



ELLEN O'REILLY

BEGINNERS' THEORY NINJA ELLEN REVISITS THE BASICS

In the last few columns we've explored some fairly heavy territory with modes, so it's time we went back to basics. This time I want to discuss key signatures and how the circle of fifths can help you learn them.

A key signature can be described as the tonal centre of a piece of music, and it tells you what notes you can play in order to sound melodic within that key. The two most common kinds of keys are the major and minor keys, and these are related. Every major key has its relative minor key: the relative minor of C major is A minor, because they share all the same notes in a different order. You can find the relative minor of any major key by going backwards three frets from the root of the major key.

There are 12 major keys: C, D \flat ,

D, E \flat , E, F, F \sharp /G \flat , G, A \flat , A, B \flat , B. The F \sharp /G \flat is enharmonic, which means that it sounds the same but it is spelled differently. This can be illustrated in the circle of fifths. By looking at this visual representation of the circle of fifths you can also see the relative minor of each key.

You can also use the circle to see how many and what kind of accidentals (sharps and flats) there are in each key. It helps to look at the circle as if it was a clock, with C major being at 12 o'clock. As you go clockwise around the circle of fifths, add a sharp (\sharp). As you go anti-clockwise, add a flat (\flat).

When learning each key signature you must know the order that the accidentals go in, and it's really useful to use the following rhymes to remember them. To remember the order of sharps, learn the acronym Father Charles Goes Down And Ends Battle. To remember the order of flats, it's Battle Ends And Down Goes Charles' Father.

Another tip for identifying the key signature of a written piece of music is by looking at the last sharp or second last flat in the key signature. For example, if you see three sharps next to the clef these will be F \sharp C \sharp G \sharp . The last sharp is G \sharp , so move up a semitone and you get A, therefore you are in the key of A major. If you see three flats then these will be B \flat E \flat A \flat : the second last flat is E \flat , therefore you are in the key of E \flat . Always move up one semitone from the last sharp or go to the penultimate flat to identify the key. Good luck!

