The Shearer Method: Guitar Harmony

by Alan Hirsh

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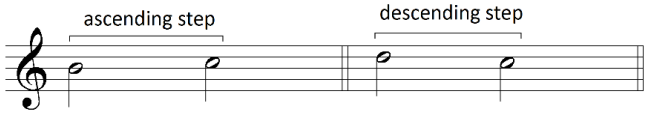
Guitar Harmony

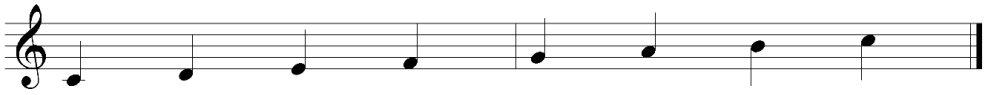
BUILDING BLOCKS

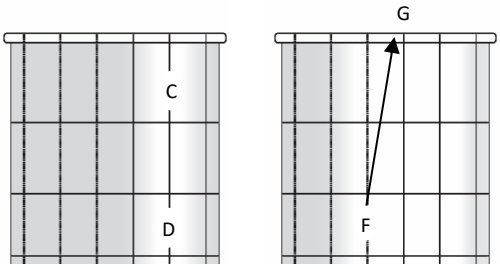
Steps

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.



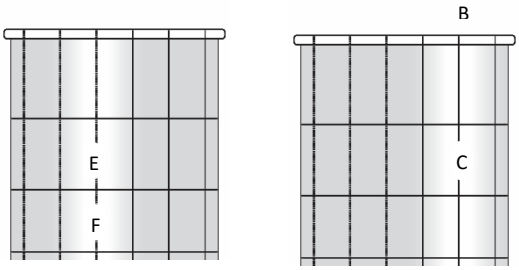
Whole Step and Half Steps

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*:



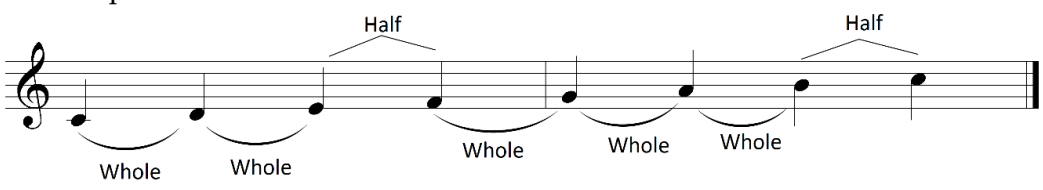
Whole Steps

…while others are one fret apart—called *half steps:*



Half Steps

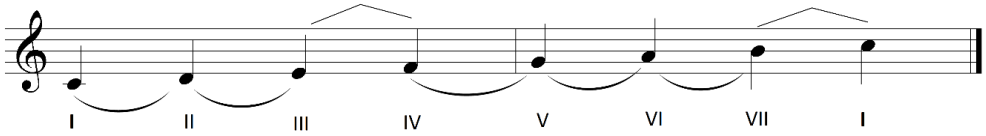
Now view the whole/half step order of the scale, noting that half steps occur *only* between E-F and B-C. All other steps are whole.



The Major Scale

When steps are ordered as *whole-whole-**half**-whole-whole-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**.

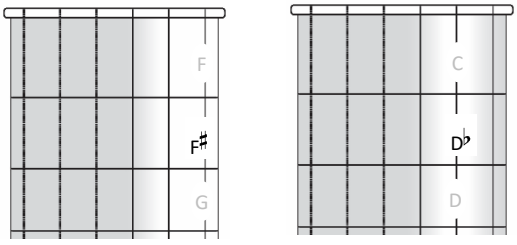
C major scale



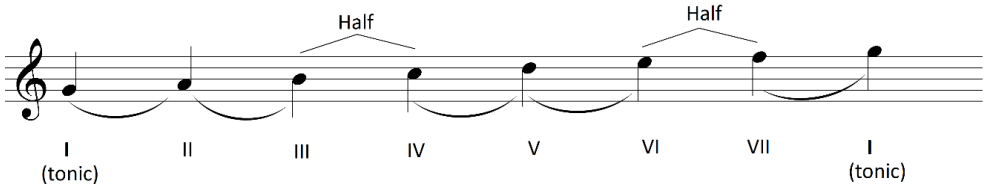
The *tonic,* or "home note" (degree **I**) names the scale and sounds strong and final. Thus, a major scale beginning and ending on C is a *C-major scale*.

