The Basics of Reading Music

Week Five: Creating Mood and Feeling

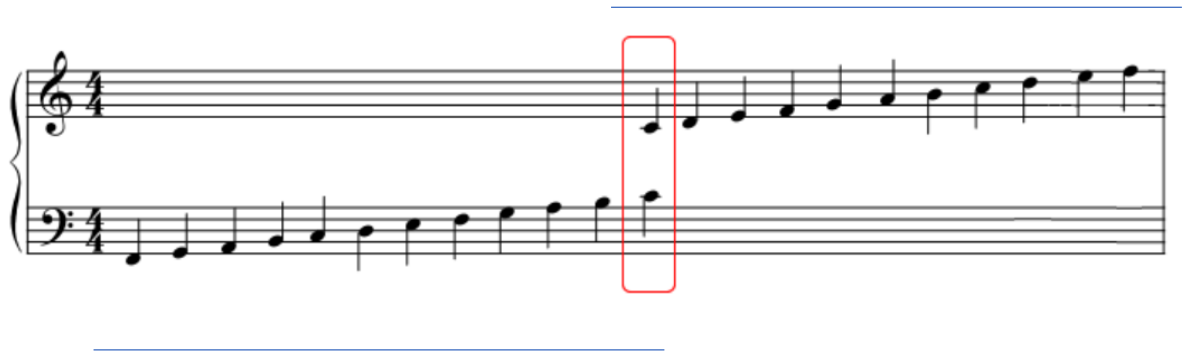
In this lesson, you are going to learn about the job of the key signature, how to recognise major and minor and how they add mood to your music.

Recapping

These are all the main pitches we have covered and this example of the GRAND STAFF shows how the treble and bass clef relate to one another.

EXERCISE Name these notes that cross from the bass clef to the treble clef.

Hint: The highlighted note in the middle is the same note!



But what about the black notes on the piano – the so-called SHARPS AND FLATS?

Sharps and Flats

Normally, the biggest headache an amateur instrumentalist suffers is the key signature. When learning to play any instrument, you will be confronted with the dreaded "sharps and flats" and have to learn to recognise them and include them in your playing, as you go along.

This is the symbol for a sharp: ♯

It looks like a modern-day hashtag with two vertical lines and two sloping horizontal lines.

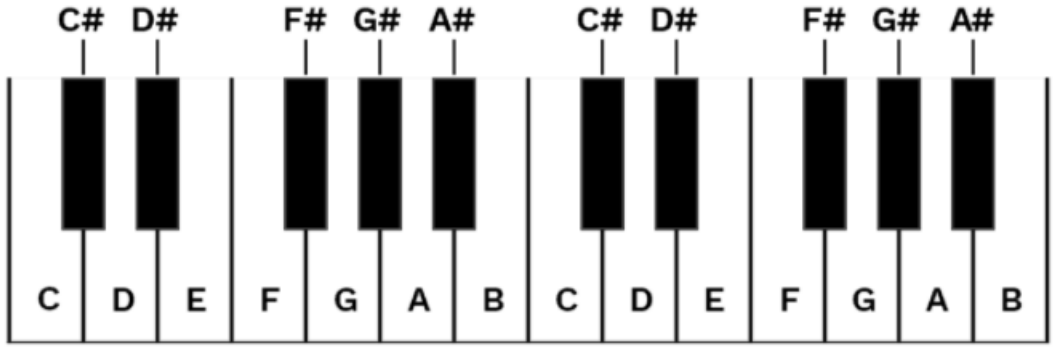
And this is the symbol for a flat: ♭

It looks like a slanted lowercase B.

