

TONALITY AND KEY

WHAT IS TONALITY?

The definition of tonality has changed throughout history. The root word of tonality is “tonal”; other words used include “tonic” or “center”. The tonality of a piece is generally defined by the key signature (or key) of a piece of music, in which the center or tonic is derived.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TONALITY

The key signature generally confirms the tonality of a piece of music. Any given piece of music will always start and end on the tonic of the piece, as given by the key signature. The exception to this is the Fugues written by J.S. Bach (beyond the scope of this website). Tonality makes sure that the piece is grounded, so to speak, with a particular key; other keys may also exist in the piece through modulation. Modulation is the temporary change from one key to another, by changing the tonic chord or tonal center.

WHAT IS A SEMITONE? A TONE?

A semitone is the distance between one note to the next. A tone is the distance between two notes (or 2 semitones), whether the note are black or white.

WHAT ARE SHARPS AND FLATS?

In the key signature or by an accidental:

1. A sharp raises a note one semitone
2. A flat lowers a note one semitone

Other accidentals include:

1. Natural: cancels previous accidentals and represents the unaltered pitch of a note
2. Double Sharp: Raises a note two semitones, or one tone
3. Double Flat: Lowers a note two semitones, or one tone

WHAT IS A KEY SIGNATURE?

A key signature is a series of sharp or flat symbols placed on the staff, designating notes that are consistently played one semitone higher or lower than the equivalent natural notes unless otherwise altered with an accidental. Every piece of music has a key signature at the beginning; pieces that change keys will have a different key signature placed after a double bar. Only one major and minor scale does not have a key signature: C major and A minor.

WHY USE A KEY SIGNATURE?

Key signatures are generally used for two reasons. The most important reason is to establish the key (tonality) of the piece of music. The other reason is that the notes that are altered by the sharps and flats in the key signature are permanent, unless they are changed by an accidental or key change.