

The Basics of Key Signatures (Guitar)

Key Signatures are a series of sharp or flat symbols that are placed on the staff (immediately after the Clef symbol) that designate certain notes of the Key that are to be played one half step higher or lower during the piece of music.

Here are a few examples of Key Signatures (Major Keys and their Relative minor Keys)



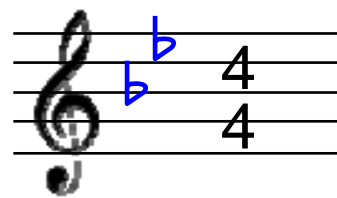
Key of C (A minor)
(No Sharps or Flats)
C-D-E-F-G-A-B



Key of G (E minor)
(Has 1 Sharp)
G-A-B-C-D-E-F#



Key of A (F# minor)
(Has 3 Sharps)
A-B-C#D-E-F#-G#

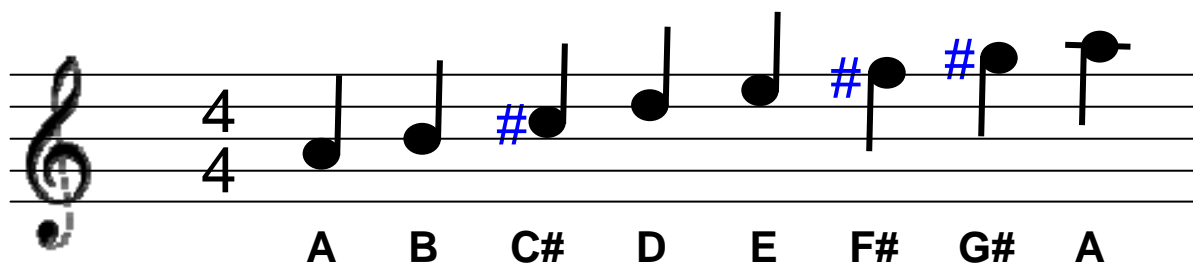


Key of B (G# minor)
(Has 2 Flats)
Bb-C-D-Eb-F-G-A

* How Key Signatures are “Applied” on the Staff

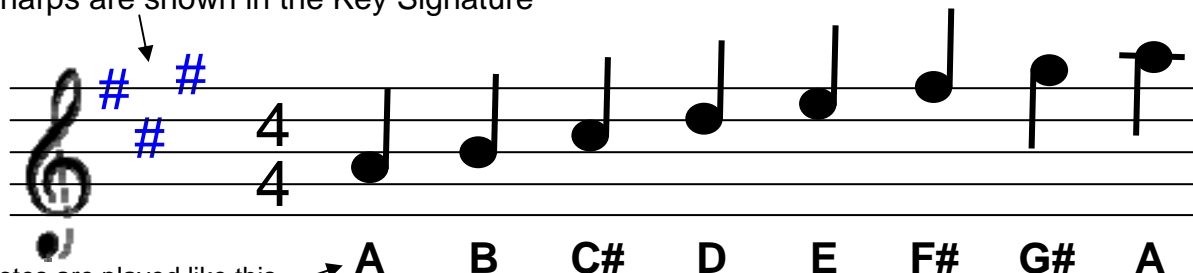
Here is an “A” Major Scale shown only written using notes (with no Key Signature):

Ex: Using the Key of A (or F# minor – both of which have 3 sharps)



Here is the same “A” Major Scale shown using the Key Signature:

Sharps are shown in the Key Signature



Notes are played like this

With a Key Signature the sharps (or flats) do not have to be placed on the staff at the notes, but rather to the left in the Key Signature (after the treble clef).

One of the main functions of the Key Signature is to minimize the number of sharps and flats used on the staff to “notate” a piece of music. The Key Signature is followed throughout the piece of music unless it is modified by using accidentals (additional sharps and flats).

Accidentals

Accidentals are sharps or flats added to notes in a piece of music (other than what is stated in the Key Signature). A “Natural” symbol (♮) when placed next to a note “cancels” the accidental (the sharp or flat in the Key Signature) within that bar of music only.

This diagram shows how accidentals can be added on the staff to change the notes...

(The natural cancels the sharp on the C notes here) (The C note returns back to normal here)

C B C F# D# D C# G#

In the diagram above you can see how adding a sharp sign to the “D” note changes it to D#, and then the natural sign cancels the sharp and changes the D# back to a D. The notes shown in the diagram above are for example only (no particular scale, etc).

Key Signatures can be misinterpreted as being related to only one key, but in reality a Key Signature can represent more than one Key.

For example: In the diagram below there is only one sharp (F#) in the Key Signature, but this does not necessarily mean that this piece of music is in the Key of “G” major (which has only one sharp - F#). This Key Signature could be referring to the Key of “E minor” (which is the “relative minor” to the Key of G and would also have only one sharp in it – F#). Or Key Signatures could be indicating one of the different scale modes (a more advanced topic for a later time). For now, it is recommended that you take a look at the “Relative Keys” part of our Music Theory section to get a better look at “Major” keys and their “Relative” minor keys.

Key of “E Minor” is shown below (E Minor is the Relative minor key to the Key of G)

E F# G A B C D E

Check our Music Theory section for more information about “Relative” Keys.