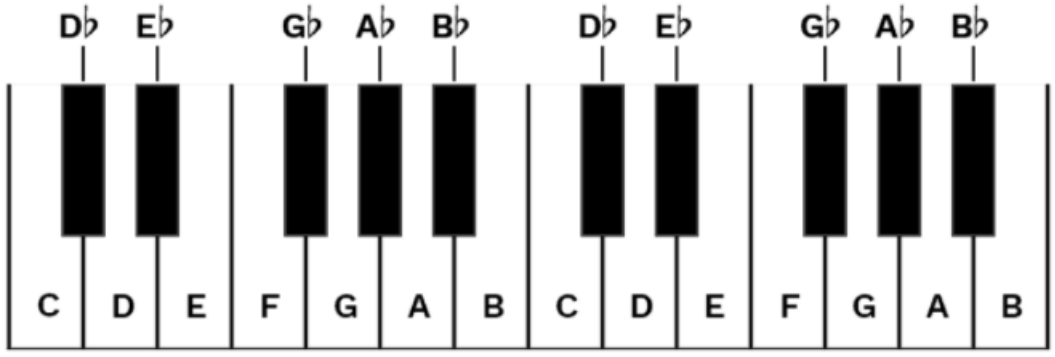
A sharp pulls a note UP by a semi-tone (half-step) while a flat pulls a note DOWN by a semi-tone.

If we use the piano keyboard as an example, this means that the black notes can actually have TWO DIFFERENT NAMES depending on whether you have pulled up to them from below or pulled down to them from above:

PULLING UP A SEMITONE



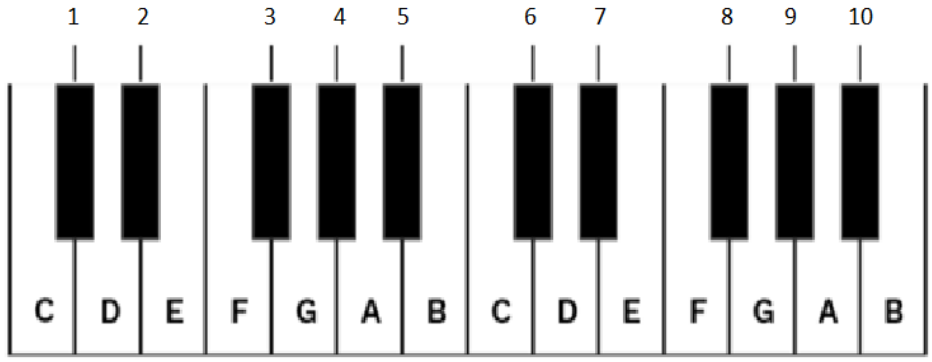
PULLING DOWN A SEMITONE



So, if you start on G and pull up a semitone, the pitch is called G♯. If you start on A and pull down a semitone, the pitch is called A♭.

EXERCISE for each example, give BOTH possible names for the note:

Hint: When you are writing pitch names, the sharp or flat sign comes second



1 = _____or_____ 2 = _____or_____

3 = _____or_____ 4 = _____or_____

5 = _____or_____ 6 = _____or_____

7= _____or_____ 8 = _____or_____

9 = _____or_____ 10 = _____or_____

So, why do we use sharps and flats?

Sharps and flats have two main purposes:

1) To tell you what key the piece is in;
2) To tell you which additional notes to alter in the body of the music, as the piece requires.

Keys and Key Signatures

You may have heard the question "what *key* is the piece in?". Do you know what it means?

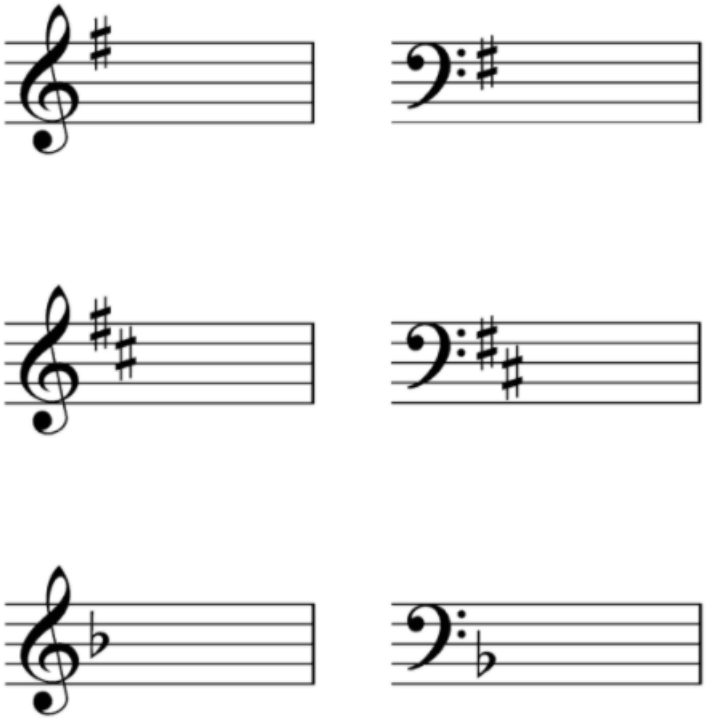
There are many different ways you can travel up and down in music, using the various pitches of A-G. These ascending and descending patterns are called SCALES and each scale has a corresponding KEY.