Chromatic Notes

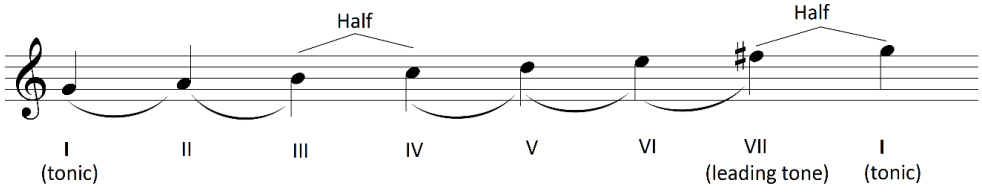
Other major scales are created when notes other than C are the *tonic*. For example, a G-major scale has G as the *tonic*; F is the *tonic* for a F-major scale Both scales will sound major, as long as the same order of whole/half steps (*w-w-**h**-w-w-w-**h***) is maintained; but this requires using *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.*

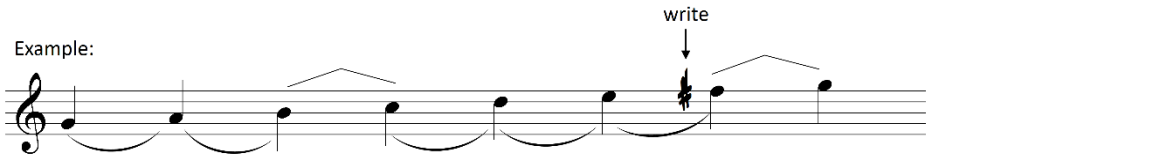


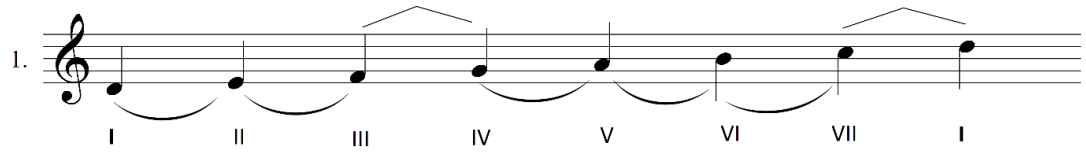
REVIEW

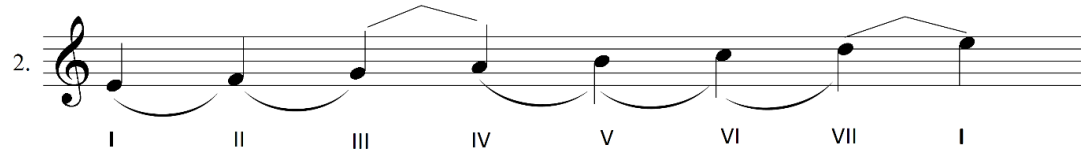
- The smallest distance from note to note is called a *step* which may be either *half* or *whole.*
- A *major scale* is a pattern of steps—*w-w-**h**-w-w-w-**h.***
- The starting and ending note (**I**) called the *tonic* names the scale.
- **VII** is called the *leading tone.*
- Among the natural notes, *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.

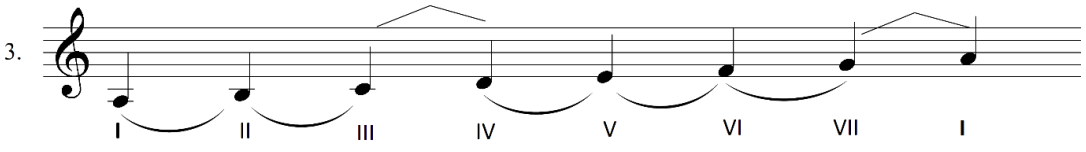
MAJOR SCALE EXERCISES

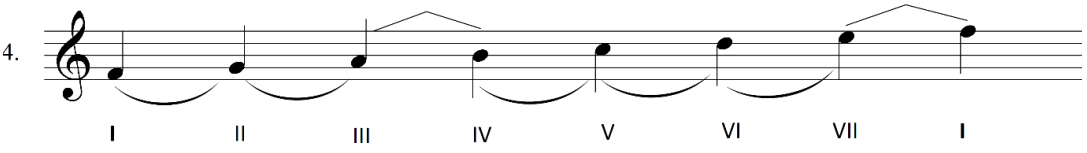
For each of the scales below, add appropriate chromatic signs (♯) or (♭) to the left of notes to make the scales major. Do not alter the tonic. After writing signs, check your answer by playing the scales on the guitar and listening for the correct whole-/half-step order.





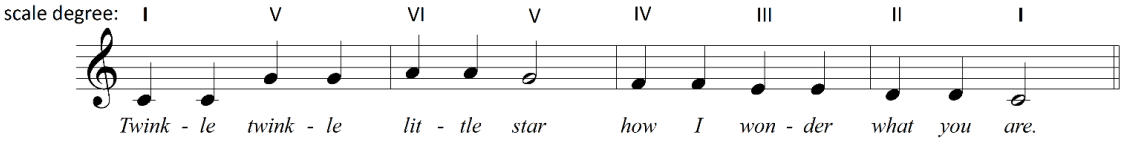






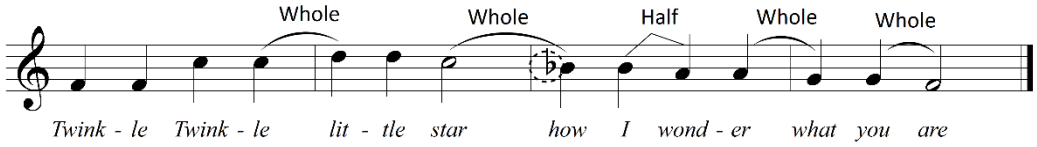
The Key

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*.

