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MUSIC SCHOOL

Piano Lessons

Music Theory

What is Music Theory?

Music theory is a practice musicians use to understand and communicate the language of music. Musical theory examines the fundamentals of music. It also provides a system to interpret musical compositions.

Knowing how music works will make the music production process easier and help you become an effective music producer.

•Benefits of learning music theory:

- Improve your musical development
- Help you understand how music works
- Help you break through creative blocks
- Make it easier to build chord progressions and melodies
- Help you make informed composition decisions
- Help you achieve expression and evoke emotion
- Improve your critical listening skills
- Speed up your workflow
- Improve your musical form skills
- Make it easy to communicate with other musicians
- Deepen your appreciation for music
- Improve your improvisation skills

- Improve your song arrangement skills
- Help you discover new creative possibilities

For example, basic music theory defines the elements that form harmony, melody, and rhythm. It identifies compositional elements such as song form, tempo, notes, chords, key signatures, intervals, scales, and more. It also recognizes musical qualities such as pitch, tone, timbre, texture, dynamics, and others.

The building blocks that form musical compositions include:

Harmony

Melody

Rhythm

Solidly understanding these three core elements will help you learn basic music theory.

What Is Harmony in Music?

Harmony is when multiple notes or voices play simultaneously to produce a new sound. The combined sounds in harmonies complement one another and sound pleasing.

Chords and chord progressions are examples of harmony. A chord has three or more notes that play at the same time. The chords and chord progressions in a piece of music support or complement the melody.

Combining vocal parts also creates harmony. The combined voices of a choir are a perfect example. The multiple voices that make up a choir blend to make a harmonious sound.

However, not all harmonies are pleasing to our ear. There are two main types of harmony: dissonant and consonant.

Dissonant harmony adds notes that do not sound pleasant when played together. The result adds

tension and makes the chord sound unstable. This tension releases by resolving to consonant chords. Dissonant interval examples are seconds, sevenths, and ninths.

Consonant harmony sounds stable and pleasing. All the notes in a consonant chord have intervals that play nicely together. Constant chords also transition smoothly with one another in a progression. Consonant interval examples are unison, thirds, fifths, and octaves.

Musicians combine consonant and dissonant harmonies to make the music more exciting and intriguing.

What Is Melody in Music?

Melody is a succession of notes or voices arranged into a musical phrase. A song's melody is often the most memorable and recognizable part.

Melodies can be created with instruments or vocals. They have two or more notes in a sequence that sound musically pleasing. Most compositions consist of multiple melodies that repeat.

The two primary elements of a melody are pitch and rhythm:

Pitch is the audio vibration produced by an instrument or voice. It's how high or low a note will sound. Arranging these pitches in a series creates a melody.

Rhythm or duration is the length each pitch will sound. These durations are divided into beat divisions like whole notes, half notes, quarter notes, triplets, etc.

Melodies also have two types of melodic motion: conjunct or disjunct.

Conjunct motion is when notes move by whole or half steps. Conjunct is also the most natural and comfortable to play and sing. There are shorter leaps between notes.

Disjunct motion has larger leaps between notes. Large interval leaps between notes can make the melody difficult to play or sing. Disjunct motion is also less memorable and smooth sounding.

Musicians combine conjunct and disjunct motion to give melodies more variation and interest.

What Is Rhythm in Music?

Rhythm is an essential element of music with more than one meaning. For example:

Rhythm is a recurring movement of notes and rests (silences) in time. It's the human perception of time.

Rhythm also describes a pattern of strong and weak notes or voices that repeat throughout a song. These patterns can be created with drums, percussion, instruments, and vocals.

The basic elements that comprise musical rhythm include:

Beat – A repeating pulse that underlies a musical pattern

Meter – A specific pattern of strong and weak pulses

Time Signature – The number of beats per measure

Tempo (BPM) – Indicates how fast or slow a piece of music plays

Strong and Weak Beats – Strong beats are the downbeats, and weak beats are the offbeats between the downbeats

Syncopation – Rhythms that accent or emphasize the offbeats

Accents – Refers to the intensity or emphases placed on notes

Musical Notes and Intervals

The Music Alphabet

Notes are the building blocks for all music. The musical alphabet consists of seven letters:

A, B, C, D, E, F, G.

