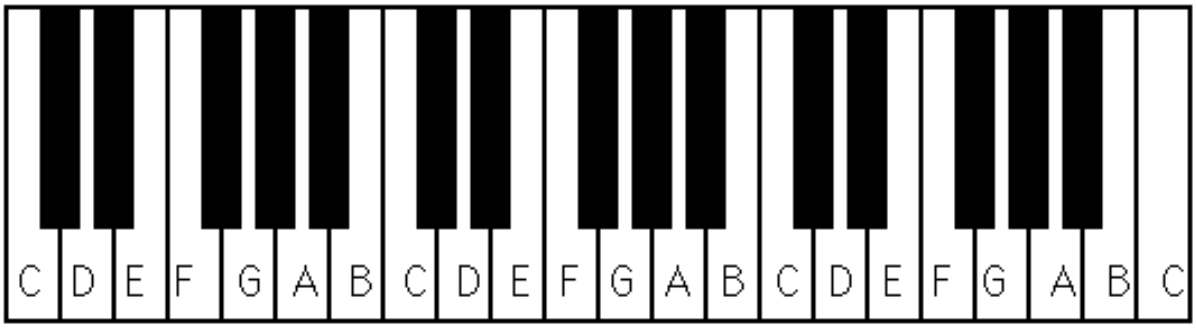
Song keys and chords

You may have been playing or singing music for years and be a very experienced performer but, unless someone has sat you down to explain the details, your knowledge of music theory might have a few gaps. This handout isn't going to turn you into Beethoven overnight, but it is designed to hopefully fill in a few blanks and to help you have a functional knowledge of what's going on when someone mentions changing a key, what chords are in a particular key or transposing a tune.

Notes

Music is made up notes and each of these notes has a letter name to go with it. The letter names start on **A** and go up through the alphabet till you get to **G**, the next note after that is another **A**. On a keyboard it looks like this:



The notes in between the white notes are either called sharps or flats. The black note between **C** and **D** can be called one of two names, either **C sharp** (written as **C#**) or **D flat** (written as **Db**). I know this is confusing, but it should start to make sense as we work through some of this theory.

These notes can be used together in groups of three to make chords. The general rule of thumb is that to create the most basic version of a chord, you need three notes (called a triad) and you create this by playing one letter name, skipping one, playing the next, skipping one and then playing the next. For example, to create the chord of **C major**, you play **C**, miss D, play **E**, miss F and then play **G**. So, **C major** is made up from the notes **C**-**E**-**G**. Similarly, to create **G major** you play **G**, miss A, play **B**, miss C and then play **D** so you end up with the chord of **G major** being made up of **G**-**B**-**D**. Major chords are sometimes shortened to just the letter name. Minor chords are sometimes shortened to the letter name with a little 'm' next to it e.g. **Gm**.

Keys

Every song you'll ever play (unless your worship band start experimenting with freeform jazz) will be in a specific key. It can be in a major key (think lighter and happier music) or a minor key (darker and a bit sadder). It might even start in a minor key for the verse and then progress into a major key for the chorus (or vice versa). A key in music tells us what notes we can and can't use and what chords sound good together. If we were in a major key such as **C**, which uses only the white notes, and we were to write out a scale of **C** (this is just writing out the notes from **C** to **C**) it would look like this:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C	D	E	F	G	A	B

You could also make chords starting on each note of the scale. The chords that sound really good in **C major** are the ones with their bottom note on **C**, **D**, **E, F**, **G** and **A**; namely **C major, D minor, E minor, F major, G major** and **A minor**. As long as you don't use any of the black notes or the chord that starts on **B**, your chord progression will sound pretty good.

A typical chord progression in **C major** might go:

C major – F major – A minor – G major

If you are playing a song in a different major key, you might have to use sharps or flats to make sure that your major scale sounds good. This is more due to the fact that if you look at the order of black and white notes on a keyboard, it's a little bit uneven. The scale of D major, for example, looks like this:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#

Major Keys

You can work out what chords you can play in any major key using the following chart:

Key	1	2	3	4	5	6	7[1]
C major	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bdim
G major	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#dim
D major	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#dim
A major	A	Bm	Cm	D	E	F#m	G#dim
E major	E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#dim
B major	B	C#m	D#m	E	F#	G#m	A#dim
F major	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm	Edim
Bb major	Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F	Gm	Adim
Eb major	Eb	Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb	Cm	Ddim
Ab major	Ab	Bbm	Cm	Db	Eb	Fm	Gdim

Minor Keys

Some songs are written in a minor key and they have a slightly different order of chords. The chords that you can play in any minor key look like this:

Key	1	2[2]	3	4	5	6	7
C minor	Cm	Ddim	Eb	Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb
G minor	Gm	Adim	Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F
D minor	Dm	Edim	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C
A minor	Am	Bdim	C	Dm	Em	F	G
E minor	Em	F#dim	G	Am	Bm	C	D
B minor	Bm	C#dim	D	Em	F#m	G	A
F minor	Fm	Gdim	Ab	Bbm	Cm	Db	Eb
Bb minor	Bbm	Cdim	Db	Ebm	Fm	Gb	Ab
Eb minor	Ebm	Fdim	Gb	Abm	Bbm	Cb	Db
Ab minor	Abm	Bbdim	Cb	Dbm	Ebm	Fb	Gb

[1] I've written the last chord in each major key, which is a diminished chord, but it's very unusual to hear it in any song, so don't worry if you're panicking about what a 'dim' chord is!

[2] I've also written the 2nd chord in each minor key, which is also a diminished chord, but again, it's very unusual to hear it in any song.

How are these charts useful though?

Knowing what chords are involved in each key – This is the easiest use of the charts. If you know the key is **D major**, say, then you know that the chords that you'll need to use in that key are **D**, **Em**, **F#m**, **G**, **A**, **Bm**, **C#dim**. This is really handy for songwriting as it instantly lays out all of the chords you can use to create your song.

Using it to work out what key the song is in – You can also use the chart to work out the key of songs you don't know, but have the chords in front of you. If the chord sequence goes **A**-**F#m**-**D**-**E** and sounds like a major chord progression (think lighter and happier again), the only major key that has these specific chords is **A major**. You've just worked out your song is in **A major**!

Using it to transpose a song – Transposing is when we move the key of a song up or down to help out the vocalist and make the melody easier to sing. When we move the melody we also need to move the chords. So, if a song is in **G major** and has a chord sequence **G**-**C**-**Em**-**D** but the band wants to change the key to **D major** then you find the line on the chart that corresponds to **G major**:

Key	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C major	C	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	Bdim
G major	G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#dim
D major	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#dim
A major	A	Bm	Cm	D	E	F#m	G#dim
E major	E	F#m	G#m	A	B	C#m	D#dim
B major	B	C#m	D#m	E	F#	G#m	A#dim
F major	F	Gm	Am	Bb	C	Dm	Edim
Bb major	Bb	Cm	Dm	Eb	F	Gm	Adim
Eb major	Eb	Fm	Gm	Ab	Bb	Cm	Ddim
Ab major	Ab	Bbm	Cm	Db	Eb	Fm	Gdim

And change each of the chords in your chord sequence to whatever the corresponding chord is in **D major**. The chord of **G** becomes **D**, the chord of **C** becomes **G**, the chord of **Em** becomes **Bm** and the chord of **D** becomes **A**.

So, our chord progression of **G**-**C**-**Em**-**D**, when transposed into the key of **D major** becomes **D**-**G**-**Bm**-**A**.