Study Guide Transcript

2025

*This study guide transcript has been provided to support learners in following the **An Introduction to Music Theory** course.*

*While the guide serves as a useful resource, we highly recommend that learners watch the course episodes on the **Wayout TV channel** to gain a full understanding before completing the answer book.*

*For your convenience, episode times are listed on **page 4 of the answer book**.*

Music Theory Basics – Study Guide (UK English)

Introduction

You probably clicked on this video because you're curious about music theory. Perhaps you think learning theory will help you become a better musician — and you're absolutely right. If you want to build a strong musical foundation, music theory is essential. Understanding how music works gives you the tools to become the musician you've always wanted to be. In this video, I'm going to show you everything you need to know about music theory to get started. Let's begin.

The Geography of the Piano

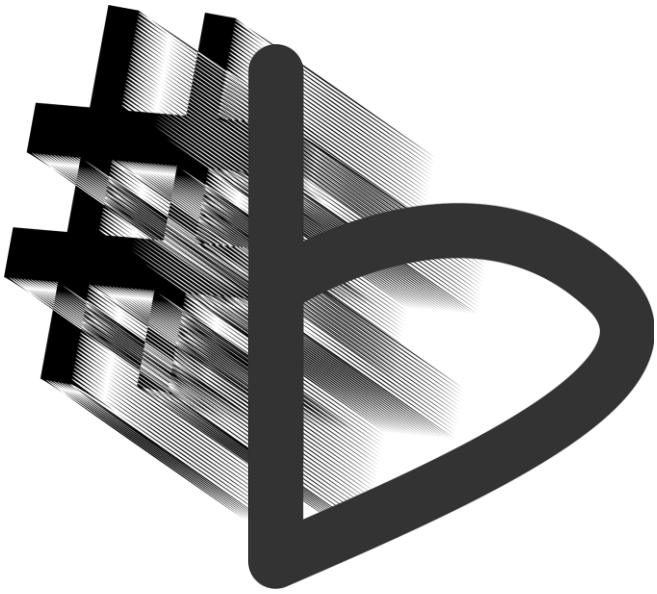
We'll start with the geography of the piano. The piano is the instrument most people turn to when learning music theory because it's so clearly laid out with its white and black keys. The black keys follow a repeating pattern: groups of two black notes followed by groups of three black notes, then two again, and so on across the keyboard. Understanding this pattern helps us navigate the piano easily. Next, we need to learn the note names for both the white and black keys.

The Musical Alphabet

The musical alphabet begins at the letter A. If you have a full 88-key piano, the lowest note is an A. The alphabet continues as A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and then repeats. Once you reach G, you return to A again: A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, and so on. This seven-letter system is universal — no matter what instrument you play; all use the letters A to G to name their notes.

Landmark Notes on the Piano

Now that we know the musical alphabet, we can identify specific references or 'landmark' notes. The most important of these is Middle C, the C closest to the centre of the piano. Although it's not the exact middle key, it is near the middle and serves as a vital reference point. If Middle C is here, then moving upwards through the alphabet gives us D, E, F, G, A, B, C again. It's also useful to practise naming notes backwards: C, B, A, G, F, E, D, C. Another key landmark is the note F, which is always found to the left of any group of three black notes. Similarly, any white key immediately to the left of a group of two black notes is a C. By using these patterns, you can easily identify any note on the piano.

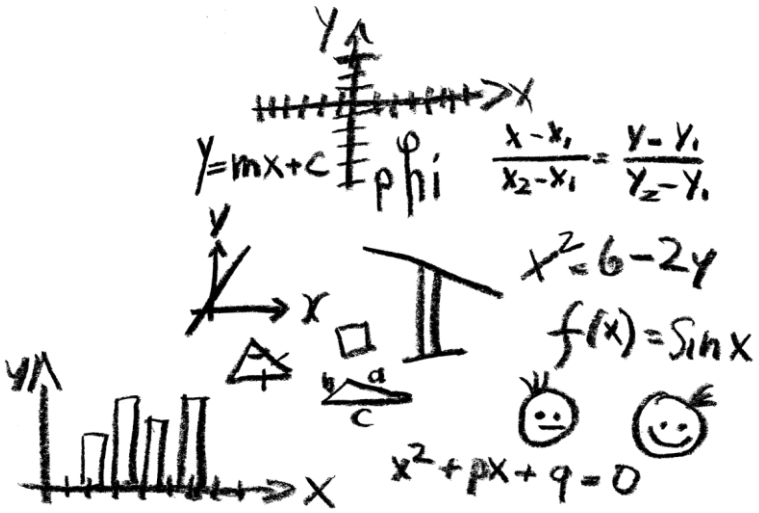


Sharps and Flats

The black notes on the piano have two possible names. When you move up one semitone (to the right), you add the word sharp (♯) to the note name. For example, moving up from C takes you to C-sharp (C♯). When you move down one semitone (to the left), you add the word flat (♭). For example, moving down from E takes you to E-flat (E♭). Some pairs of white notes — specifically B and C, and E and F — have no black note between them. In theory, we can still call C 'B-sharp' or E 'F-flat', though these names are rarely used outside of certain theoretical contexts. It's also possible to encounter double sharps and double flats, though for now, it's enough to understand that moving one semitone up makes a sharp, and one semitone down makes a flat.

Half Steps and Whole Steps (Semitones and Tones)

Next, we'll discuss intervals, which are simply the distances between two notes. A half step (or semitone) is the smallest distance between two notes on the piano — from one key to the very next. A whole step (or tone) equals two half steps. For example, from C to D is a whole step, because it skips C-sharp. Understanding half and whole steps is vital because we'll use them to build scales.