If a piece of music primarily uses the pitches of a particular scale, we say the piece is "in that key".

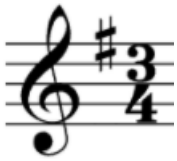
Let's say we have a piece of music that primarily uses the pitches of G Major. The KEY SIGNATURE is where you would find this information, without having to look through the whole piece and figure it out yourself.

The key signature is a group of sharps and flats that you can find at the very start of your music. It comes after the clef (treble or bass) and before the time signature.

These are some examples of key signatures:



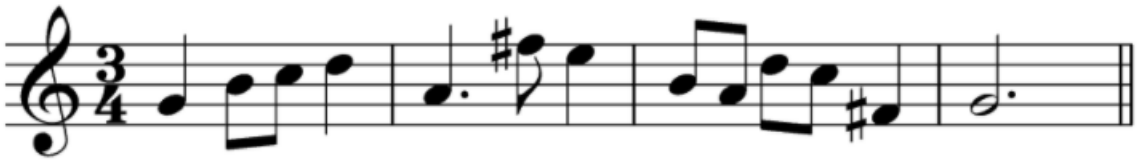
To remember which order to put the signs on our stave/staff, we use the phrase “see Katy” or “C, K, T”: C = clef, K = key, T = time:



The key signature is there so that we don’t have to write the sharp or flat signs throughout the piece, as this would make the music messy and harder to read. Remember – we’re all about trying to make music look *clearer* and much easier to read at speed (that’s why we use bar lines and group notes, too).

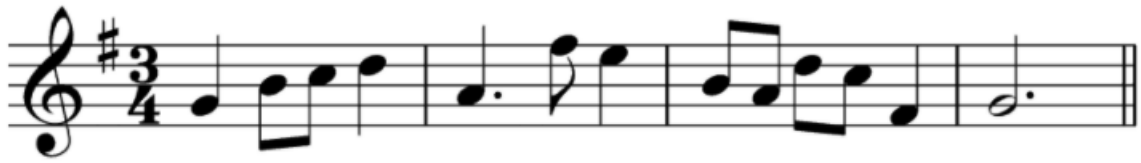
So instead, we write the sharps or flats we need ONCE only in the key signature, and then we have to remember to include them as we play. Each different key has a different key signature and musicians must learn them all. See why it’s such a headache?

Here is a simple melody written in G Major, with the sharp signs shown throughout:



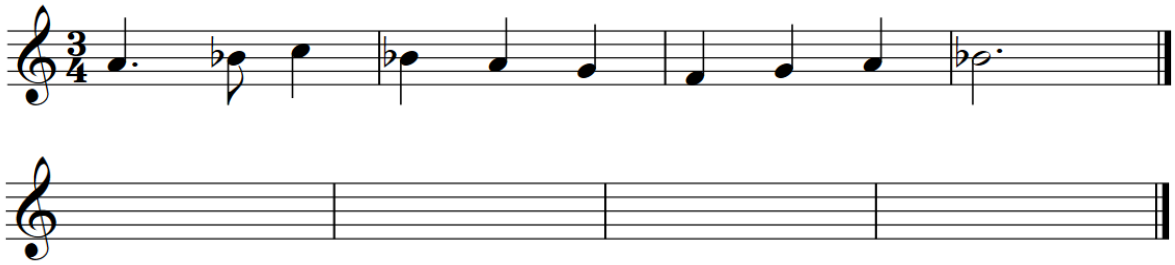
In this piece, there are two F♯ shown (one on the high F in bar 2 and one on the low F in bar 3).

