

Music Theory For Beginning Troubadours

Musicians need to be able to talk about music with each other, and there is already a vocabulary of terms in use. You don't need to study music in a school to be able to use and understand them. Almost no modern troubadours, amateur or professional can read music at all, so if you did not learn when you were young or if you know nothing about formal music, that should not be a barrier to you becoming a functioning troubadour. We understand the ideas gradually, but we need the language and terminology right away.

Notes & Their Names

Music theory begins with the concept of the octave, which essentially represents the integer 2. If you shorten a string by half, or double its length, it makes a note an octave higher or lower. The octave is found in nature, and is common to all musical systems on earth. Notes an octave apart are so similar to our ears that they are given the same letter names.

In Western music, the octave is divided into 12 equal pieces. All musical notes are given names using the 7 letters A-B-C-D-E-F-G, with *sharps* (#) and *flats* (b) in-between A-B, D-E, F-G and G-A, for a total of 12 note names. All the notes we deal with have one of those 12 names, though 5 of them have double names, since A# and Bb refer to the same pitch. (There are 8 different C notes on an 88-key piano.) The 12th fret of a guitar string is an octave higher than the open string, and half its length. Each of the guitar frets represents an equal pitch interval, just like keys on a piano. This naming system originated on the piano; the white keys are named with the seven letters A through G, and the black keys are the sharps and flats. (The *natural* (♮) is also an accidental, and temporarily negates a sharp or flat in written music.) It is not necessary to understand the naming system, but it is important to be able to use the terms, since it has become the language of music everywhere. Study a diagram of the guitar fingerboard if you haven't done this, and pay attention to the names of the notes you are playing. *Sharping* a note usually means going to the next higher note, and *flattening* it means going a notch lower.

The note between A and B is sometimes called A# and sometimes Bb, and you must memorize the way this naming system works. Its logic is not apparent when you are staring at a guitar fingerboard. The note above G we usually call G#, and the next one is A, since there are only 7 letter names used for music pitches and they “wrap around” after G and go back to A. It's also essential to remember that between B and C and between E and F there are no sharps or flats. On a piano, these show up as adjacent white keys.

We use these 12 names for notes, and also for naming scales, chords and keys, so get used to them.

The basic reason for this naming system is that most scales (think do-re-mi even though there are lots of kinds of scales...) have only seven notes in them. In general, each 7-note scale will have the letters A through G (with sharps or flats) represented once and only once. Guitars and other stringed instruments really only play well in the keys of C, G, D, A and E, which are all “sharp keys,” so you hear guitarists use the word “sharp” more than the word “flat.” It's normal to only know part of the music theory that applies to playing in those keys, though keep in mind that horn players and sometimes pianists prefer the “flat” keys of F, Bb, and Eb. The guitar's lowest string is an E, and there are three more E's you can play above that. (The next one is the 2nd fret of the 4th string, in standard tuning. The first string is the next E, and the 12th fret of the high E string is the 4th octave of E.

Scales

A *scale* is just a group of notes arranged in order of pitch. There are dozens, possibly hundreds of kinds of scales that are associated with the various kinds of music in the world. Each pair of adjacent notes in any scale is an *interval*. The 12 names that are given to the musical pitches are also used to name chords, and there are also names given to successions of chords, usually called *chord progressions*. The starting point for understanding and naming all these building blocks of music theory is called the “*major scale*” and even if you don't play music that uses a major scale for the melody, and all you do is strum troubadour chords, major scales are used to describe and name a number of things.

Each of the 12 named notes can be the starting point or *root* for each type of scale or chord. The C major scale is the simplest, and it is just the white keys on a piano, starting with C: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-C. It makes the familiar “do-re-mi” sound, and actually represents intervals of frets or half-steps of 2-2-1-2-2-2-1. If you start anywhere on any guitar string or on a piano, and play up any string with those intervals, it will make a major scale. There is a major scale that starts on each of the 12 notes names, and because of the way that the black and white keys on a piano are laid out, each of the 12

scales has a unique pattern of sharps and flats (black keys) in it. The largest part of why we use the 7 letters and sharps & flats for musical note names is so that each scale will contain each of the 7 letters once and only once.

