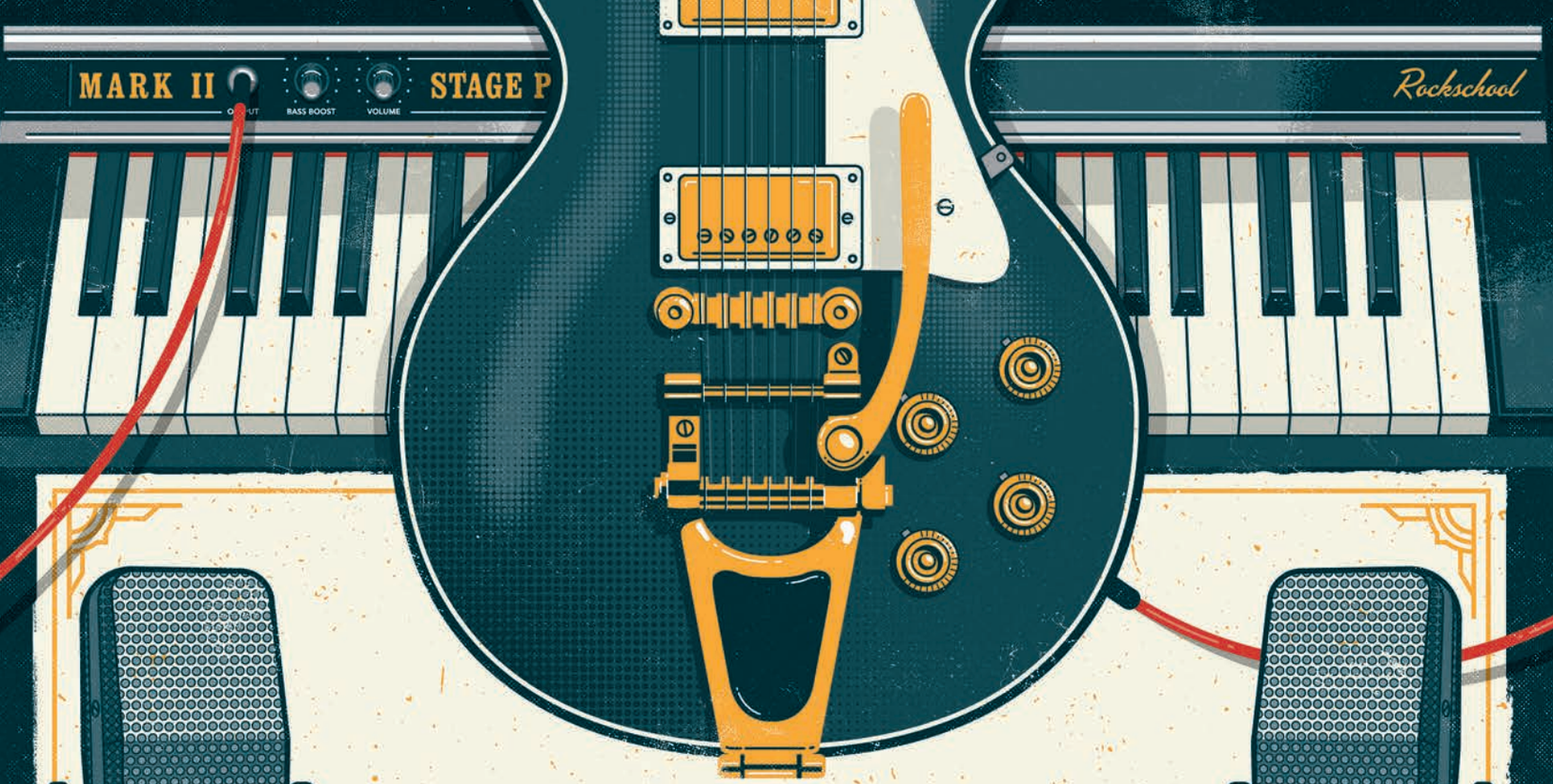

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POPULAR MUSIC THEORY

The *essential* guide for rock & pop musicians

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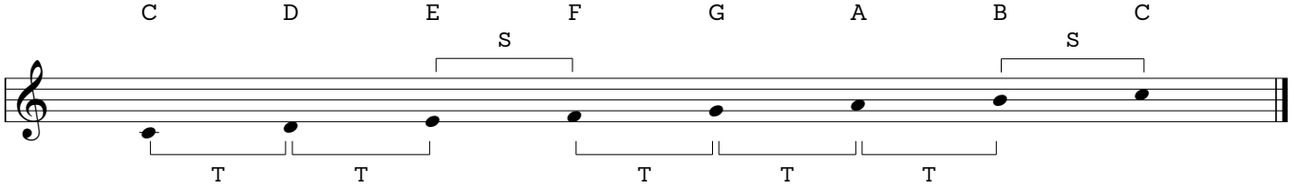
THE MAJOR SCALE

The major scale has a bright, happy sound. A scale's character derives from its internal structure of Ts and Ss. Remember, an interval of a tone is the same as moving two frets on a guitar or bass, or moving two keys on a keyboard. A semitone is half of that: one fret on your guitar or bass, or one key on a keyboard. The sequence for a major scale is TTS T TTS.

