

Advanced Music Theory

By Kathleen Thomas

Introduction

This is a more advanced music theory course for the advanced middle school student or high school musician. It is presumed that students are very interested in music and already play an instrument or sing. The first few lessons have some questions and answers to check comprehension and may be review for some students. The remainder of the lessons have some practical practice, so the student will be using the theory they learn. These lessons are meant to be done over a period of time so the student learns the theory well and becomes a better musician. The lessons can be stretched out as long as needed or done as a semester- or year-long course. Most students will need a year if they are truly practicing the lessons until it becomes easy or second nature.

Some students may want to begin writing their own music or worship songs while learning these concepts. I would encourage them to do so.

Lesson 1

Musical Alphabet

The musical alphabet is A B C D E F G. These letters just repeat over and over again. They go up and down in order: C D E F G A B C D E F, on and on, up and down, as high or low as whatever sound or instrument can go. It is a little like numbers that can go on and on in either direction.

Each note represents a specific pitch. All the A's sound the same but are an octave apart.

Sharps and Flats

Even though there are only seven letters in the musical alphabet, there are five more notes or pitches in each octave. These notes are sharps and flats. These notes are half steps between other notes. Each sharp note is also a flat note depending on when it is being used.

When we write out these notes, we use a symbol after the natural note (the letter names for notes): # for sharps and ♭ for flats.

It is easiest to see on a piano where the notes are sharp or flat. The white keys are natural notes, and the black keys are the sharp or flat notes. #

You may also notice that there are no black notes between B and C or E and F. This does not mean there are no B sharps or C flats or E sharps or F flats. We still use those names, but rarely. When we sharp a B, we get B#. When we flat an F, we get F \flat ; however, we usually just call a B# a C or an F \flat an E.

Notice that the black keys all have two names. For example C# is also D \flat . This is called enharmonic. It just means that the same pitch has two different names.

Vocabulary

Note - a pitch produced by a musical instrument or voice, a mark written to represent a pitch

Octave - a range of notes from one letter name up or down to the same letter name

Natural notes - notes represented by the letter names A B C D E F G with no flats or sharps

Sharp notes - notes represented by the letter name with the added symbol #

Flat notes - notes represented by the letter name with the added symbol \flat

enharmonic - two notes with the same pitch represented by two different names, for example, C# and D \flat

- If you have a piano or keyboard, look at the white and black keys. Play around with natural notes and sharps and flats. Say the names of the notes. Find the octaves for any specific note.
- If you play an instrument already, play around with octaves and listen carefully to the pitches to check your tuning. This works for all winds, brass, and strings.

This should be review for many theory students, so have a little fun composing with just naturals or flats.

Lesson 1: Test Your Knowledge

1. Complete the series of natural notes.

D E _____ A _____ D E

2. Provide the alternative names for the notes:

A ♭ _____

F♯ _____

D♯ _____

B ♭ _____

E ♭ _____

3. What is the word when two notes have different names but the same pitch?
4. What happens to a note when you make it a sharp?
5. What happens to a note when you make it a flat?
6. What is the word for the same note with a higher or lower pitch, for example, C–C?

Bonus Questions:

Using only double ♯'s and double ♭'s and naturals, write an alternate name for each of the following. There may be more than one correct answer.

1. C
2. B ♭
3. E ♭
4. A
5. E ♭ ♭

Many people do not think there is such a thing as double flats or double sharps or B♯, E♯, C ♭, or F ♭. These all do exist but are not common, as you will discover in later lessons.