

Basic Terms In Music



The Notes

In western music we use the letters A - G to name the notes that we play. These letters describe notes of a particular pitch. The same letters are repeated each octave.

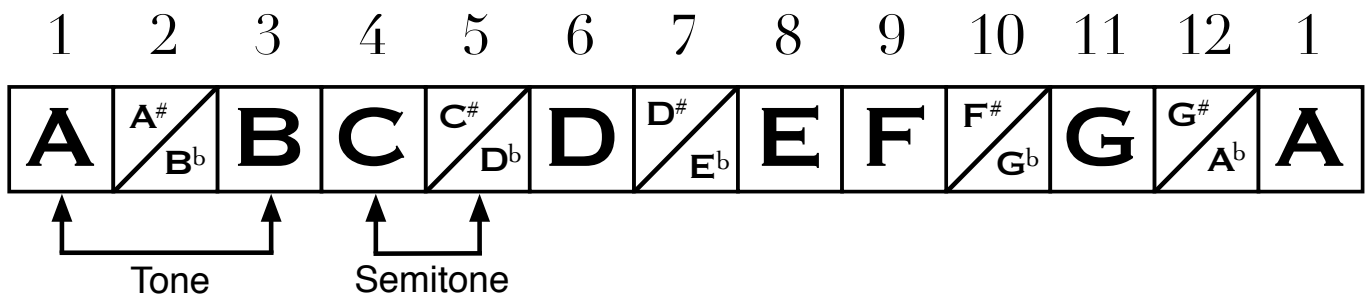
Pitch

The term 'pitch' refers to how high or low a note sounds. A note that sounds higher is said to have a higher pitch than a note which sounds lower than it. The pitch of a note is determined by the rate or frequency of which the sound source vibrates, for example a guitar string or a bell chiming.

Scales

Notes are grouped together into scales which form the basis of the melodies or tunes we listen to. The word 'scale' comes from a Greek word meaning 'steps' or 'ladder'. A scale is a group of ascending or descending notes in a particular order of pitch. It is important to study scales because music is based on scales.

The Chromatic Scale is made up of 12 pitches each one semitone apart and contains all of the notes used in Western music. All our scales are derived from the chromatic scale (see diagram).



Of all the scales derived from the chromatic scale, the most frequently used scale is the Major Scale. It is likely that 90% of all the music you have ever heard is based on the major scale. When we listen to music we are hearing a scale presented to us. Each part played, excluding non-tuned percussion, is made of notes from a scale. The adherence to a scale is what makes music sound 'right' to our ears. For example The C major Scale:-

C D E F G A B C

These notes are referred to as the Natural Notes (as opposed to sharps or flats) and correspond with the white keys on the piano (refer to the keyboard diagram). Notice that after we reach G the following note is A.

Octave

The term octave refers to the distance in pitch between 8 successive notes in a major scale. For example, the distance between the first C and the last C in the C major scale above is one octave. The fact that an octave is called an octave underlines the prominence the major scale has in our system of music; seeing there are 12 semitones in an octave and not 8.

Tonic/Root Note

The terms tonic and root note are nearly identical . The tonic is the note on which a scale or chord is based and gets its name from. For example, the C major scale above has the note C as its tonic. An A minor chord has the note A as its tonic. To save confusion we will refer to the **Tonic** as only applying to scales and the term **Root Note** as applying to chords. Only one note in a scale can be the tonic for that scale, but any of the notes in the same scale can be the root note of a chord.

Chords

Notes which are sounded together are called chords. Chords are usually formed with a combination of 3 to 7 different notes from the scale. Sounding 2 notes together does form a chord, but we will consider 3 notes as being the minimum for now, because major and minor chords (foundation chords) are made of 3 notes each. We will discover what major and minor means when we study Chord Construction.

Tone

Nearly every span (either up or down in pitch), between notes alphabetically is called a tone. This is the case between A to B, C to D, D to E, and F to G. (refer to chromatic scale diagram) Notice that B to C and E to F are only a semitone apart. A tone (also called a Whole Tone or Whole Step) is equal to a span of 2 frets on the guitar.

Semitone

A semitone (also called a Half Tone or Half Step) equals 1/2 of a tone. A semitone is equal to a span of 1 fret on the guitar.

Sharp

When a natural note is raised in pitch by one semitone it is called sharp. For example if we raise the pitch of C one semitone we have the note called C sharp; written as C#.

Flat b

When a natural note is lowered in pitch by one semitone it is called flat. For example if we lower the pitch of B one semitone we have the note called B flat, written as Bb.

Key Signature

Key signature, or Key for short, specifies the particular major scale which is being used to play a piece of music. For example:- the key of G major means that the G major scale is being used to make that music.

Intervals

The term interval refers to any unit of distance in pitch. This could be an octave, two octaves, a semitone, a tone or other intervals such as thirds and fifths. We will study intervals more closely when we look at chord construction.

The Major Scale

As already mentioned, most of the music that we hear in the west is based on the major scale. All major scales have the same characteristic, 'Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti, Do' sound to them. This is because they have the same set of intervals between their notes and these are:- T, T, S, T, T, T, S. This can be thought of as our Major Scale Formula. If we were to build a major scale using C as our tonic we would have the following:-

C T D T E S F T G T A T B S C

C major can be thought of as 'home base' in music, principally because it contains no sharps or flats. All other major scales contain either sharps or flats. For example:-

G A B C D E F# G
F G A B \flat C D E F