Each note has a unique pitch.

The 12 Keys of Music

There are 12 notes on the piano keyboard**: A, A#/B♭, B, C, C#/D♭, D, D#/E♭, E, F, F#/G♭, G, G#/A♭.**

The same 12 notes repeat upwards and downwards in octaves.

White Keys

The white keys on a piano play the "natural" notes in a scale: **A, B, C, D, E, F, G.**

Playing only white keys places you in either the key of C major or A minor.

Black Keys

The black keys on a piano play the "flat" and "sharp" notes in a scale: **A#/B♭, C#/D♭, D#/E♭, F#/G♭, G#/A♭.**

Each note has a symbol**: ♭ for flat** and **# for sharp**. Playing a combination of white and black keys allows you to write in all available key signatures.

Intervals

An interval is a distance between two notes. There are several intervals. Measure these intervals by the number of half steps, whole steps, and their position in the scale.

A half step interval is one semitone

A whole step interval is two semitones

Two half steps make a whole-step

Intervals are also the foundation of both harmony and melody. Playing two or more notes at the same time creates harmonic intervals (chords). Playing single notes in a sequence makes melodic intervals (melodies).

Furthermore, we describe intervals by number (distance) and prefix (quality). The interval number represents the number of half-steps between two notes. These numbers are **1st (unison), 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, and 8th (octave)**.

Lastly, intervals have using a prefix to describe their quality. The five interval qualities are **major (M),**

minor (m), perfect (P), augmented (A), and diminished (d).

Octaves

Octaves are the next highest or lowest pitch of the same note. The interval between a note and a note double its frequency is an octave. For example, an octave up from C1 on a piano is C2. An octave down would be C0.

There are 12 semitones in the octave. These pitches repeat in the same order throughout the range of human hearing.

Key Signatures

Key signatures tell you what notes in a scale are sharp (♯) or flat (♭). There are twelve key signatures, each derived from the twelve available notes.

Key signatures also help identify the key of a song, which is the tonal center. For example, a song in the key of A minor uses notes from the A minor scale.

Music Scales and Modes

Musical scales form the building blocks of music. Understanding musical scales and their functions is essential when learning basic music theory.

A music **scale** is a set of notes within an octave arranged by their pitch. The ascending or descending interval relationships among the note pitches define each scale. Moreover, the notes from a scale form melodies and harmonies.

There are several types of scales. However, the two main types are the major scale and the minor scale. You can build both major and minor scales from any note. How you use them depends on the pattern of intervals you use.

Major Scales

There are twelve possible natural major scales. Natural major scales are bright, uplifting, and happy sounding.

The seven notes in all major scales follow the same interval pattern: **T-T-ST-T-T-T-ST** (tone-tone-semitone-tone- tone - tone -semitone).

Minor Scales

Natural minor scales are dark, sad, and emotional sounding. The seven notes in all minor scales follow the same interval pattern: **W-H-W-W-H-W-W** (whole-half-whole-whole-half-whole-whole).

There are twelve possible natural minor scales. In addition, there are three variations of the minor scale:

natural, harmonic, and melodic.

Scale Degrees

Each note of a scale has a specific name related to its function, called a scale degree. The name is the function, and a number indicates its position on the scale.

There are seven scale degrees. These names apply to all major and minor scales. Learning more about these functions takes us into advanced music theory. For now, it's good to know the names:

1st – Tonic

2nd – Supertonic

3rd – Mediant

4th – Subdominant

5th – Dominant

6th – Submediant

7th – Leading Tone

Music can create and release tension. The function of a scale degree relates to the amount of tension created. It also helps you decide what note(s) should follow to resolve the tension.

Moreover, remembering the different pitches in major and minor scales is difficult. Referring to the steps of the scale by numbers rather than notes makes it easier to remember.

Music Modes

Musical modes are scales derived from a parent scale. There are seven music modes.

Each mode is a slight variation of a scale. They use all the same notes and interval patterns as the parent scale.

