

Important Concepts for Unit 2: Key

Key – the tonic and mode of a piece of music. For example, in the key of A major, “A” is the tonic, and “major” is the mode. This information provides a mental framework, or “key”, to understanding the piece.

Tonic – the pitch that is the overall tonal center of a piece of music; a sort of “home pitch” for the piece. The tonic has the greatest sense of resolution of any of the pitches in a key, and all the other pitches are defined by their relationship to it.

Mode – a set of specific interval relationships that determine how the pitches in a key relate to the tonic, and to each other. In other words, all keys that share the same mode share the same pattern of intervals from the tonic to the other pitches in their scales.

Scale – the pitches of a particular key, arranged in ascending or descending order.

Scale Degree – a pitch in a key's scale, identified by its place in the scale when the pitches are numbered in ascending order up from the tonic, with the tonic being the first scale degree, or “1”. Often written in Roman numerals.

Key Signature – a list of which pitches in a particular key are altered by a sharp or flat.

Transpose – move a piece of music to a different key from the original.

Relative Keys – keys that share the same set of pitches, but use a different pitch as the tonic. Because they share the same set of pitches, relative keys have the same key signature.

Parallel Keys – keys that share the same tonic, but use a different set of pitches.

Diatonic – using the pattern of interval relationships created by the seven natural pitches A, B, C, D, E, F, G (the white keys on the piano).

Pentatonic – using only five different pitches. In Irish music, the most common pentatonic modes can be created by removing two pitches from one of the seven-pitch diatonic modes.

Gapped Scale – a scale in a mode based on a seven pitch diatonic mode, but with one or two of the scale degrees left out. Refers to the common five-pitch (pentatonic) and six-pitch (hexatonic) modes of Irish music.