

Keys and Key Signatures

The **key** that a song is in determines the song's overall sound, known as its **tonality**.

The key also determines which scale (and therefore which notes), will normally be used to make up the melody of that song. For example, if a tune is written in the key of G major it is likely a composer will use notes from the G major or G pentatonic major scale. Because the tonic is the strongest note, many melodies will begin and/ or end with it.

A *key signature* tells you which key the music is written in. Key signatures are written immediately after the clef and are repeated on every new staff of music.

These two staves share the same key signature: one sharp, F#



Key signatures are written at the start of every staff, and each key signature is always written in the same way, as shown below:

- When you write an F# in a key signature, always write it across the F line.
- When you write a C# in a key signature, always write it in the C space.
- When you write a Bb in a key signature always write it across the B line.
- When you write an Eb in a key signature, always write it in the E space and so on.

C Major G Major D Major A Major

E Major B Major F# Major C# Major

F Major B \flat Major E \flat Major A \flat Major

D \flat Major G \flat Major C \flat Major

Accidentals

When a flat, sharp or natural sign is written before a note during a piece of music, it is called an accidental.

A natural (\natural) sign means that the note is returned to its 'natural' version.

For example: C# would become C, Eb would become E.

Majors and Relative Minors

Each key signature represents both a major key and its relative minor key.

- Two sharps – F# and C#, is the key signature for both D major and B minor.
- One sharp – F#, is the key signature for both G major and E minor
- Two flats – Bb and Eb, is the key signature for both Bb major and G minor and so on.

You can usually identify whether the key of a piece of music is major or minor by its overall sound; sometimes you can also identify this by seeing which note the melody begins or ends with.

If a piece of music has two flats in the key signature and begins and ends on the note of Bb, then it is likely to be in the key of Bb major; if the melody begins and ends on the note G, it is likely to be in the key of G minor.

If the chords are shown, then you can normally identify the key from the first and last chord.

Blues key signatures

Blues music does not fit neatly into the traditional rules of music theory that were originally developed for classical music. Because blues scales have a minor third interval between the first and third notes of the scale, it might appear that they should use minor key signatures, however, it is generally considered that major key signatures are more appropriate for blues.

The reason for this is that blues music is normally based on 'dominant harmony' – in other words, the chordal accompaniment to a blues usually consists of dominant 7th chords. As dominant 7th chords are essentially 'major' chords, this creates an underlying 'major harmony', which is best reflected by the use of major key signatures.

The fact that the melody or improvisation uses flattened notes against these major chords is simply a reflection of the method that blues music uses to create the musical tensions which form the core of the 'blues' sound.

Although using major key signatures means that a number of accidentals will have to be used when notating music taken from the blues scale, this is

actually an advantage, as it immediately demonstrates to the reader that the written music is blues-based and not in a standard major or minor key.

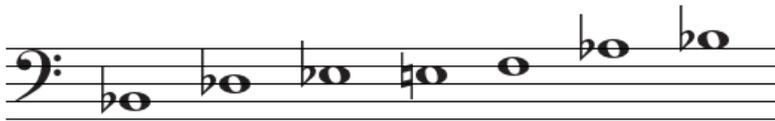
The key signature for each blues scale is therefore the same as for the major scale with the same tonic.

- The D blues scale has a key signature of two sharps – F# and C#, just like D major,
- The Bb blues scale has a key signature of two flats – Bb and Eb, just like Bb major and so on.

Remember that the above is a combination of two musical traditions and reflects the most common current usage. For blues scales and keys, the key signature only tells you what the key centre is – it does **not** tell you which notes are in the scale. In fact, each blues scale will need to use several accidentals as a result of the key signature.

Enharmonic spellings

The Fb note in the Bb blues scale...



...is another way of describing the pitch 'E'; just as the Cb in the F blues scale is the same pitch as 'B'. Whilst there would be no difference in the sound of either version, it is important in all scales that the pitch name of the note matches the corresponding scale degree. For example, in G blues scale, the minor third is notated as Bb rather than A# because the letter B is a third higher than G, whereas the letter A is only a second higher.