And here is that same melody again, written with a G Major key signature. See how it looks much neater?

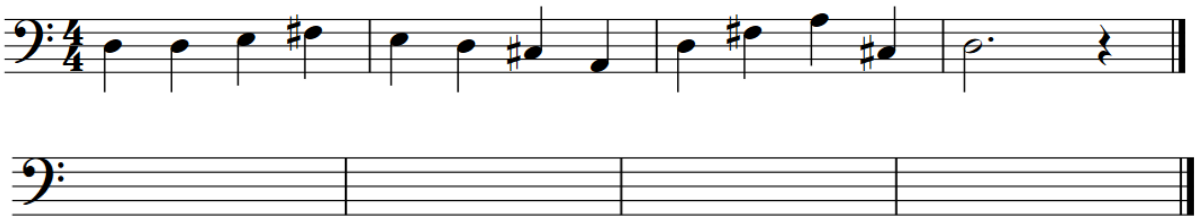


EXERCISE Take the sharps or flats OUT of the piece and write them in the KEY SIGNATURE instead!

1)



2)



So, the key signature tells us which sharps and flats to include in our piece, and this depends on which key the piece is in (which pattern of pitches it uses).

<u>So how does this affect me?</u>

Well, the bad news is that as a singer you might encounter any of these key signatures at the start of your music. That's up to the composer.

BUT your conductor would not expect you to know what they're called and, in fact, might not even mention their names at all. You probably wouldn't be able to tell whether you were singing in D or E or F (most people can't – musicians, or not).

In fact, key signatures, and sharps and flats, help singers in two different ways:

1) **They will cause you to alter some of your notes by pulling them up or down.**
2) **They will determine the feeling or mood of your piece.**

Altering a Pitch: Using Accidentals

Sharps and flats don't appear only in key signatures; sometimes, we want to include a pitch in our piece that is not covered by our key.

For example, in the key of G Major, the notes we would normally play are:

G – A – B – C – D – E – F♯.

But what if we want to play a B♭ or a C♯? That's where the sharp or flat signs come in again.

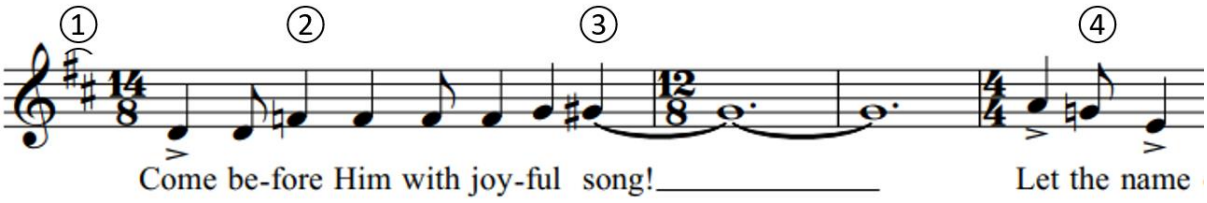
In this case, we call them ACCIDENTALS and place them just before the relevant pitch, in the main body of our music (NOT in the key signature). You will probably come across these quite a lot in vocal music and they will force you to alter the pitch of the note you were about to sing.

We can also use an accidental to cancel out a sharp or a flat in our piece and this is where you might see the symbol for the third kind of accidental, the NATURAL.

This is the symbol for a natural: ♮

A natural sign before a pitch tells you to cancel out the sharp or flat and go back to the original note.

Take a look at this example from the alto part of "Jubilate, Deo".



① The key signature shows we need to use F♯ and C♯ throughout the piece.

② The F♯ is altered to F♮ by adding the natural sign in the body of the music. This just means normal F.