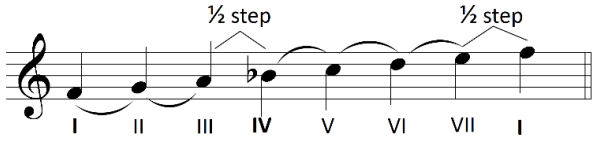


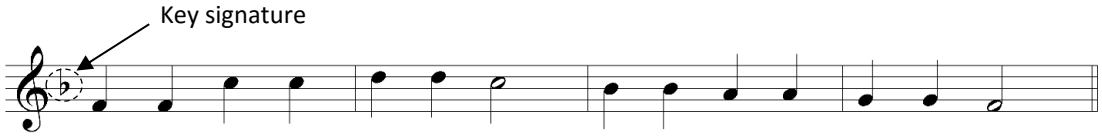
Transposing

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*.

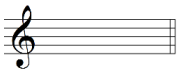
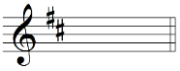
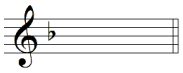
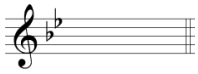
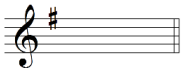
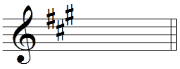
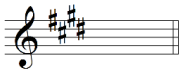


Notice that B♭ also transposes the correct whole-/half-step order of the major scale:

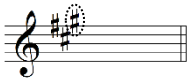
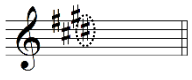


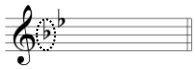
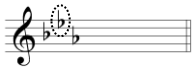
Musicians understand the key of a piece by its *key signature,* indicated by a chromatic sign(s) displayed at the start of each staff.

The key signature applies to all affected notes throughout a piece. Thus, the ♭ 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]:

Key	Chromatic signs	Key Signature
C major	no sharps or flats:	
G major	1 sharp: **F♯**	
D major	2 sharps: **F♯, C♯**	
A major	3 sharps: **F♯, C♯** and **G♯**	
E major	4 sharps: **F♯, C♯, G♯** and **D♯**	
F major	1 flat: **B♭**	
B♭ major (less frequent)	2 flats: **B♭, E♭**	

Identifying Keys

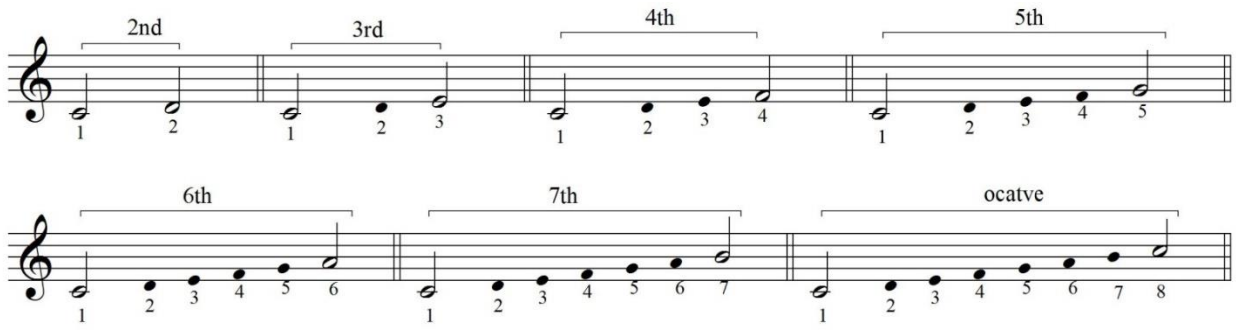
The key of C major has no sharps and flats. The easiest way to identify a sharp key signature is to look at the last sharp (on the *right)*), which is the leading tone of the key:

- The last sharp of is G♯, which is the leading tone of *A major*.
- The last sharp of 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:

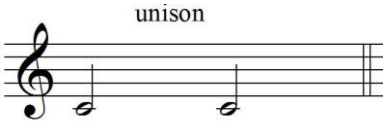
- The next-to the-last flat in is B♭, which names the key.
- The next-to the-last flat in is E♭, which names the key.

