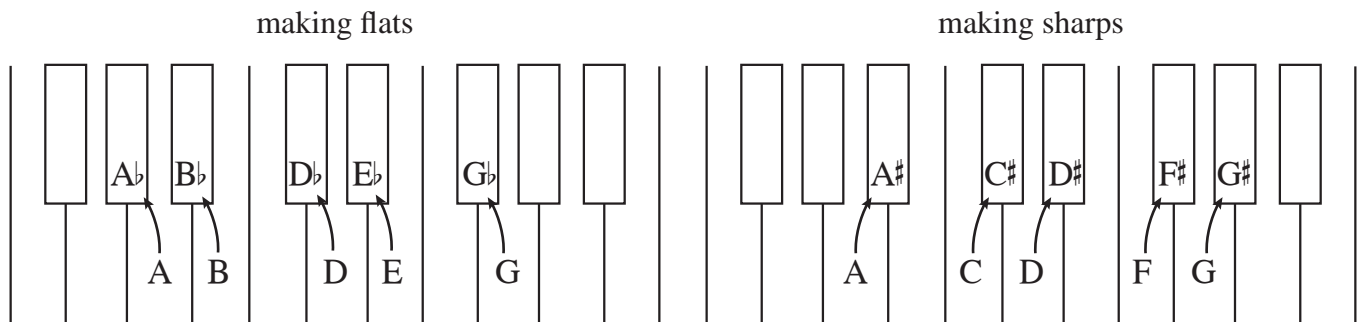


Accidentals - The Sharps and Flats

Up until now we've focused exclusively on the "plain" notes that correspond to the white keys on the piano. But you are probably aware that the majority of music also uses sharps and flats. These modifications to our basic pitch notation are called *accidentals*.

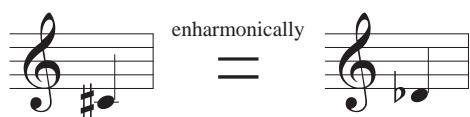
The way accidentals work is pretty simple. Sharps push a note up, and flats pull it down. So when you add a sharp or flat to a note, it simply means the note a half-step higher or lower than the "plain" version. On the piano, this will frequently mean the black key to the right or left of the usual white key.



Enharmonic Equivalence

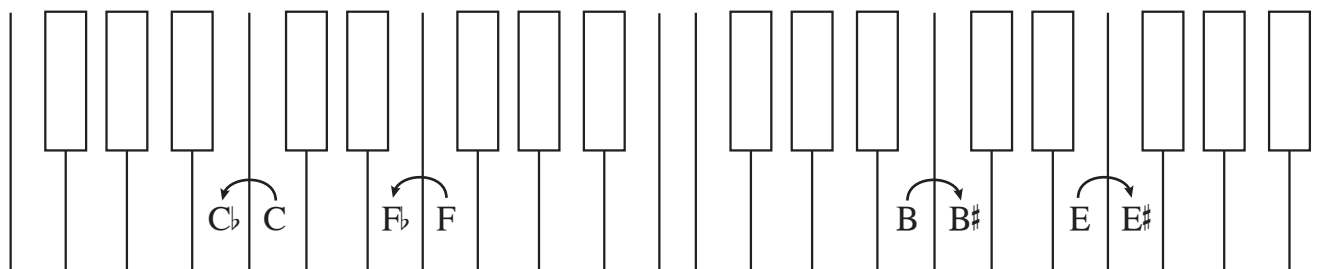
You might notice, however, that you can approach a black key from either the right or the left -- this means that the same key can have more than one name.

The note between C and D, for example, could be called either C sharp or D flat. We say that C sharp and D flat are thus *enharmonically equivalent*.



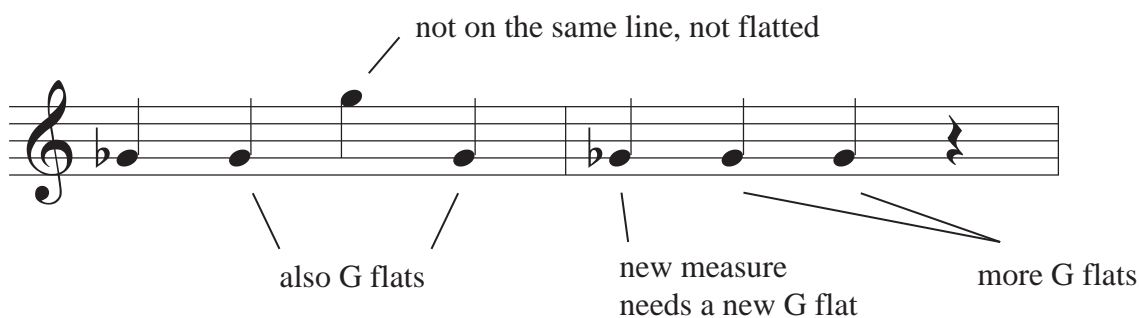
We'll learn later that it matters which one you choose! Picking C sharp instead of D flat can be as important as spelling the word "car" with a C and not a K.

The black-key notes aren't the only ones that have more than one enharmonic equivalent - white notes have more than one name as well. Believe it or not, there is such a thing as C flat, F flat, B sharp and E sharp. These are relatively rare, but they do come up for various reasons.



Notation

When you are drawing notes on the staff, you put the accidental before the note. It will have an effect on all the notes that follow in that measure as well - so if you apply a flat to your first G, all subsequent G's will also be flattened. (This only applies to the notes on the same line or space, however.)

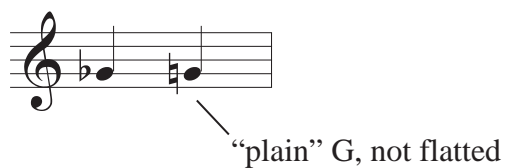


When we speak or write about the notes, however, we always mention the accidental after the note, not before. We say and write G flat or G \flat .

The Natural Sign

The natural sign indicates the "plain" letter name. This is useful when you've had an accidental earlier in the measure and you want to undo it. So, if you've had a G-flat earlier and you want plain G, you'd indicate that by notating G natural. (Also, it's much more correct to say "G natural" rather than "plain G.")

 natural



Double Flats and Double Sharps

Double flats and double sharps alter a note so that it is either two half-steps higher or lower.

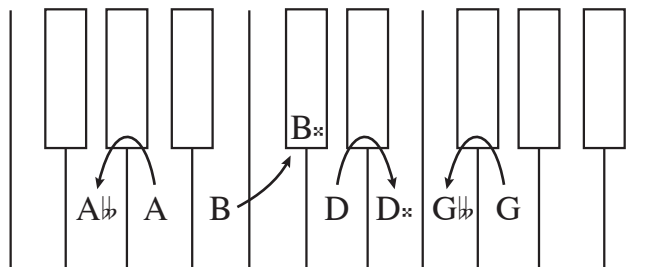
The double flat is written exactly the way you'd expect...



...but the double sharp looks more like a small X.



Thus the white notes have enharmonic equivalents that can be made with double flats or sharps.



Key Signatures

Key signatures appear at the beginning of a piece (and usually at the beginning of each line in the sheet music.) They consist of one or more accidentals floating without any notes attached to them. These flats or sharps affect every note in the entire piece, unless they are undone with naturals. Unlike normal accidentals that you attach to notes, they also affect the same letter name in different octaves - so, for instance, if your key signature has an F sharp in it is means that all kinds of F's will now be F sharps, not just those on that top line.