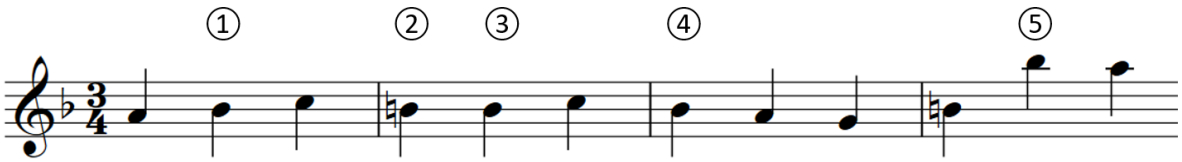
③ The G does not feature in the key signature and so is not normally flattened or sharpened. However, we want a G♯ at this point, so we have to add the sign as an accidental.

④ We are in a new bar and so are back to a regular G, but the publisher has added a sign also, to remind us of this. This is called a CAUTIONARY ACCIDENTAL. G and G♮ mean THE SAME THING.

Some rules about accidentals:

1) The sign for the accidental must go directly before the note it refers to – or you might have already sung/played it before you spot the sign;
2) An accidental of any kind lasts for an entire bar (measure) and then is automatically cancelled by the next bar line;
3) Unlike in a key signature where an F♯ applies to all Fs in the piece, an accidental ONLY applies to notes at the same octave.

Take a look at this further example below and then have a go at the exercise which tests the same rules:



① is B♭ because it is shown in the key signature.

② is B♮ because it has the accidental in front of it which alters it.

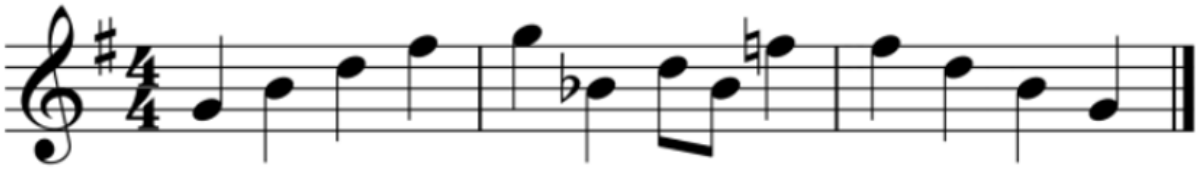
③ is also B♮ because the accidental lasts the entire bar.

④ is B♭ because the accidental has been cancelled out and we're back to using the key signature again. This time, the publisher did not add a CAUTIONARY ACCIDENTAL.

⑤ is still B♭ because the accidental on the note before it refers to a different octave.

EXERCISE Name these notes:

Hint: Check the key signature first, then re-read the rules about accidentals above. Remember, when you are writing pitch names, the accidental goes second.



____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____ ____

Major and Minor

Every single pitch (ABCDEFG) has a number of different scales (and keys) associated with it. However, for singers, there are only two kinds of keys you will need to know: MAJOR and MINOR. The other kinds of keys and scales are more appropriate for jazz, ancient music and non-western music, for example.

Scales (and their corresponding keys) affect how a piece of music sounds:

A piece in a MAJOR KEY sounds happy

A piece in a MINOR KEY sounds sad.

This is very important when you are singing as you will perform the piece differently and also will move through your melody in a different way.

Here are some examples of famous pieces that use MAJOR keys:

- "Hey Jude" by the *Beatles*
- "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star" based on a melody by Mozart
- "The Can Can" by Offenbach

And here are some examples of famous pieces that use MINOR keys:

- "Greensleeves" Traditional
- *5th Symphony* by Beethoven
- "Stairway to Heaven" by *Led Zeppelin*

IMPORTANT: Even though major pieces sound happier than minor pieces, it is, of course, possible to have a sad or melancholy piece in a major key (or vice versa). In this case, the speed, lyrics and overall meaning of the piece would also contribute. A good example of this is "Danny Boy" which is in a major key but is sentimental and sad.