[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:

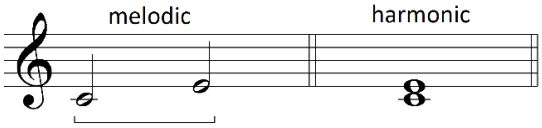


Notice the eight-note interval above is called an *octave*, not an 8th. Another unique interval is the *unison* which refers to the sounding of the same note—something not always payable on the guitar and is neither skip nor step:



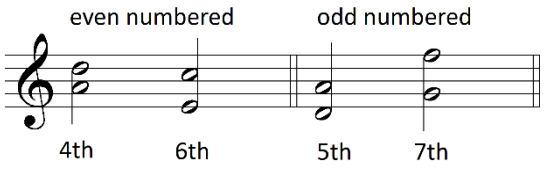
Interval Characteristics

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



On the staff:

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

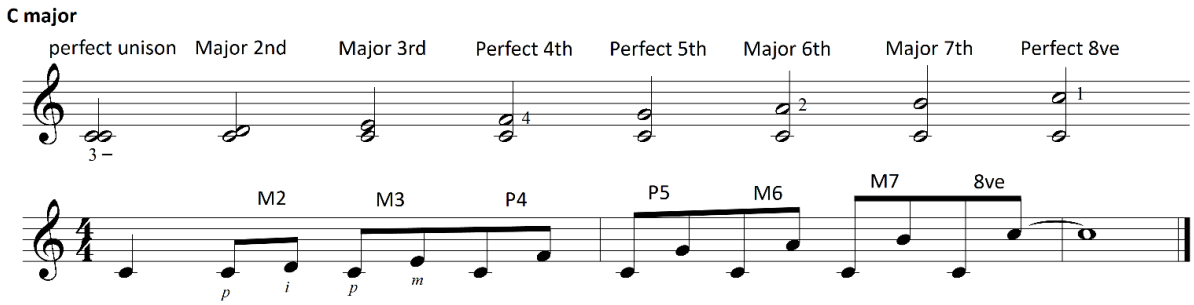


Interval Qualities

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.

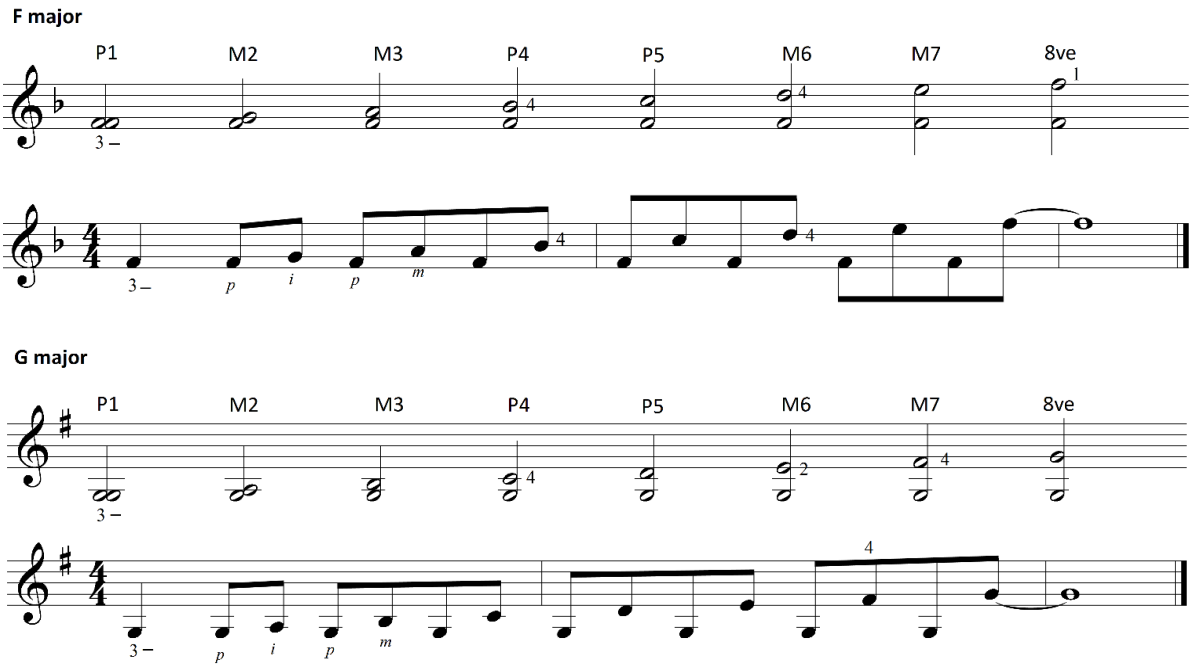
There are five different interval *qualities—major, minor, perfect, diminished* and *augmented*. We begin by examining the *major, minor* and *perfect* intervals naturally formed between the tonic and other degrees of a major scale. Intervals that occur naturally within a key are called *diatonic*. The 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.

