

It's All Relative

Some Keys Have More in Common than You Think

At first glance, the E major and C# minor scales seem to have nothing in common. They start on different notes. They have opposite tonalities—one major and one minor. However, they do have one very important similarity: Both share F#, C#, G#, and D# in their key signatures. Because of their identical key signatures, E major and C# minor are known as relative keys.

Each major key has a relative minor, and vice versa. To find a major key's relative minor, count down one-and-a-half steps, or a minor third. For example, if you are given the key of D major, count down a minor third from D to B, which tells you that the relative key is B minor. This rule works in reverse, as well. If you are given the key of A minor, for instance, count *up* a minor third to find that the relative key is C major.

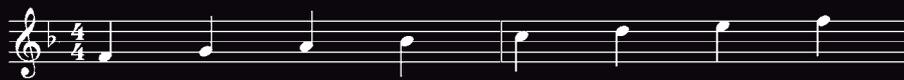
Since relative keys have identical key signatures, and therefore use all the same notes of the scale, they

make for easy and natural-sounding key changes. Composers frequently take advantage of this. For example, *sonata-allegro* form—the musical structure found in the first movement of most symphonies—always uses an opening theme in one key and a second theme in the relative key.

Relative keys are not to be confused with parallel keys, which share the same tonic—that is, the first scale degree—but do not share a key signature. This means, simply, that A major and A minor are parallel keys, B major and B minor are parallel keys, and so on. To find the correct key signature for a parallel minor key, lower the third, sixth, and seventh scale degrees; alternately, to find the key signature of a parallel major key, raise the third, sixth, and seventh scale degrees.

Below is the F major scale, its relative minor, and its parallel minor. Remember to pay attention to the key signature for each!

F Major



D Minor (Relative Minor)



F Minor (Parallel Minor)

