

What is a Key?

A “key” (in the musical sense of the word) is the “harmonic centre” of a piece of music. This is easy to hear and experience, but difficult to explain. I’ll try my best...!

When you listen to a tune, every note you hear is being sub-consciously related to one particular note by your brain, and this particular note is the “tonic” (or “do” in solfège) of the scale in which the notes of the tune appear. This note could be described as the “focal point” of the tune, and all the other notes in the melody are heard in your brain by their contrast to this one note. This note is called the “keynote”, and is the harmonic and melodic base for all the other notes in the tune. It is usually not difficult to hear when the tonic (or keynote) has been arrived at in a tune - it gives to the listener a sense of completeness and conclusion, rather like having arrived home at the end of a journey.

As an example, we can consider the French song “Frère Jacques”. The first note of this tune is the tonic (or “keynote”). As you sing or play the tune, the notes you hear are being judged and compared in your brain to the tonic, and the pitch of the first note is being held in your mind. The melody progresses until the end of the tune, where you sing the tonic once again as the very last note. If we were to imagine the tune finishing not on the last note but the note *before*, we would have a very real sense of the tune being incomplete and not resolved properly - it would feel as if the tune were “left hanging”. Your brain expects the song to finish on the tonic note, which indeed in the case of “Frère Jacques” (and many other tunes) it does. However, the tonic can also occur at other points in the tune. Here are the words written out with every instance of the tonic note being in **bold**:

Frè-re Jac-ques, Frè-re Jac-ques,
Dormez-vous? Dormez-vous?
Sonnez les mati-**nes**, Sonnez les mati-**nes**,
Ding dang **dong!** Ding dang **dong!**

As we can see, the tonic note occurs several times during the tune, but very importantly it occurs as the *last* note of the song. This gives to the listener a good sense of the tune having finished, and “arrived home”.

The tonic note also has a chord associated with it, and this chord is called the “key-chord” or “tonic chord” of the piece. It is almost always the last chord of the piece.

How to Tell the Key of a Piece

There are two ways of telling the key of a piece of music. The first is to look at the last chord of the piece. There is a very good chance that this chord will be the tonic chord ("key-chord"). So if, for example, the last chord of the piece is a G-major chord, then the chances are that the piece of music is in G-major. Although this method usually works, it is not completely reliable, as some pieces of music do not finish on the tonic chord. Most do, however.

The second way of telling which key a piece of music is in is to look at the "key signature". The key signature is a collection of sharp signs or flat signs which appear just after the clef sign at the beginning of each line of music. This tells you not only which key the piece is in, but it also tells you which notes are to be sharpened or flattened from their original pitches as you play the piece.

The notes printed on the staff do not represent adjacent notes on the piano. They represent adjacent notes *in the scale*, and precisely *which* scale is being referred to in the piece of music scale is indicated by the key signature. So as the printed notes move up and down the lines and spaces of the staff, they are moving up and down the notes within the relevant scale that the key signature is referring to.

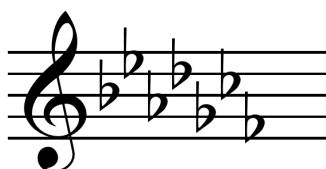
These key signatures are detailed on the following pages.

The Key of C-flat Major

(7 flats)

If a piece of music is in the key of C-flat, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is a C-flat major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is C-flat.

There are **seven** flats in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of C-flat major. The flats in this key are: C-flat, D-flat, E-flat, F-flat, G-flat, A-flat and B-flat.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like a C, you should play a C-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a D, you should play a D-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an E, you should play an E-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an F, you should play an F-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a G, you should play a G-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an A, you should play an A-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a B, you should play a B-flat;
in other words, *every* note should be played as a flat!

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of C-flat major will probably finish on a chord of C-flat.

The Key of G-flat Major

(6 flats)

If a piece of music is in the key of G-flat, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is a G-flat major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is G-flat.

There are **six** flats in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of G-flat major. The flats in this key are: G-flat, A-flat, B-flat, C-flat, D-flat and E-flat.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like a G, you should play a G-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an A, you should play an A-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a B, you should play a B-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a C, you should play a C-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a D, you should play a D-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an E, you should play an E-flat;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times during a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of G-flat major will probably finish on a chord of G-flat.

The Key of D-flat Major

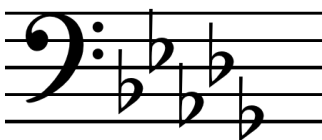
(5 flats)

If a piece of music is in the key of D-flat, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is a D-flat major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is D-flat.

There are **five** flats in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of D-flat major. The flats in this key are: D-flat, E-flat, G-flat, A-flat and B-flat.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like a D, you should play a D-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an E, you should play an E-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a G, you should play a G-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an A, you should play an A-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a B, you should play a B-flat;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of D-flat major will probably finish on a chord of D-flat.

The Key of A-flat Major

(4 flats)

If a piece of music is in the key of A-flat, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is an A-flat major chord, and the tonic note (the “root” note) of the melody is A-flat.

There are **four** flats in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of A-flat major. The flats in this key are: A-flat, B-flat, D-flat and E-flat.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like an A, you should play an A-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a B, you should play a B-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a D, you should play a D-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an E, you should play an E-flat;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of A-flat major will probably finish on a chord of A-flat.