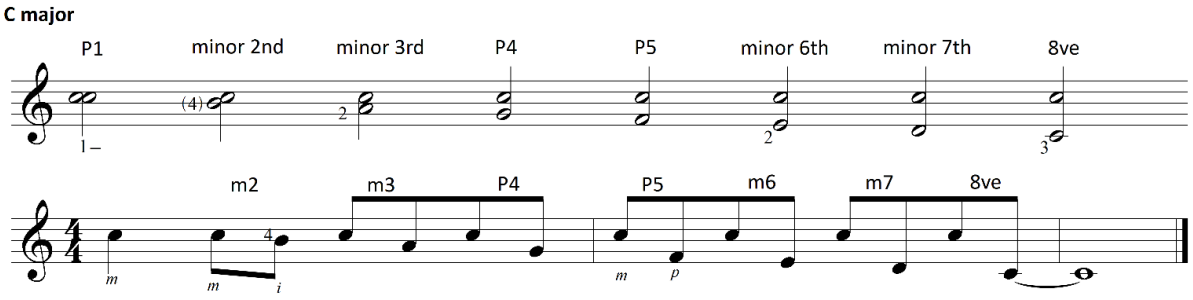


Notice that the M2 and M7 sound *dissonant* while the other intervals are *consonant*.

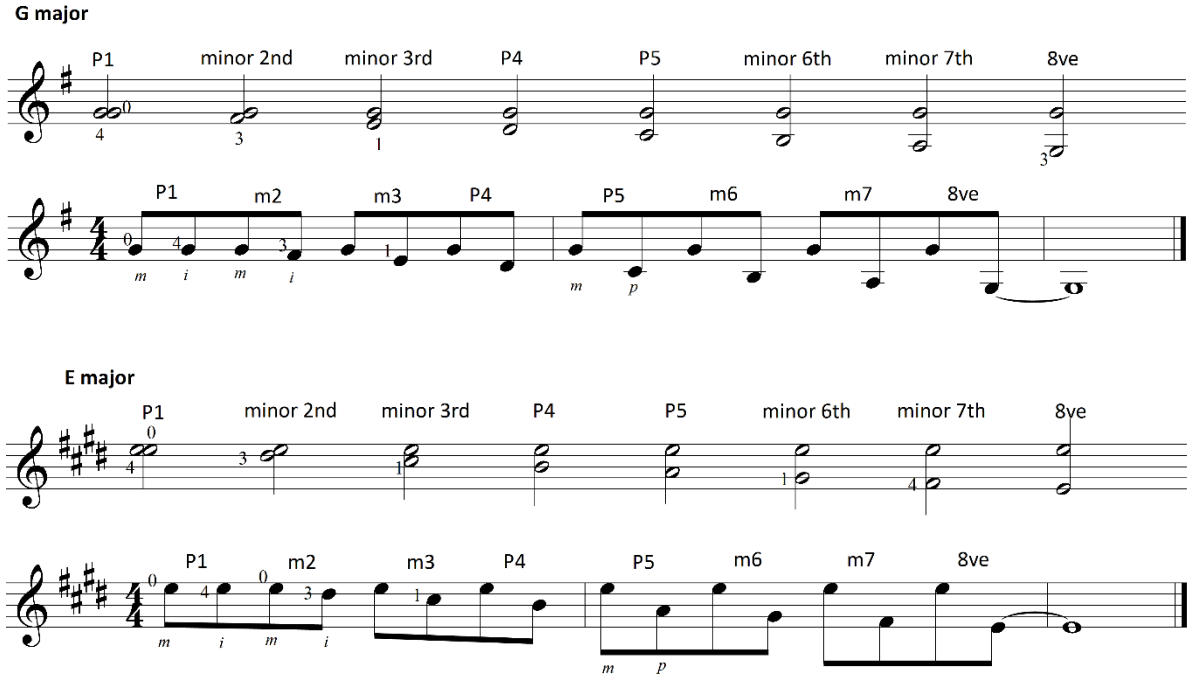
This same interval expansion formed with *tonic* as the lowest note, transposed to F and G major:



Interval expansion with tonic as the highest note and the lower note descending the scale produces the minor intervals 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 7th (abbreviated with "m"). Notice the unison, 4th, 5th, and octave are still *perfect*.



Descending intervals is also played in the key of G and E major. For both, the beginning unison is playable:

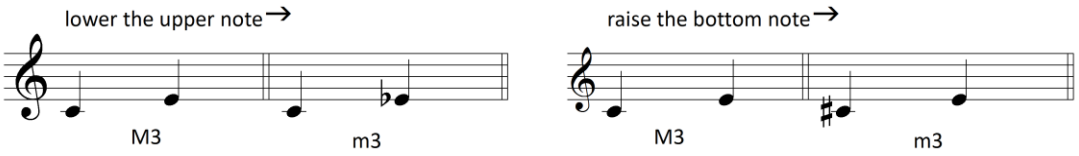


REVIEW

- An interval is a distance between pitches.
- Intervals may be either melodic or harmonic
- Some harmonic Intervals sound *dissonant* (2nd and 7th), all other intervals sound *consonant.*
- Intervals are *diatonic* when they occur naturally with the key.
- The diatonic unison, 4th, 5th, and 8ve (octave) are always *perfect* (abbreviated "P").
- All other diatonic intervals may be major (abbreviated with "M") or *minor* (abbreviated with "m").