The main difference is the root note used to build the scale. Starting a scale on a different note defines the tonal center, giving it distinct melodic characteristics.

The seven musical modes are:

I – **Ionian** (major scale)

ii – **Dorian** (major scale starting on the 2nd degree)

iii – **Phrygian** (major scale starting on the 3rd degree)

IV – **Lydian** (major scale starting on the 4th degree)

V – **Mixolydian** (major scale starting on the 5th degree)

vi – scale starting on the 6th degree)

vii – **Locrian** (major scale starting on the 7th degree)

Chords and Chord Extensions

Chords are the harmonious building blocks of music. They evoke emotion and provide the foundation for creating melodies.

Knowing how to build chords and how they interact with each other is essential when learning music theory. This section looks at basic chord types, chord extensions, and inversions.

A chord is a combination of two or more notes played at the same time. They're built off a single starting note called the root.

You can create chords from all twelve notes. There are also four basic types of chords in music:

Major – Has a major third and a perfect fifth above the root

Minor – Has a minor third and a perfect fifth above the root

Diminished – Has a minor third and a diminished fifth above the root

Augmented – Has a major third and an augmented fifth above the root

The chords and chord progressions in a piece of music support or complement the melody.

Triad Chords

The most basic chords are triads. A triad is a chord made of three notes. Triads have a **root** note, a third (four semitones above the root), and a perfect fifth (seven semitones above the root).

Triads are also the foundation for more complex chords. For example, you can create seventh and ninth cords by adding notes above a tried.

Seventh Chords

A seventh chord adds a note above the basic triad. Seventh chords have a root note, a third, a perfect fifth, and a seventh.

For example, a C major seventh has the notes: C–E–G-B. There are also five main types of seventh chords: major, minor, dominant, diminished, and half-diminished.

Major Chords

Major chords have a root note, a major third, and a perfect fifth. A chord with these three notes alone is a major triad.

For example, a C major triad has the notes: C-E-G. You can also add notes to build more complex chords.

Minor chords

Minor chords have a root note, a minor third, and a perfect fifth. A chord with these three notes alone is a minor triad.

For example, a C minor triad has the notes C-E♭-G. You can also add notes to build more complex chords.

Diminished Chords

Diminished chords sound tense, dissonant, and dramatic. They have a root note, minor third, and a diminished fifth (six semitones above the root).

For example, a C diminished triad has the notes: C-E♭-G♭.

Augmented Chords

Augmented chords sound dissonant, unsettling, and mysterious. They have a root note, major third, and an augmented fifth (eight semitones above the root).

For example, a C augmented triad has the notes: C–E–G#.

Chord Extensions

Chord extensions are notes added to the basic triad beyond the seventh. These notes extend into the next octave. There are four chord extensions: the 9th, 11th, and 13th.

Extended chords create a richer, more harmonically complex sound than basic major and minor triads. They also provide additional voice leading possibilities, which makes chord progressions sound more interesting.

Chord Inversions

Chord inversions are variations of the same chord. Transposing the bottom note in a chord to the next octave creates an inversion.

There are two main chord inversions: first inversion and second inversion.

First Inversion – Transposes the root note up one octave. The third of the triad becomes the bass note.

Second Inversion – Transposes the inverted triad again. The fifth of the triad becomes the bass note.

Chord i nversions add variation, excitement, and smoother transitions in chord progressions. The more notes a chord has, the more possible inversions.

Chord Progressions

A chord progression or a harmonic progression is an ordered series of chords. Chord progressions support both the melody and the rhythm. They also provide the foundation for creating harmony and melody.

Moreover, the key determines the chords used in a progression. A progression can also consist of major and minor chords.

Roman numerals indicate the chords in a progression. They identify the musical key and the root note for each chord. For example, "IV" means the chord is built on the fourth degree of a scale.

Uppercase Roman numerals represent major chords, while lowercase numerals represent minor chords. For example, a chord progression in the key of C major would look like I-vi-IV-V (C-Am-F-G).

Delving deeper into this topic goes beyond basic music theory. However, it helps to introduce this numerical system.

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