EXERCISE Listen to these different extracts of music and say whether you think they are in a MAJOR or MINOR key:

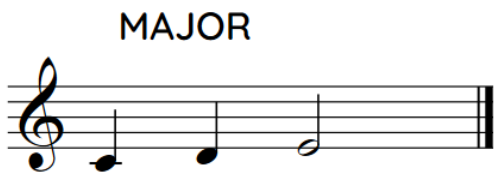
Example 1:

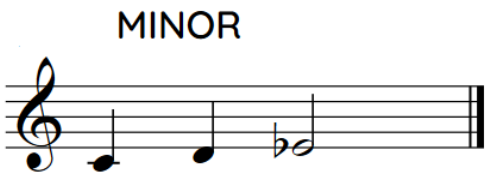
Example 2:

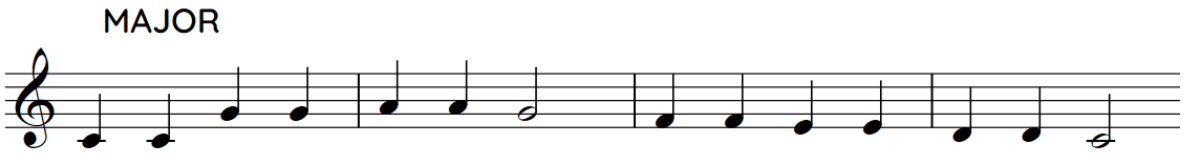
Example 3:

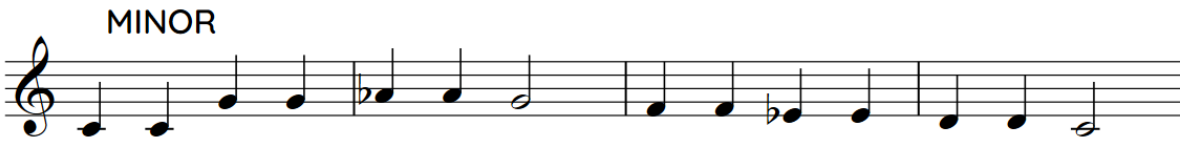
The main difference between a MAJOR and MINOR key is how you treat the third note. In a MINOR key, the third note is usually flattened, making it sound a bit "bluesy" or "spooky".

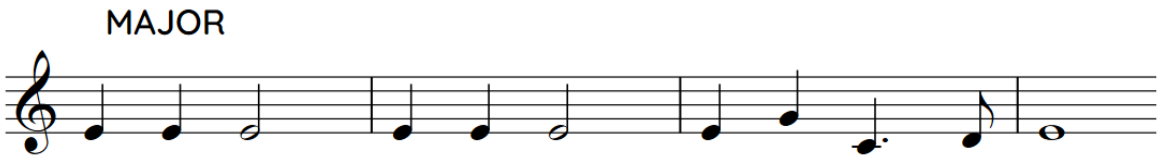
EXERCISE Sing through these short musical phrases that change a major tune to a minor one.

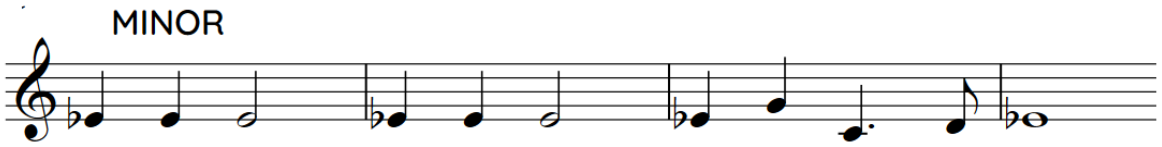












In Summary

1) We use the KEY SIGNATURE to tell us which flats and sharps should be played or sung throughout the piece.
2) The KEY SIGNATURE comes at the start of the piece, between the CLEF and the TIME SIGNATURE (CKT).
3) When singing, we can't really tell what KEY we are in, but we *can* tell whether the piece is MAJOR or MINOR.
4) MAJOR keys tend to sound happy while MINOR keys tend to sound sad.
5) Singers might also find sharps and flats in the body of their music and that's where you would need to pull your note up (sharp) or down (flat).

Next week, we are going to combine everything you have learned about reading music so far and put it all into practice!