RIK EMMETT

Back To Basics

The Circle, The Cycle: What Goes Around Comes Around

It makes a beautiful, symmetrical picture, doesn't it? Like a clock, or an ancient drawing of the planet or the universe. Our little wheel, called the circle of fifths, is an important visual aid that can help you understand and remember key signatures, the order of sharps and flats as they appear in key signatures, the relationships of relative major and minor keys, and the concept of enharmonic equivalency. It illustrates a perfectly wonderful cycle-of-fifths pattern that proves, no matter where you start, that what goes around comes around. It also provides an excellent structure for practicing scale and arpeggio exercises. Now let's take a look at our musical clock.

Key signatures. Start at the *C* (12 o'clock: no sharps, no flats) and head out in a clockwise direction. The next seven notes are the sharp keys, appearing in order according to the number of sharps that each contains. If you go counter-clockwise, you'll hit the seven flat keys, also in order. Notice how each clockwise step takes you *up* an interval of a perfect fifth (e.g., *C* to *G*, five scale steps above *C*; see Ex. 1), while every counterclockwise step goes *down* a perfect fifth (e.g., *F* to *B*♭; see Ex. 2).

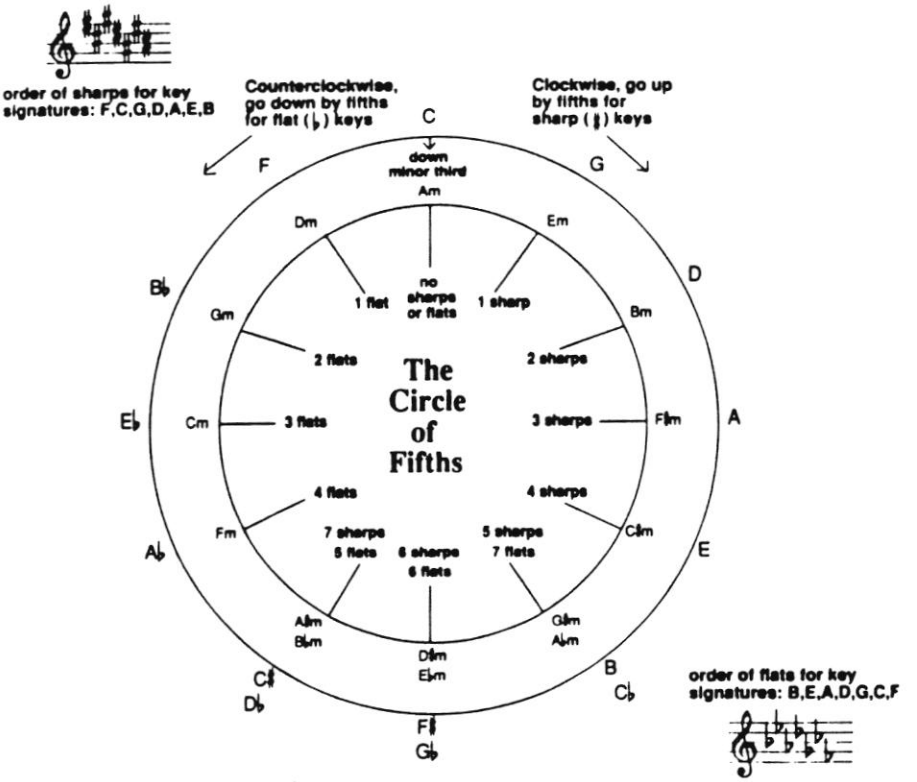
The order of sharps and flats. Father Charlie Goes Down And Ends Battle. Battle Ends And Down Goes Charlie's Father. Are you still with me? When you write in a given key, you must indicate the key's sharps or flats on the staff in a prescribed order, which these nonsense sentences can help you remember. Sharps go *F, C, G, D, A, E, B*; flats are *B, E, A, D, G, C, F*. Traveling around the circle clockwise and counterclockwise yields the two sequences.