The Major Scale Formula

The formula for a major scale is: Whole, Whole, Half, Whole, Whole, Whole, Half (W W H W W W H). For example, starting on D and following this pattern gives: D, E, F♯, G, A, B, C♯, D. You can create a major scale beginning on any note by applying this formula.

The Natural Minor Scale Formula

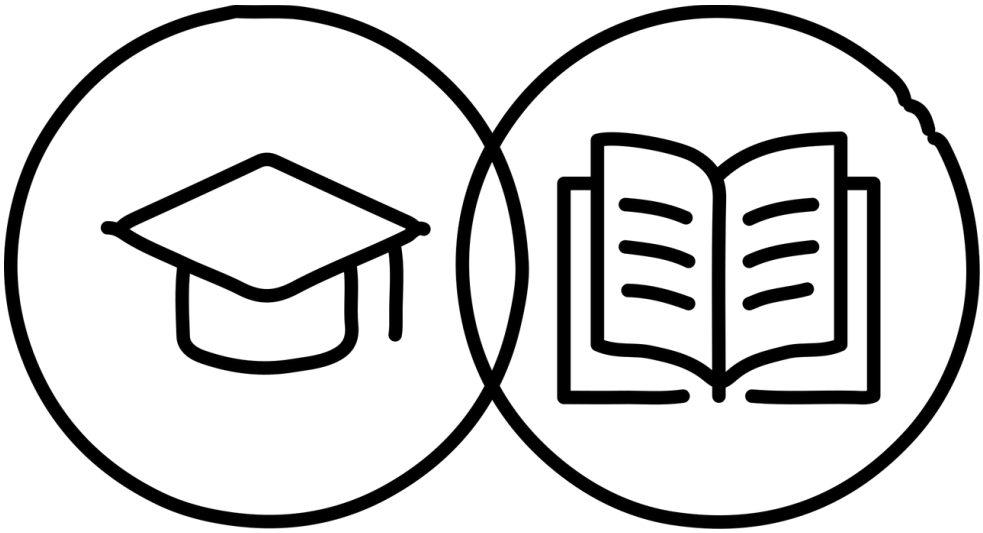
The natural minor scale follows a different pattern: Whole, Half, Whole, Whole, Half, Whole, Whole, W H W W H W W). Using this formula, you can build a minor scale from any starting note on the piano.

Intervals by Name

Intervals also have traditional names depending on the distance between the notes. C to D = Major 2nd; C to E = Major 3rd; C to F = Perfect 4th; C to G = Perfect 5th; C to A = Major 6th; C to B = Major 7th; C to C (next octave) = Perfect Octave. There are also smaller intervals: C to C♯ = Minor 2nd; C to E♭ = Minor 3rd; C to F♯ = Tritone (also called Augmented 4th or Diminished 5th); and so on. Knowing these intervals helps in recognising melodies, harmonies, and chord structures.

Chords: Major, Minor, Augmented, and Diminished

Now that we understand intervals, we can build any triad (three-note chord). A Major chord = a Major 3rd (4 semitones) + a Minor 3rd (3 semitones). Example: C–E–G. A Minor chord = a Minor 3rd (3 semitones) + a Major 3rd (4 semitones). Example: C–E♭–G. An Augmented chord = two Major 3rds (4 + 4 semitones). Example: C–E–G♯. A Diminished chord = two Minor 3rds (3 + 3 semitones). Example: C–E♭–G♭. With these simple formulas, you can create any triad on the piano.



Chord Spelling

When writing chords, the notes must be spaced in thirds (every other letter name). For example, a D major triad is D–F♯–A, not D–G♭–A. This ensures that chords follow the correct alphabetical order. Understanding chord spelling helps when reading or writing music correctly.

How to Read Music

Now that we can play chords and scales, we'll learn to read music notation. A quarter note (crotchet) equals one beat. A half note (minim) equals two beats. A whole note (semibreve) equals four beats. Eighth notes (quavers) are half the length of a quarter note and are often connected by a beam. A dot beside a note adds half of its original value. For example, a dotted half note lasts three beats. Time signatures tell us how many beats are in each bar. For example, 4/4 time means four quarter-note beats per measure, while 3/4 time means three.

Music Notation and the Staff

Music is written on a staff (stave) five lines and four spaces. Piano music uses two staves joined together, known as the grand staff. The treble clef (used for the right hand) shows notes above Middle C. Spaces: F-A-C-E ('FACE'). Lines: E-G-B-D-F ('Every Good Boy Deserves Fudge'). The bass clef (used for the left hand) shows notes below Middle C. Spaces: A-C-E-G ('All Cows Eat Grass'). Lines: G-B-D-F-A ('Good Boys Deserve Fudge Always'). These mnemonics help you remember note placement and quickly read music.

Chord Progressions

Understanding theory allows us to play real music. One of the most common chord progressions in popular music uses four chords: C major – G major – A minor – F major. This is known as the I–V–vi–IV progression (1-5-6-4) in the key of C major. Thousands of songs use this exact sequence. If you start on the sixth chord instead (A minor), you get vi–IV–I–V, another hugely popular progression. Recognising these patterns helps you play, compose, and analyse songs more effectively.

Final Thoughts

Music theory is essential for understanding how music works, but it's most powerful when applied practically on your instrument. Use what you've learned here — scales, intervals, chords, and progressions — to explore, experiment, and create your own music.