

MUSIC THEORY.aargh©

The Key Signature: what good is it for me? (Session 8)

By Dr. Ona Pinsonneault

Congratulations on a great Duluth conference!

I have been thinking about “key signature” and over the years have insisted that students learn to read the key signature. But, what good is it anyway? In an earlier column (see Session 2) we **defined “key signature”** as “an indication of pitches consistently sharp, flat or natural.” That’s all that it does.

There is an **order of sharps and flats**. F, C, G, D, A, E, B is the order of sharps and the reverse B, E, A, D, G, C, F is the order of flats. This order can be seen in the diagrams below.



Reading the key signature. If there is one sharp, it will be F# and it indicates that all “F’s” (in any octave) are to be played as sharps. If there are two sharps, they will be F# and C# and they indicate that all “F’s” and “C’s” are to be played as sharps. This continues. Three sharps will be F#, C#, and G#, etc.

The flats follow the premise above. If there is one flat, it will be Bb and indicates that all “B’s” are to be played as flats.

The sharps and flats follow the given order. If the key signature has 4 sharps or flats those used will be the first four in the order.

The “key signature” does not really tell you what “key” a composition is using. It’s a combination of key signature, knowing the tonic pitch and spelling a scale that will indicate the key of a composition. (See session 3a for a discussion of the Major and minor scales.) Modern compositions may have alternate key signatures. Remember, the purpose of a key signature is to indicate the pitches that are consistently sharp, flat or natural.

Why is this melody in the key of G Major (see Session 1 for “tonic” and Session 3a for Major scale) and, what good is that information for me?

1. I set up my bells according to pitches used.
2. I could make my own “Handbells Used” chart for my choir.
3. I can remind the choir that all F’s are sharps. (There are two added notes outside the key signature; can you identify them for your choir?)
4. Along with the tempo indication the major key tells me that the composition is lively and cheerful, should be performed with, as some say, “the easy gait of an athlete”, and is better used as Postlude rather than Prelude.
5. Add your own:

Why do I want to know key signatures and why is this important to a handbell choir? How does Ear Training help correct mistakes in reading Key Signatures? (Well, maybe next time.)

A Melody in G Major

Ona Pinsonneault

Allegro

Until next time,

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(At the conference I was reminded that members receive the **Clapper Chatter**. Please share this column as you deem necessary and/or appropriate with others.)