Relative keys. These are pairs of major and minor keys that share the same key signature. To find a major key's relative minor, just move in along the same spoke of the wheel to the inner circle. The intervallic distance from the root of a major key to that of its relative minor is up a major sixth or down a minor third (see Ex. 3). I prefer to go down a minor third because it's the shorter distance.

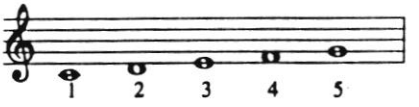
Enharmonic equivalents. Check out how the cycles overlap and get busy lookin' down there between 5 and 7 o'clock. That's because notes like *B* and *C*♭, *F*♯ and *G*♭, and *C*♯ and *D*♭ are *enharmonic equivalents*, notes that sound exactly the same (at least in Western music's commonly accepted equal temperament tuning system), but are "spelled" differently. For example, the note at the 2nd fret of your *B* string could be labeled *C*♯ or *D*♭, depending on its function.

I'll leave you with a philosophical thought: The circle of fifths is aesthetically pleasing because it is complete and tidy. It takes some of the chaos out of the incomprehensible infinite, making it cyclical and orderly, an established logical pattern that is safely closed and self-perpetuating. As long as there is nature, the circle must remain unbroken, and what goes around will surely come around again. And speaking of coming around again, tune in next month for some cyclical arpeggio exercises based on these concepts.

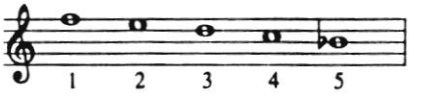
Rik Emmett, a renowned Canadian guitarist/singer/songwriter/columnist seeking to add more slashes to his description, has just completed Absolutely, *his first solo LP, and is currently doing that deal-shopping thing*



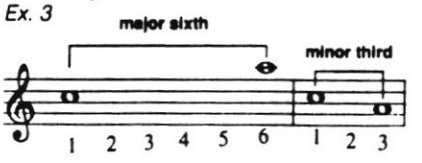
Ex. 1



Ex. 2



Ex. 3



Circle of Fifths

All Major Keys and Relative Minors

Fig. 1

C Major Scale

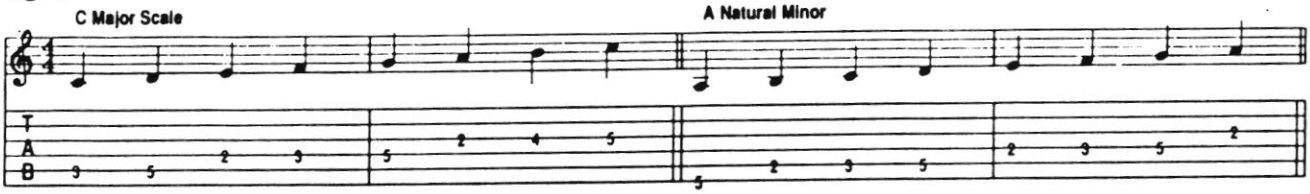


Fig. 2

A Natural Minor

Fig. 3

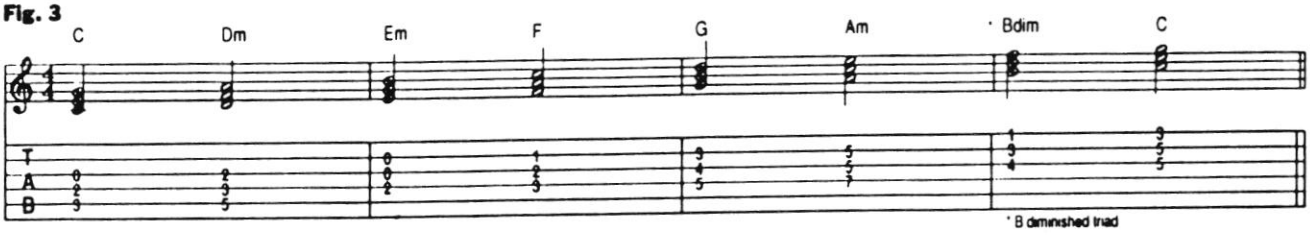


Fig. 4