When playing a scale, the note you start from is called the root or tonic. This could be any of the 12 notes of the musical alphabet, which means there are 12 possible major scales available to you, each starting a semitone away from the next: C, C♯/D♭, D, D♯/E♭, E, F, F♯/G♭, G, G♯/A♭, A, A♯/B♭, B. Each of these major scales has its own unique set of notes, but the one thing that never changes is the spacing between the notes, i.e. the major scale is always, without exception, TTS T TTS.

For now, let's start each scale from the same note so you can easily compare scales. Let's use the note C as our starting point. Start the tone-semitone sequence from C and the following notes are produced: CDEFGABC.

HERE'S WHAT THOSE NOTES LOOK LIKE ON THE STAVE:



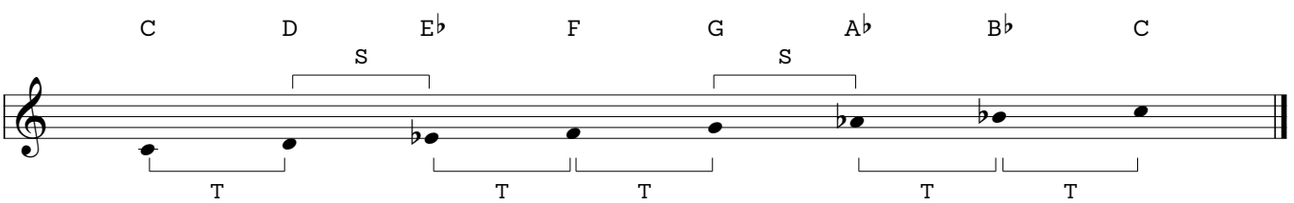
It is useful to remember that the only lines/spaces on the stave that are a semitone apart are E to F and B to C. All the other notes on the stave are a tone apart. This is also true of the bass clef.

THE MINOR SCALE

There are several types of minor scale commonly used in popular music. The most fundamental of these is the natural minor scale, the scale that can be produced directly from the notes of the minor key signature. The natural minor scale is made up of a different sequence of T and S building blocks, so it has a different sound from the major scale. Compared to the bright and happy major, the minor scale has a darker, sadder sound, which makes it perfect for rock and metal as well as tear-jerking pop ballads. This time, the building blocks are stacked like this: TST TST T.

Placing these notes on the stave is not as straightforward as the major scale. There are a couple of kinks which need to be ironed out. The first two notes, C and D, are a tone apart, so you can easily place them on the stave. However, a problem arises when you get to the third note of the scale. The natural minor scale sequence requires the third note to be a semitone above the second, but the stave only lets you move from the D to the E, which is an interval of a whole tone – it seems the scale and the stave are incompatible! But don't worry, that's not really the case, as you can solve the problem with accidentals. Using sharp (♯) and flat (♭) symbols, you can shift any note up or down a semitone to create whatever note spacing is required. The C natural minor scale has three flat notes (highlighted here in red): C D E♭ F G A♭ B♭ C.

THE C NATURAL MINOR SCALE IS SHOWN ON THE STAVE LIKE THIS:



INTERVALS

So far, you have learned two ways to describe scales: 1) as sequences of tones and semitones, and 2) as letters of the alphabet. The alphabetical system requires a bit more work, since each of the 12 possible major and minor scales has its own unique set of letters (more on that later).

There is a third way, which is arguably the most useful of all. This approach uses intervals to describe scales. Essentially, the interval approach uses numbers instead of letters to spell out scales (and chords). For example, the root note (also known as the 'tonic') of the scale is number 1, the next note is 2, then 3 and so on. As we have seen, the major scale has seven notes, so those notes are numbered 1 2 3 4 5 6 7.

When you sing or play melodies on your instrument, you can either play the intervals one after the other like a scale, or skip intervals to create bigger jumps between notes. For example, well-known melodies such as 'Baa Baa Black Sheep', the main theme from *Star Wars* and The Beatles' 'Blackbird' all start on the tonic 1, then go straight to the fifth note of the scale, so you can say that those tunes start with an interval of a 5th. The distance between any two notes is referred to as the interval quality. The names and interval qualities for the major scale are as follows:

C MAJOR SCALE	C	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
INTERVAL QUALITY	**Unison**	Major 2nd	**Major 3rd**	Perfect 4th	**Perfect 5th**	Major 6th	**Major 7th**	Octave
EQUIVALENT IN SEMITONES	**0 semitones**	2 semitones	**4 semitones**	5 semitones	**7 semitones**	9 semitones	**11 semitones**	12 semitones

As you can see, most of the intervals are described as major, two are 'perfect' and octave takes its name from the Latin for eighth. You can also find the intervals by counting the equivalent number of semitones; for example, you can start from the root note and count up seven semitones (or seven piano keys) to find the perfect 5th.