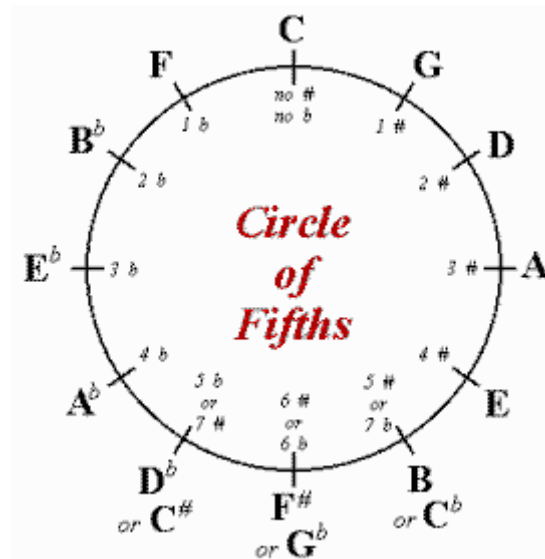


The Circle of Fifths

What is the circle of fifths?

The circle of fifths is used to show the relationship between keys. If we take any key, for example the key of G, the circle of fifths shows us that the fifth note (the dominant) in the scale of G is D, and that the fourth note (the sub-dominant) is C.



How It is Built

Take the major scale in the key of C. It has no sharps or flats in it. The Circle of Fifths tells us that the fifth note in the C major scale is a G. The G major scale has exactly the same notes as the C major scale, except that it has one note sharpened. The fifth note of the G major scale is a D. This has exactly the same notes as the G major scale, except that it has another sharp in it, and so on.

When writing music, we use a key signature to show the key of a piece of music. This is written by showing the number of sharps or flats that are in the key.

The practical application for musicians

The Circle of Fifths helps to further explain the use of modes in music (see the music modes section.)

If a song is in, for example, E major, I could use the E major scale to improvise. I could also play a B major scale, except I would have to flatten one of the notes of the scale to make it fit (remember, a B major scale is the same as an E major scale, with an extra sharp in it.) In the B position, I would play the Mixolydian mode.

I could also play in the A position, except this time I would have to sharpen a note (make it in the Lydian mode.)

We can do the same in minor scales. Take a song that is in E minor. When we solo, we can use the Em scale. We could also play the Em scale around the B note, with a flattened note of the scale (the Phrygian mode), or at the A position, using the Dorian mode.