Keys

The concept of a musical “key” is important to troubadours, and it has a different meaning than the “keys” on a piano. Every song can exist in any of 12 different keys, which correspond to the 12 notes that make up an octave, and the 12 keys span the pitch range. Rather than always playing a song in the key it was written in, (like Bach’s *Prelude in C*) when we sing with our guitars we want to play chords to the song that put it in a pitch range that suits our voice. Moving a song to another key is called *transposing*. It’s a good idea from the beginning to try to conceptualize the structure of a song in a way that it can simultaneously exist in all of the 12 keys. It’s also a good idea to figure out for each song that we learn what is our best key, and to write that down or remember it. We say things like “Let’s play *San Antonio Rose* in the key of G, which tells another musician what chords to play if they are familiar with the song.

Chords

A *chord* is 3 or more notes played at once. There are a huge number of combinations of notes that make up simple or complex chords, and each chord type has a name and a “flavor.” Major chords have a certain structure and a sound. So do minor chords and 7th chords, and 6th chords., and we gradually learn to recognize their distinctive sound. There are dozens of kinds of chords, such as minor, diminished, 9th etc. and each of them exists in 12 different versions built on each *root* note. The note structure of each chord is described by the location of the notes in the major scale, even when it is not a major chord. (Not all chords have names, and there are different naming systems for chords used by different people. If you study a number of different guitar chord books, you’ll often see different naming conventions and sometimes different symbols. For example, a C diminished chord is sometimes written *Cdim* and sometimes *C°*.)

To a campfire guitar player, a chord is a shape you make with your left hand so you can strum across as many of the strings as possible. We tend to accompany songs by playing a series of left hand chord shapes that match the melody. There is not just one way to put chords to a melody (it’s called *arranging* a song to play various other notes along with the melody.) We can create an arrangement of a song by learning what chords best go with the melody, and playing them at the right places in the song. A jazz musician would play different chords to a melody than a polka musician might, but the melody, words and chords are the 3 basic building blocks of troubadour songs. Often beginners can play a basic sketch of the chords, and more advanced players will usually add or substitute other chords to make a more complex chord accompaniment.

Chord Progressions and Numbers

When we learn a basic guitar song, our voices sing the words to the melody, and our hands play the chords that correspond to the melody. When we pay attention to the structure of the song, we find that the various components of the song like the *verse* or *chorus* generally follow patterns of chord changes that we need to memorize or learn to read from a *chord chart*. This is vital, and we need a language to talk about this. A simple 2-chord song might have a C and a G chord in it, (if it is in the key of C) and it would also be a 2-chord song in each of the other 11 keys but each would have 2 different chords in it that all had the same relationship to each other that C and G have.

Musicians often describe this internal structure with numbers. Because the first note of a C scale is a C note, we call the C chord the *1 chord* in the key of C. In the key of D, the D chord is the 1 chord. We then use the 7 number positions of the major (do-re-mi) scale to name the chords. In the key of C, a D chord is the 2 chord, an E is the 3 chord, F is the 4 chord, G is the 5 chord, etc. The most common 2-chord songs have a 1 and a 5 chord, though there are some that have a 1 and a 4, or a 1 and a flat 7.

The most common basic 3 chord songs use the 1, 4 and 5 chords, and troubadours learn to recognize the distinctive sound of these chord changes. When we strum along with songs, we think things like: “Play the 1 chord for 8 beats, then play the 4 chord for 4 beats then a 5 chord for 4 beats, then back to the 1 chord for 8 beats.” This is how we make the basic chordal map of the song that provides our accompaniment. On the Transposing handout is a chart of the 12 keys and their basic 1-2-3-4-5-6-7 chords. When we learn each song, we map out where the chord changes land as the melody moves forward, and we mark each chord change with a letter name or a number.

If we write down just the letter name for the chord progression, then the song is mapped out in just one key. More often we use numbers, which describes the structure of the song in all 12 keys at once.

