

When Different Notes Sound the Same

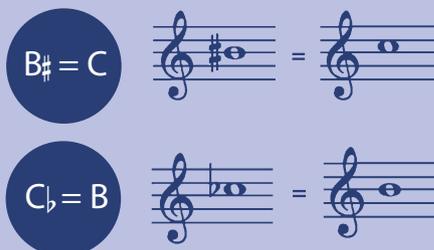
UNDERSTANDING ENHARMONICS

■ When is an F# not an F#? When it's a Gb! You may have noticed while making music that each pitch has more than one possible note name. These equivalent notes are called enharmonics. The most common enharmonics are sharp notes with equivalent flats, and vice versa.

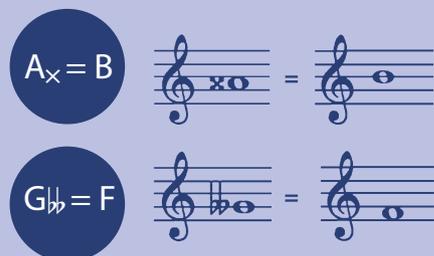
For example, A# and Bb are enharmonics because an A raised by a half step is the same as a B lowered by a half step.



In cases where two adjacent natural notes are only separated by a half step rather than a whole step (in other words, white keys with no black keys in between), that sharp-and-flat pattern does not apply. For instance, since B to C is only a half step, B# and C (not Cb) are enharmonics, and Cb and B (not B#) are enharmonics.



Many more enharmonics can be found by using double sharps (x) and double flats (bb). While a regular sharp or flat raises or lowers a pitch by a half step, a double sharp or flat raises or lowers a pitch by a whole step. For example, Ax is the same pitch as B, and a Gbb is the same pitch as F.



Why all the different ways to name notes? Pitches that are identical to the ear can play different roles in chords and harmonies depending on how they are named, or "spelled." The simplest way to understand this is to think of a triad, such as D major. The pitches of the chord are D, F#, A. If the chord were spelled D, Gb, A, the chord would sound the same, but it would not be identified as a major triad; that's because major triads, by definition, are built using intervals of thirds.

Additionally, although keyboard instruments do not distinguish between enharmonic notes—that is, a C# and a Db are played using the same black key—many other instruments use different fingerings depending on how the note is spelled. For example, a violinist might play a C# using his second finger raised above the natural position, but would be more likely to play the enharmonic note Db, using his third finger lowered from the natural position.