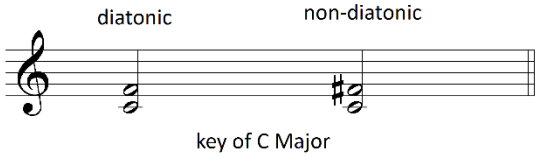
Comparing Major and Minor Qualities

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.

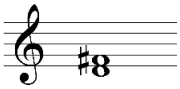


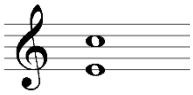
Analyzing interval qualities

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*:



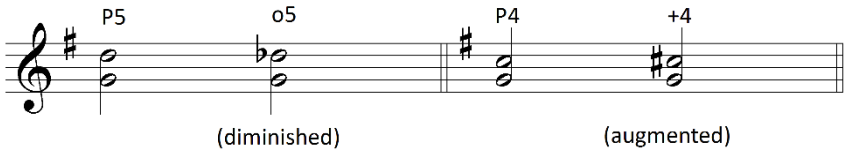
The Diatonic Test

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.

.

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

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

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 (*tone*s).

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.

Tune Table

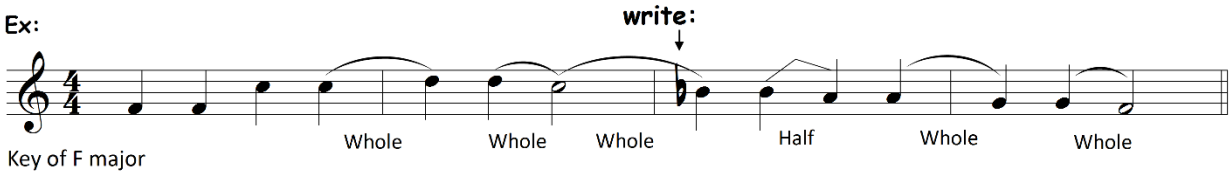
Major and Perfect Ascending		
Interval	Associated well-known tune	List your own tune, if better
M2	*Happy Birthday*	
M3	*O when the Saints*	
P4	*Here Comes the Bride*	
P5	*Twinkle Twinkle*	
M6	*My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean*	
M7	*Superman (movie soundtrack)*	
8ve	*Somewhere over the rainbow*	
Minor and (tritone) Ascending		
m2	*Jaws*	
m3	*Brahms Lullaby*	
m6	*Go Down Moses (spiritual)* , *In my Life* (the Beatles)	
m7	*Somewhere* (West Side Story)	
TT (Tritone)	*Maria* (West Side Story)	

UNIT I—EXERCISES

TRANSPOSING

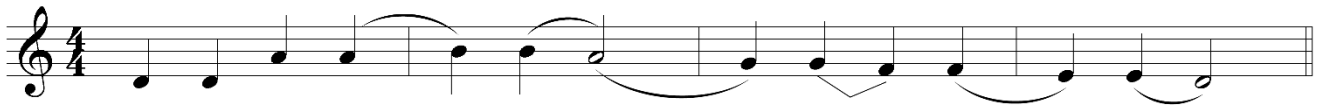
For each transpoition of *Twinkle, Twinkle*, add the correct chormatic sign(s) either sharp(s) or flat(s) to maintain the correct relation of the melody notes.

Ex:



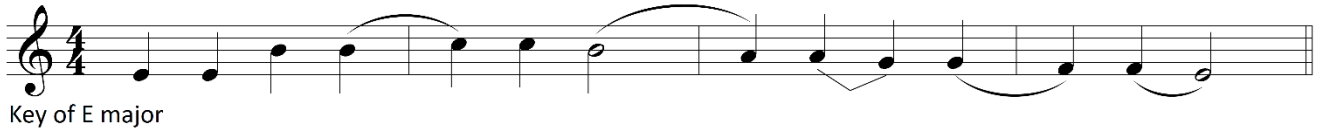
Key of F major

1.



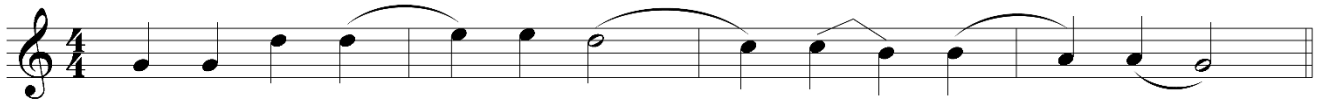
Key of D major

2.



