The Shearer Method: Guitar Harmony

by Alan Hirsh
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The study of harmony, or music theory, is an essential part of any musical training. In a nutshell, harmony may be defined as the language of music, complete with governing rules much like grammar. While the idea of an academic music study may seem tedious, the long-term benefits are entirely worthwhile. Mastering harmony provides a command of the music language that develops musicianship, enables reading, and ultimately guides musical expression. It also empowers your creativity in many stylistic directions, providing foundations for improvisation and composition.

Traditional approaches to harmony for many guitarists can be somewhat problematic. Since the piano is best suited for realizing harmonic principles, most harmony texts are keyboard-centric. This means concepts are theoretically learned from a keyboard perspective, then later applied/translated onto the guitar by the student. Such a disconnected approach is completely unnecessary, especially given that the guitar is a harmony instrument, capable of playing bass, melody and chord, all at the same time. The question is then why can’t a method be designed, that brings the subject to life on the guitar?

Aaron Shearer’s Basic Elements of Music Theory for the Guitar (published in 1965) was one of the first books to do so. The text presents a well-organized overview of its subject, though as stated in the preface, it “is …a book of what, not how.” While it still contains useful information and exercises, Shearer himself admits to its limitations stating that “it will explain the tonal materials from which music is composed, but not how they are organized to form a piece.”

About this Book

The Shearer Method—Guitar Harmony, is not only a book of what, but also of how and why. This comprehensive method is organized into eleven progressive units, beginning with Building Blocks and culminating with Harmonizing a Melody. While some content has been filtered by the natural limitations of the guitar, all principles are immediately applied for meaningful association in workbook-style exercises, both analytical and written. In addition, concepts are amply illustrated in excerpts taken from the literature including works by Sor, Carcassi, Carulli, Giuliani, and others. While excerpts have been chosen to be accessible and playable, those marked with the 🎧, may be listened to at the Guitar Harmony Online Supplement at the AaronShearerFoundation.org. Here you can also find nine Aural Skills Training modules that correspond to exercises at the end of units, a Fingerboard Interval Trainer, and a wealth of other resources for both students and teachers. To access the Guitar Harmony Online Supplement, go to aaronshearerfoundation.org and choose Online Supplement, then Guitar Harmony Book IV. To login, type the password: gharmony-135

This book has been designed to work in conjunction with other methods (such as The Shearer Method Book II—Classical Guitar Developments) and may also meet the needs of a one-year high school or one-semester college theory course. The text assumes, at the very minimum, the student has already established foundational training in the guitar. If you are a raw beginner, it is recommended to first work thoroughly through The Shearer Method Book I—Classical Guitar Foundations or similar methodology.
As a prerequisite, the student should possess basic right- and left-hand technique and:

- read notes and understand the fingerboard in the open position.
- have an understanding of rhythm and meter.
- play chords, strummed, arpeggiated, or blocked.
- play scales in the open position.

As with any method book, students should never go at it alone. Always study with a qualified teacher to review materials and to have your written work checked (no answers for written exercises have been included in this text). In addition, teachers should feel free to expand on any concepts, especially where applied—such as the analysis, writing, and/or drills in the Aural Skills sections.

It is the hope, that this book will lay a foundational understanding that will inspire the student to pursue a deeper level of study and to make music more than a mere reading of notes, but a meaningful language of artistic expression.
Guitar Harmony

BUILDING BLOCKS

Steps
The study of harmony, begins with the smallest of musical patterns called the step—the shortest distance from one note to another. On the staff, the step appears as a change of consecutive notes from space to line, or line to space which may ascend or descend.

Whole Step and Half Steps
A series of seven consecutive steps in the same direction creates a pattern called a scale. Play the following:

Notice that not all steps are the same. Some steps are two frets, or a string change, apart—called whole steps:

...while others are one fret apart—called half steps:

Now view the whole/half step order of the scale, noting that half steps occur only between E-F and B-C. All other steps are whole.
The Major Scale
When steps are ordered as whole-whole-half-whole-whole-half, they form a pattern called a major scale. Each of the seven steps, also called scale degrees, is indicated by a Roman numeral. Thus half steps occur between III-IV and VII-I.

C major scale

The tonic, or “home note” (degree I) names the scale and sounds strong and final. Thus, a major scale beginning and ending on C is a C-major scale.