The Key of E-flat Major

(3 flats)

If a piece of music is in the key of E-flat, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is an E-flat major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is E-flat.

There are **three** flats in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of E-flat major. The flats in this key are: E-flat, A-flat and B-flat.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like an E, you should play an E-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an A, you should play an A-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like a B, you should play a B-flat;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of E-flat major will probably finish on a chord of E-flat.

The Key of B-flat Major

(2 flats)

If a piece of music is in the key of B-flat, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is a B-flat major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is B-flat.

There are **two** flats in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of B-flat major. The flats in this key are: B-flat and E-flat.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like a B, you should play a B-flat;
every time you see a note which looks like an E, you should play an E-flat;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of E-flat major will probably finish on a chord of E-flat.

The Key of F Major

(1 flat)

If a piece of music is in the key of F, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is an F major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is F.

There is **one** flat in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of F major. The flat in this key is B-flat.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like a B, you should play a B-flat;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of F major will probably finish on a chord of F.

The Key of C Major

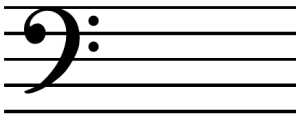
(no sharps or flats)

If a piece of music is in the key of C, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is a C major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is C.

There are **no** sharps or flats in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



No sharps, no flats.

So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of C major. This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

you should play all notes at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of C major will probably finish on a chord of C.

The Key of G Major

(1 sharp)

If a piece of music is in the key of G, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is a G major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is G.

There is **one** sharp in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of G major. The sharp in this key is F-sharp.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like an F, you should play an F-sharp;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of G major will probably finish on a chord of G.

The Key of D Major

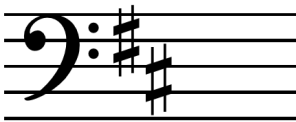
(2 sharps)

If a piece of music is in the key of D, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is a D major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is D.

There are **two** sharps in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of D major. The sharps in this key are F-sharp and C-sharp.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like an F, you should play an F-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a C, you should play a C-sharp;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of D major will probably finish on a chord of D.

The Key of A Major

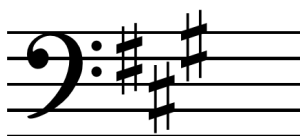
(3 sharps)

If a piece of music is in the key of A, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is an A major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is A.

There are **three** sharps in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of A major. The sharps in this key are F-sharp, C-sharp and G-sharp.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like an F, you should play an F-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a C, you should play a C-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a G, you should play a G-sharp;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of A major will probably finish on a chord of A.

The Key of E Major

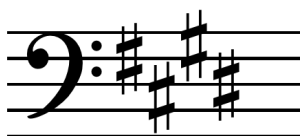
(4 sharps)

If a piece of music is in the key of E, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is an E major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is E.

There are **four** sharps in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of E major. The sharps in this key are F-sharp, C-sharp, G-sharp and D-sharp.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like an F, you should play an F-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a C, you should play a C-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a G, you should play a G-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a D, you should play a D-sharp;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of E major will probably finish on a chord of E.

The Key of B Major

(5 sharps)

If a piece of music is in the key of B, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is a B major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is B.

There are **five** sharps in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of B major. The sharps in this key are F-sharp, C-sharp, G-sharp, D-sharp and A-sharp.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like an F, you should play an F-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a C, you should play a C-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a G, you should play a G-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a D, you should play a D-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like an A, you should play an A-sharp;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of B major will probably finish on a chord of B.

The Key of F-sharp Major

(6 sharps)

If a piece of music is in the key of F-sharp, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is an F-sharp major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is F-sharp.

There are **six** sharps in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of F-sharp major. The sharps in this key are F-sharp, C-sharp, G-sharp, D-sharp, A-sharp and E-sharp.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see a note which looks like an F, you should play an F-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a C, you should play a C-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a G, you should play a G-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a D, you should play a D-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like an A, you should play an A-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like an E, you should play an E-sharp;
all other notes should be played at their written pitches.

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of F-sharp major will probably finish on a chord of F-sharp.

The Key of C-sharp Major

(7 sharps)

If a piece of music is in the key of C-sharp, that means that the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) of the music is a C-sharp major chord, and the tonic note (the “root note”) of the melody is C-sharp.

There are **seven** sharps in this key. The key signature looks like this in the treble clef:



and this in the bass clef:



So this key signature tells you that the scale now being represented on the staff is the scale of C-sharp major. The sharps in this key are F-sharp, C-sharp, G-sharp, D-sharp, A-sharp, E-sharp and B-sharp.

This means that when you are playing a piece of music in this key:

every time you see note which looks like an F, you should play an F-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a C, you should play a C-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a G, you should play a G-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a D, you should play a D-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like an A, you should play an A-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like an E, you should play an E-sharp;
every time you see a note which looks like a B, you should play a B-sharp;
in other words, *every* note should be played as a sharp!

Remember that although it may occur many times *during* a piece, the harmonic centre (the “home chord”) is usually the *final* chord of the piece. So a tune in the key of C-sharp major will probably finish on a chord of C-sharp.