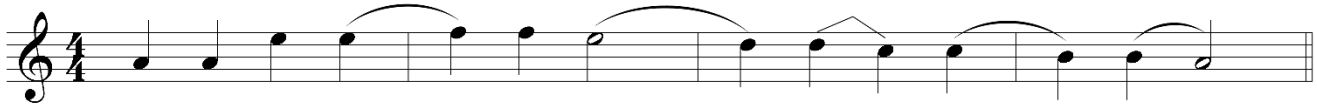
Key of E major

3.



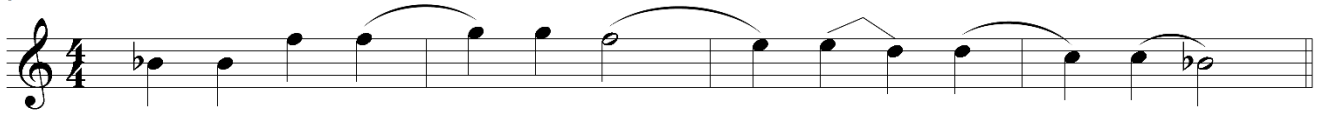
Key of G major

4.



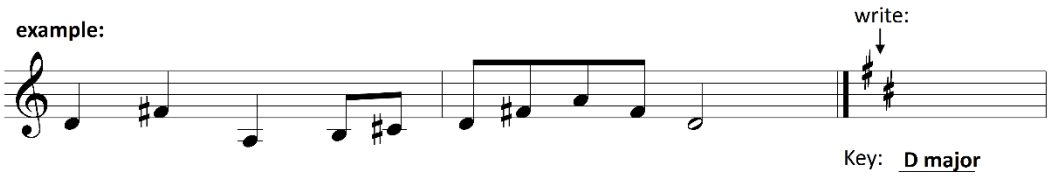
Key of A major

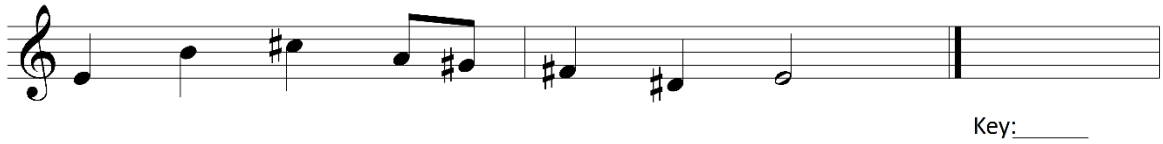
5.



Key of B♭ major

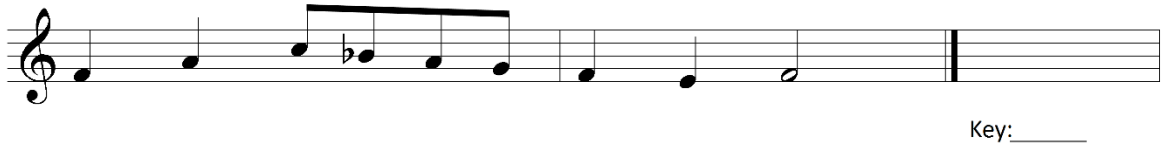
KEY SIGNATURE ANALYSIS

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:

1.

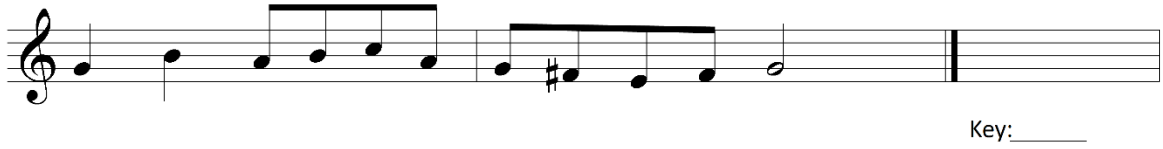


Key:_____

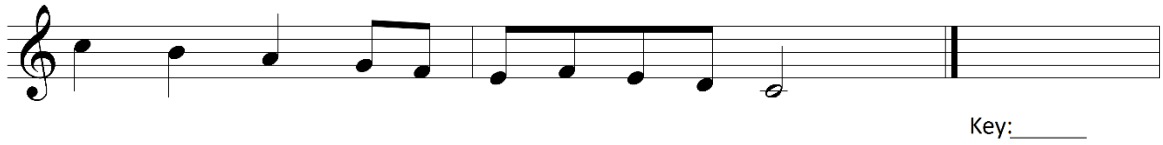
2.



Key:_____

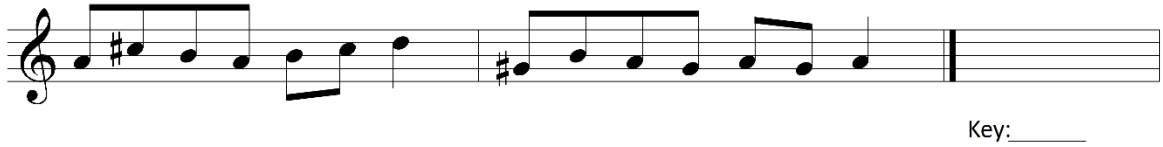
3.