Chromatic Notes
Other major scales are created when notes other than C are the tonic. For example, a G-major scale has G as the tonic; F is the tonic for a F-major scale. Both scales will sound major, as long as the same order of whole/half steps (w-w-h-w-w-h) is maintained; but this requires using chromatic signs. Chromatic signs alter natural notes, raising them one fret with a sharp (♯) or lowering them one fret with a flat (♭).

To better understand, play the following G scale:

Degree VII sounds incorrect; however, if F is raised to F♯, the whole/half step order is corrected, making the scale major. This also creates a “pull” or attraction from VII- to tonic, an important characteristic of all major scales. Degree VII, a half step from the tonic, is called a leading tone.
REVIEW
• The smallest distance from note to note is called a step which may be either half or whole.
• A major scale is a pattern of steps—w-w-h-w-w-w-h.
• The starting and ending note (I) called the tonic names the scale.
• VII is called the leading tone.
• Among the natural notes, half steps are only found between B-C and E-F. All other steps are whole.
• Chromatic notes maintain the major-scale whole-/half-step pattern when the tonic is other than C.

MAJOR SCALE EXERCISES
For each of the scales below, add appropriate chromatic signs (♭) or (♯) to the left of notes to make the scales major. Do not alter the tonic. After writing signs, check your answer by playing the scales on the guitar and listening for the correct whole-/half-step order.

Example:

1.

2.

3.

4.
The Key

All notes in a scale are collectively called the key. The key establishes a setting or environment for a piece of music. For example, notes in a C-major scale may be used to form a melody in the key of C major. All notes in Twinkle, Twinkle below, belong to the C-major scale. The melody also begins and ends on C; thus, it is in the key of C major.

Transposing

Other keys are used to sing Twinkle, Twinkle at lower or higher pitch levels. For example, when F is the starting/ending note, the piece is in the key of F major. However, the melody in this key requires a B♭ on the word “how,” making a whole step from “star-how” and a half step from “I-wonder.” Moving all melody notes to a new pitch level while maintaining their note-to-note relationship is called transposing.

Musicians understand the key of a piece by its key signature, indicated by a chromatic sign(s) displayed at the start of each staff.
The key signature applies to all affected notes throughout a piece. Thus, the $b$ sign on the B line at the beginning of the staff means that all B's, anywhere in the piece (high or low register), will be B$. This is the key signature of F major.

While there are 15 different major keys, only a limited number are common within the repertoire of guitar music (due largely to the instrument’s open strings and the way it’s tuned). Typical major keys in guitar music are ¹:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key</th>
<th>Chromatic signs</th>
<th>Key Signature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C major</td>
<td>no sharps or flats:</td>
<td>![KeySignature_C_major]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G major</td>
<td>1 sharp: F$ #$</td>
<td>![KeySignature_G_major]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D major</td>
<td>2 sharps: F$ #$, C$ #$</td>
<td>![KeySignature_D_major]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A major</td>
<td>3 sharps: F$ #$, C$ #$ and G$ #$</td>
<td>![KeySignature_A_major]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E major</td>
<td>4 sharps: F$ #$, C$ #$, G$ #$ and D$ #$</td>
<td>![KeySignature_E_major]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F major</td>
<td>1 flat: B$ #$</td>
<td>![KeySignature_F_major]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B$ major (less frequent)</td>
<td>2 flats: B$ #$, E$ #$</td>
<td>![KeySignature_B_major]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Identifying Keys

The key of C major has no sharps and flats. The easiest way to identify a sharp key signature is to look at the last sharp (on the right), which is the leading tone of the key:

- The last sharp of $\text{ }$ is C$ \#$, which is the leading tone of A major.
- The last sharp of $\text{ }$ is D$ \#$, which is the leading tone of E major.

For flat keys, you must first memorize that F major has one flat. For all other flat keys, look to the next-to-the-last flat in the signature. This names the key:

- The next-to-the-last flat in $\text{ }$ is B$ \#$, which names the key.
- The next-to-the-last flat in $\text{ }$ is E$ \#$, which names the key.