Song Structure and Terminology

There is a language that is used to describe how songs are constructed, and it is important to learn to recognize and use

the jargon and concepts. It is common in all professions for people to describe pieces of wood, basketball skills, kinds of tires, hoses, hockey pucks or bandages by an ever-evolving set of slang words, and it may be the best way to spot newcomers or inexperienced practitioners of any discipline. There is never an organized or universal language, and this kind of thing does not typically show up in music theory instruction lessons, though it is essential to know if you are playing music with other people. The language that blues musicians in Chicago use to talk about song structure is not likely to be the same as that used by Nashville session players, a church band in Texas or bluegrass jammers in Asheville, North Carolina. You will have to be alert and flexible, and know as many of the words as you can that apply in your own life situations.

Probably the most universal word used to describe a song is *verse*, and you might not run into too much confusion if you use it, though the old-fashioned word *stanza* is still used some places. The repeating section of a song that often follows the verses is called both the *chorus* and the *refrain*, and the term *pre-chorus* is even used for an intermediary repeating section. *Bridge* is a widely-used term to describe a third section of a song that is neither the verse or chorus, and that often is musically quite different structurally from them. Song crafters and pop songwriters usually include a bridge in a song, while things like old folk songs usually don't have them. The Beatles modeled a lot of their writing after the pop songwriters of Tin Pan Alley, and most of their songs have catchy bridges, for example.

An instrumental section in-between verses or used as a separator or *interlude* between sections of a song is often called a *break*, *solo* or even a *ride*. Words like *riffs*, *runs*, *solos*, *lines*, *licks*, *breaks* and others might be used interchangeably to describe instrumental *phrases* that band members might contribute. I often hear the word *turnaround* to describe the old church practice of playing the closing phrase of a song as an introduction or a short break between sections. You may also encounter the term *middle eight*, which is a term for a middle section of a song that is unusual or differs substantially from the more common sections like verses and choruses. The word "eight" refers to the most common number of measures in this kind of section.

A shorter section at the beginning of a song that may be sung or instrumental might be called a *kick-off* or an *intro* (short for introduction) though the word *prelude* still exists. In old-time fiddle music, people sometimes call the intro a "4-potato" or an "8 potato," which refers to two different lengths of intro, depending on how many times you could count "one-potato 2-potato 3-potato etc" before starting into the verse. This establishes the rhythm and the key, and is usually done by the fiddler just bowing a pair of strings back and forth. A closing phrase might be called a *tag*, *outtro* (the opposite of intro), *closer* or *coda*, or even in some cases you might hear the word *postlude* to refer to an ending section. Classical music has a vocabulary of terms in several languages that still appear, such as *aria* (solo section by the featured vocalist), *ostinato* (repeating phrase), *allegro* (fast section), *andante* (slow section) and *cadenza* (free-form interlude.)

Capital letters are also commonly used to describe song structure, and they have nothing to do with the musical uses of those letters. Traditional fiddle tunes, for example, typically have the structure AABB, which means that the tune has two sections, referred to as the *A part* and the *B part*, and each is played twice. The traditional fiddle tune *Ragtime Annie* is sometimes played with a third section, called the C part, and there will usually be a discussion before it is played where the players will ask if they want to do the C part. Its structure with the 3rd section is AABBC or sometimes AABBC. The "C part" is essentially the same concept as that of a bridge or a "middle eight." Many musicians, especially in jazz songs, use the term *head* to describe the *top* or the beginning of the song, which may get obscured by a long interlude or improvised section, and a song leader signifying the head will get all the players back together in sync. A *vamp* is also a common word that refers to a repeating phrase that serves as a pause or a tension-building section that repeats until some sort of signal is given to end it. A soloist might play or improvise while the rest of the band vamps on a simple chord change, or the bandleader might introduce the band or make a thank you speech. The word *hook* is used a great deal in pop music to describe the chunk of the song that gets stuck in your head, and that is the most familiar, identifiable and catchy part of the song. The hook in the Rolling Stones "*Satisfaction*" is the opening fuzz guitar riff, while the hook in "*YMCA*" is the repeating phrase "YMCA-YMCA." A bandleader might say something like: "Let's play a 1-5 turnaround as an intro, and the guitar will take a ride after the 2nd B part, and the bass will drop out on the bridge." Be ready for new and unfamiliar terms, and always try to use the best words to communicate with whomever you need to communicate with.