Key:_____

4.

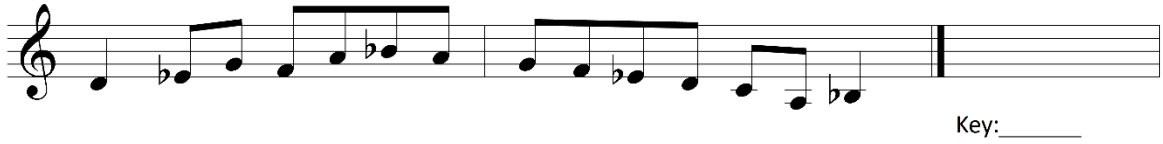


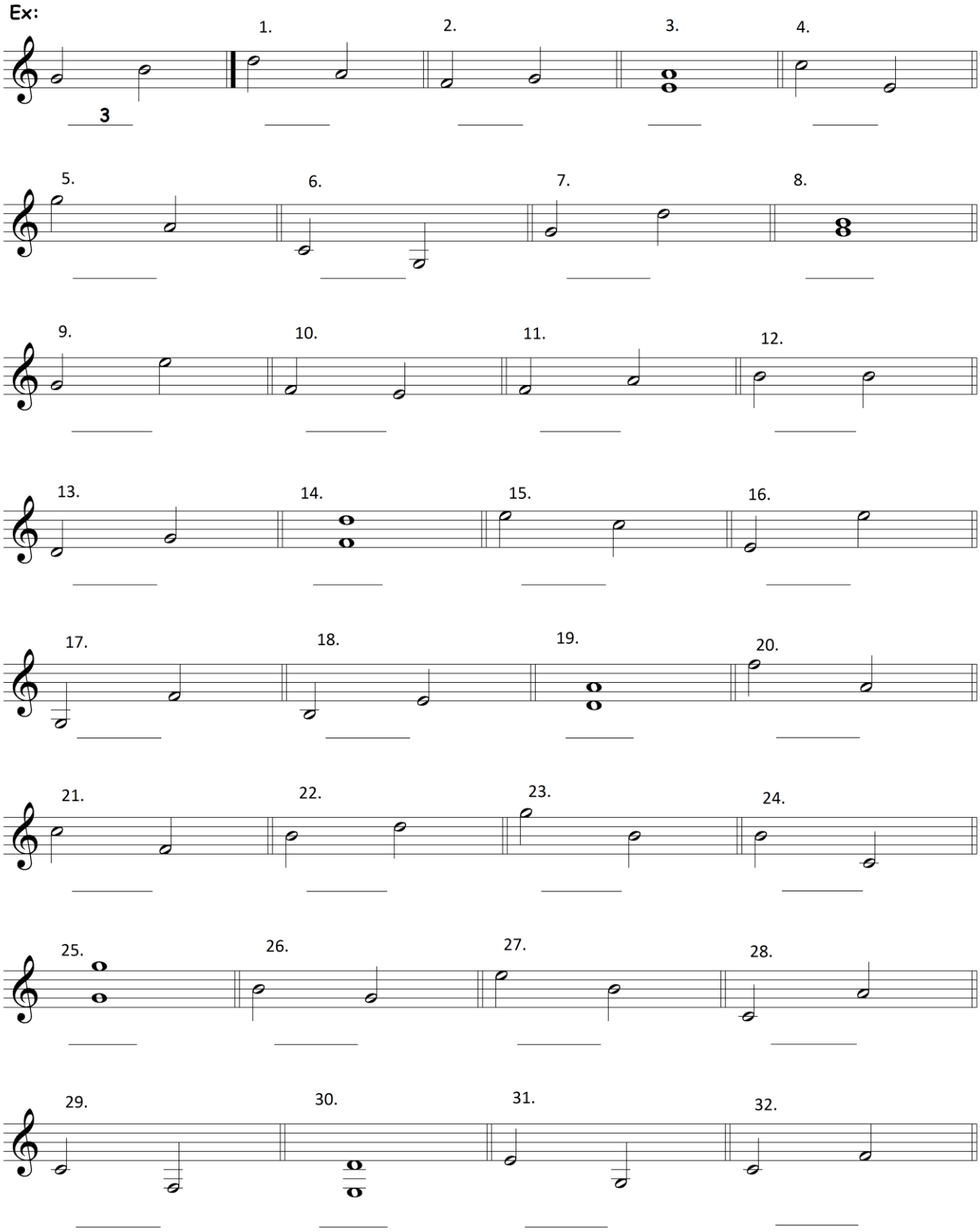
Key:_____

5.



Key:_____

6.

Key:_____

INTERVAL ANALYSIS—I

Correctly identify the interval (either melodic or harmonic) by number.