

The Magic Key

(excerpt from the e-book "Improvise for Real" by David Reed)

In this chapter I am going to show you something that is very special to me. It is something very simple, and it has been around for a long time. I certainly didn't invent it myself. It is mentioned (at least briefly) in almost every harmony course that exists. But despite the fact that a lot of people seem to "know" what I am about to show you, nobody seems to care much about it or use it in any conscious way.

In fact, I have never met *anyone* who truly grasped all of its implications until I showed them. To me it's like an old, rusty forgotten key that has the remarkable ability to open every door in the world. I love this key. And although it doesn't offer much in the way of explanations, once you learn to use it you won't need any explanations because you will understand literally everything there is to know about harmony.

Please take a couple of minutes to really look at the following drawing:

1 · 2 · 3 4 · 5 · 6 · 7 | 1

Doesn't look like much, does it? If you've studied music theory at all you probably already know exactly what this is. It's simply a visual representation of the major scale in any key. But take a good look, because you are looking at nothing less than the map of your musical imagination. Every musical sound you have ever heard in your life is located somewhere in the above drawing. From the screaming guitar solos of Eddie Van Halen to the string quartets of Shostakovich, it's all right there on your map. And if you become as addicted to the IFR method as I am, you will spend the rest of your life contemplating this simple little drawing from infinite points of view.

Don't be put off by the numbers. There is nothing cold or mathematical about our work. The seven notes could just as easily have more friendly names like Jimmy, Fluffy, Grandpa, etc. But I use numbers because it's the simplest way to name seven things and remember their order. Just think of them like street addresses or signposts that indicate where each sound "lives".

Each item (whether it be a number or a little dot) in the drawing above represents a single note in the unbroken chain of half steps that you are learning to visualize in Exercise 1. If you imagine this series of half steps in any particular region as the following drawing:

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...then you can also visualize the major scale anywhere in this region:



Notice that the little “curtain” that separates note 7 from the following note 1 is not a note at all. It is merely a reminder that we are entering a new octave. It’s there to remind us that the following note 1 is actually the exact same note as the original note 1 at the beginning of the scale, except that it’s one octave higher. The entire major scale has only seven notes. But I often include an additional note 1 in my drawings just so that you can see clearly the interval between note 7 and the following note 1, which is a half step.

Since you have now been practicing Exercise 1 with half steps for a little while, I trust that you can pick any region on your instrument and move around comfortably within this region by half steps. So please grab your instrument and try the following activity which will allow you to hear for yourself the seven notes of our major scale.

(Playing activity)

Pick a note, any note. But don't pick an obvious note like C. Be courageous and pick an unusual note like A natural or D flat. This will be note 1.



Move up *two half steps*. This is note 2. Practice alternating between both notes.



Move up *two more half steps* above note 2. This is note 3. Play for a moment with all three notes.



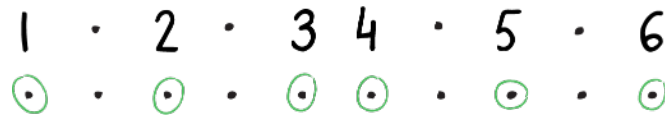
Now move up only *one half step* above note 3. This is note 4. Play with all four notes for a minute.



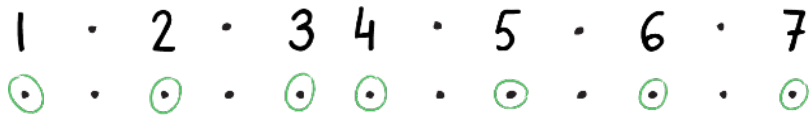
Move up *two more half steps* above note 4. This is note 5. Play with all five notes for a minute.



Move up *two more half steps* above note 5. This is note 6. Play with all six notes for a minute.



Move up *two more half steps* above note 6. This is note 7. Play with all seven notes for a minute.



