tertian*—chords built in thirds. A *triad* is a three-note chord that contains a root or starting note, the note a third above the root, and a note a fifth above the root. Four examples of triads built on C appear below (figures 1.28a, 1.28b, 1.28c, and 1.28d).

a. b. c. d.

Figure 1.28a, Figure 1.28b, Figure 1.28c, Figure 1.28d. Four triads built on C

The third and the fifth notes of the triad indicate mode. When the distance between the root and fifth of a triad is perfect, the modality is either major or minor. In the example above, figures 1.28

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