

Key signatures

How does knowing the key signature of a piece of music help us to read it? An instrumentalist needs to know the key signature to know which notes to sharpen or flatten, ie where to place their fingers. Singers have a different experience because they are placing the notes in their voices and one note often feels very similar to another.

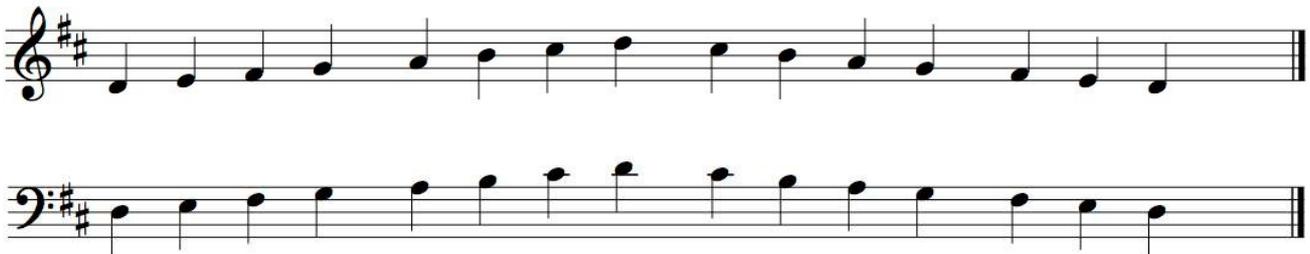
Much of the time, singers don't consciously have to think about "accidentals" (sharps and flats). They predict where the musical line is going from the tonality of the piece, rather than strictly reading the intervals between the notes. This is fine when learning is done partly by following the printed music and partly by ear, but it doesn't improve a singer's sight reading ability.

Knowing which key we are in, and then applying that information to the printed music, is a fundamental step towards being able to sing at sight.

Look at the following D major scales.

Major scales always follow the same pattern:-

Tonic - tone - tone - semitone - tone - tone - tone - semitone(tonic)



So at a very basic level, when we are reading this scale, we know that every time we see a D, we are singing the tonic (the "home" note), and every time we see an A, we are singing a perfect fifth above the tonic.

We also know that all the Fs and Cs are sharpened, so that when we sing the first three notes of the scale, they are all whole tones. If there was no key signature, the interval between the E and F would be semitone.

Use the D major key signature to read the following line.



The following round has a key signature of one flat. Which major or minor key could it be in? What tells us which of those keys the piece is in? It could be in F major or D minor. The melody starts and ends on a D, which suggests that we are in D minor.

A two-line musical score in 2/2 time on a treble clef staff. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The melody starts on D4 and ends on D4. A star is placed above the second measure. The lyrics are: "Fall, fall, fall the leaves are leav - ing the branch caught on the wind win - ter is com - ing".

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branch caught on the wind win - ter is com - ing

Trying reading this piece of music, noticing when you are singing the tonic (D), the minor third (F) and the perfect fifth (A) in the scale.