Move up *one last half step* above note 7. This is note 1 again, in the next octave. Improvise freely with all eight notes for a few minutes.



If you want to convince yourself that the above drawing works in all keys, just go back and pick a new starting note as your note 1. As long as you respect the intervals shown in the above drawing you should be able to perfectly reproduce the major scale in any key, simply by visualizing every whole step and half step along the way.

Before we move on, I want to make some observations that are going to seem very obvious to you. But these observations are so important and so useful that you should repeat them to yourself as a personal mantra until you know them by heart:

“There is a whole step between notes 1 and 2.”

“There is a whole step between notes 2 and 3.”

“There is only a half step between notes 3 and 4.”

“There is a whole step between notes 4 and 5.”

“There is a whole step between notes 5 and 6.”

“There is a whole step between notes 6 and 7.”

“There is only a half step between note 7 and the following note 1.”

Go back and look at the drawing above of the major scale while you repeat each of these phrases to yourself. Once you are able to visualize the entire drawing of the major scale in your mind, you will no longer need the mantra because you will literally see in your mind the distances between the notes.

I was actually given all of the clues necessary to start using the above drawing when I was about 10 years old. But it would be another 20 years before I would have any idea what to do with this information. That's because the drawing itself is not the discovery. You see, when you find an old key, the object itself is no great cause for excitement. It's not until you start *using* it, and you discover its remarkable ability to open every door in the world, that you begin to realize that you have found something very special, a *magic key*.

What's special about this key is that it contains literally everything there is to know about Western harmony. (When you get to IFR Exercises 4 and 5 you will see that this is no exaggeration. Even the "outside notes" that appear constantly in modern jazz and contemporary classical music are nothing more than displaced fragments of this very drawing.) The fact that so much music can be understood with so little theory is nothing short of astonishing. But even more astonishing is the fact that nobody ever tells you this, despite its being a rather important detail. I mean, if all of Western harmony can be understood with one little drawing, how do you teach a course on harmony and forget to mention that?

Maybe on some dry academic level they do mention briefly that all of Western music is based on the major scale, but only as a kind of historical trivia. It's like telling somebody that our spoken language is based on ancient Latin. There is nothing for a person *to do* with this information. But the major scale is not just a piece of historical trivia. It is the actual material of which all modern music is made. It is the source of every sound that we recognize as "musical", and its structure is the central architectural theme in every song you have ever heard. You can literally listen to the radio for hours without ever hearing a note that is not one of these seven. And those chords you're hearing in the background are nothing but the seven basic chords that can be built from these seven notes.

The remarkable discipline with which we stick to the major scale in our songwriting is even more amazing when you consider that we don't even do it on purpose. Take for example the melodic and beautiful reggae music of Bob Marley. With very rare exceptions, every one of his songs is perfectly contained within the seven notes and seven chords of the major scale, even though he composed songs in all different keys. Now do you think Bob Marley stayed perfectly within the major scale out of respect for his grade school music teachers? Was he consciously thinking about the key signature of each song? ("Hmm...this song is in the key of A major so I better remember to sing C#, F# and G# in my melodies.")

Of course not. He simply sang the notes he *imagined* and he used chords on his guitar that *sounded correct* to his ear. And he is not the only songwriter who does this. All over the world people are composing songs by ear, singing melodies that they imagine while fumbling for the chords that sound right. Through trial and error they eventually get everything to sound "just right" to their ear. They don't even realize that the end result simply places all the notes and all the chords in just the right places so that it all fits perfectly within one particular major scale. In other words, the ear was feeling the seven notes of the major scale all along, and would not be satisfied with the composition until all other notes were eliminated. Like a sculptor chipping away at a block of marble, the final result is always the major scale.

Additional resources:



<https://improviseforreal.com/ifr-blog/practice-tips/getting-past-the-theory/how-music-works-1>



<https://improviseforreal.com/ifr-blog/practice-tips/creating-a-new-music-practice/2-5-1-ear-training-workout>



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