¹ For a complete listing of Key Signatures, see Reference p. 126.
Intervals

A step is more accurately understood as a distance between pitches, called an *interval*. Learning to recognize intervals aids music reading. Instead of processing one note at a time in isolation, you read patterns of notes, which later associate with fret/string patterns on the guitar. The situation is similar to language: instead of reading individual letters, we recognize patterns of letters. An interval can be anywhere from a small step to a large skip and is named by a number representing the total pitches it includes. For example:

![Intervals Diagram]

Notice the eight-note interval above is called an *octave*, not an 8\textsuperscript{th}. Another unique interval is the *unison* which refers to the sounding of the same note—something not always payable on the guitar and is neither skip nor step:

![Unison Diagram]

Interval Characteristics

Intervals can be *melodic*—two notes sounding consecutively, or *harmonic*—two notes sounding simultaneously:

![Melodic Harmonic Diagram]

On the staff:

- even numbered intervals—2\textsuperscript{nd}, 4\textsuperscript{th}, 6\textsuperscript{th}, and octaves—consist of a *space* note and a *line* note.
- odd number intervals—3\textsuperscript{rd}, 5\textsuperscript{th}, and 7\textsuperscript{th}—are both *space* notes or both *line* notes.
Interval Qualities

Some intervals sound pleasing to the ear—consonant; some sound displeasing—dissonant. The way an interval sounds is called its quality. Qualities create an emotional connection to music, making us feel sad, happy, restful, or anxious.

There are five different interval qualities—major, minor, perfect, diminished and augmented. We begin by examining the major, minor and perfect intervals naturally formed between the tonic and other degrees of a major scale. Intervals that occur naturally within a key are called diatonic. The unison, 4th, 5th, and 8ve (octave) are all perfect (abbreviated “P”); all other intervals are either major or minor.

In the example below, the tonic remains as the upper note ascends the scale, creating expanding intervals. The diatonic 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 7th are all major (abbreviated with “M”). Play and listen to these on the guitar. The beginning unison (which is not possible) should be played as a single note with p; all other intervals, play p and a finger.

Notice that the M2 and M7 sound dissonant while the other intervals are consonant.

This same interval expansion formed with tonic as the lowest note, transposed to F and G major:
Interval expansion with tonic as the highest note and the lower note descending the scale produces the minor intervals 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 7<sup>th</sup> (abbreviated with “m”). Notice the unison, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and octave are still perfect.

**C major**

![Diagram of C major intervals](image)

**G major**

![Diagram of G major intervals](image)

**E major**

![Diagram of E major intervals](image)

---

**REVIEW**

- An interval is a distance between pitches.
- Intervals may be either melodic or harmonic.
- Some harmonic intervals sound dissonant (2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup>), all other intervals sound consonant.
- Intervals are diatonic when they occur naturally with the key.
- The diatonic unison, 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and octave are always perfect (abbreviated “P”).
- All other diatonic intervals may be major (abbreviated with “M”) or minor (abbreviated with “m”).
Comparing Major and Minor Qualities
Major intervals are larger than minor intervals by one half step or one fret. Thus, whole steps are *major 2nds* and half steps are *minor 2nds*. There are two ways to make a minor interval from a major—*lower* the top note or *raise* the bottom note.

Analyzing interval qualities
It’s easy to recognize an interval’s size, but identifying its quality requires thinking diatonically, that is whether or not the notes occur naturally within a key. For example, in the key of C major, C-F is diatonic, but C-F♯ is not, since F♯ is not in the key. A chromatic sign, which is not part of a key, is called an *accidental*:

The Diatonic Test
Testing to see whether or not an interval is *diatonic* is a way to determine all qualities. This is done by analyzing the interval from its lowest note and giving it temporary “tonic” status. To understand, consider:

- D is the lowest note and is temporarily considered a “tonic.”
- **QUESTION:** Is F♯ diatonic (occurring naturally) to the key of D major (recall the D major key signature)?
- **ANSWER:** Yes, thus D-F♯ is a *major 3rd*. If the upper note were F, a half-step less than diatonic, it would be a *m3*.

Next, analyze:

- E is the lowest note and is temporarily considered a “tonic.”
- **QUESTION:** Is C diatonic to the key of E major (recall the E major key signature)?
- **ANSWER:** E to C♯ is diatonic; therefore E-C is a *minor 6th*. 


**Diminished and Augmented Intervals**

The diatonic test should be applied to perfect intervals whose quality is neither major nor minor. If the interval is less than perfect, it is diminished (abbreviated “o”); if the interval is greater than perfect, it is augmented (abbreviated “+”). Both the o5 and +4 sound very dissonant.

![Diminished and Augmented Intervals](image)

Notice above that while the o5 and the +4 are spelled differently, they sound exactly the same. This is because the D♭ and C♯ are the enharmonic, meaning having the same pitch but different spellings. Thus, the two intervals are also enharmonic with one another.

Intervals such as the 2nd, 3rd, 6th, or 7th may also be diminished or augmented. If an interval is a half-step larger than major, it’s augmented; if it is a half-step smaller than minor, it’s diminished. In such instances, accidentals are always added:

![Double Sharp and Flat Signs](image)

**Double Sharp and Flat Signs**

Sometimes augmented and diminished intervals are formed using special chromatic signs, the double sharp (\#) which sharps the note twice, or the double flat (bb) which flats the note twice.

![Double Sharp and Flat Signs](image)

Notes with double sharps and flats may appear confusing at first, since they are enharmonic with other natural notes. For example, C♯ = D and E♭ = D. However re-spelling these notes, enharmonically changes its interval name.
**REVIEW**—the Diatonic Test:

- Analyze the interval from its lowest sounding note.
- Temporarily consider the lowest note the “tonic” of a major key.
- Determine if the higher note is diatonic to that key.
  - If diatonic, then the interval will be major or perfect.
  - If not diatonic, then determine how much larger or smaller, and identify its quality, either minor, diminished, or augmented.

You should work toward quickly recognizing intervals, while visualizing their pattern on the guitar. The immediate understanding of interval and fingerboard patterns greatly facilitates music reading and learning. For a complete listing of all interval fingerboard patterns, see pp. 129-31.

**Identifying Intervals Aurally**

In addition to understanding notation, intervals must be recognized by their distinctive sound. One special consideration: since the +5 and o4 are enharmonic with one another, they are aurally recognized as one-in-the-same interval called the tritone, meaning an interval of three (tri-) whole steps (tones).

An easy way to learn interval sounds is by associating them with the beginnings of well-known tunes. In the table below, the interval in the left column indicates the first two ascending notes of the tune listed in the middle column. If you can think of a better tune association, list it in the right column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interval</th>
<th>Associated well-known tune</th>
<th>List your own tune, if better</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M2</td>
<td>Happy Birthday</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M3</td>
<td>O when the Saints</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P4</td>
<td>Here Comes the Bride</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P5</td>
<td>Twinkle Twinkle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M6</td>
<td>My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M7</td>
<td>Superman (movie soundtrack)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8ve</td>
<td>Somewhere over the rainbow</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m2</td>
<td>Jaws</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m3</td>
<td>Brahms Lullaby</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m6</td>
<td>Go Down Moses (spiritual), In my Life (the Beatles)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m7</td>
<td>Somewhere (West Side Story)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TT (Tritone)</td>
<td>Maria (West Side Story)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
TRANSPOSING
For each transposition of *Twinkle, Twinkle*, add the correct chromatic sign(s) either sharp(s) or flat(s) to maintain the correct relation of the melody notes.

1. Ex:
   Key of D major

2. Ex:
   Key of E major

3. Ex:
   Key of G major

4. Ex:
   Key of A major

5. Ex:
   Key of B♭ major
KEY SIGNATURE ANALYSIS
Study the key signatures table (p. 5), then determine the major keys for each of the melodies. In the last measure write the key signatures, making sure to neatly align chromatic signs on the correct line or space. For example:

```
example:

\[\text{\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example.png}}\]

write:

Key: D major
```

1.

\[\text{\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example.png}}\]

Key:______

2.

\[\text{\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example.png}}\]

Key:______

3.

\[\text{\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example.png}}\]

Key:______

4.

\[\text{\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example.png}}\]

Key:______

5.

\[\text{\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example.png}}\]

Key:______

6.

\[\text{\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{example.png}}\]

Key:______
INTERVAL ANALYSIS—I
Correctly identify the interval (either melodic or harmonic) by number.

Ex:

1. 2. 3. 4.

5. 6. 7. 8.

9. 10. 11. 12.

13. 14. 15. 16.

17. 18. 19. 20.

21. 22. 23. 24.

25. 26. 27. 28.

29. 30. 31. 32.