

Monteverdi's Gloria for 8 voices M 17

Learn how to work out a key signature - as far as 4 sharps and flats and why major and minor keys share their key signatures

You can learn to work out a key signature because they follow patterns. You looked at these in Activity 15. You might want to have that chart to hand

1. There are one or more sharps in the key signature – major key

The sharps accumulate in the order F# C# D# G#

The last sharp in the key signature is always the 7th note of the major scale it belongs to.

One sharp – the last (and only) one is F#, go up one note = G major

Four sharps – the last is D#, go up one note = E major

2. There are one or more flats in the key signature – major key

The flats accumulate in the order Bb Eb Ab Db

The last flat is always the 4th note of the major scale – but it can be easier to remember that the second to last flat is the key note

Two flats – Bb and Eb The second to last is Bb = Bb major

Four flats – the second to last is Ab = Ab major

(Don't be put off by having a key built on black note)

You have to remember that one flat – Bb is the key of F major - “F” for “flat”?

3. No sharps or flats – it's C major – or – could it be A minor?

Remember that in Activity 15 you've found out that each major key has its relative minor - the minor key that shares most of the same notes.

The only way to establish whether the piece is in the major or the minor key is to check out the end. Is the last note of the tune a C or an A? Once you've done the activities about chords you'll be even better at this.

a major key's relative minor is the 6th note of its scale.

a minor key's relative major is the 3rd note of its scale.

4. So why don't we have special key signatures for minor keys?

Like just a G# for A minor? It's tempting, but the simple answer is, we never have so we don't. If you did have a G# on its own as the key signature, there's a risk it might get misread as an F# and then the music wouldn't sound as you planned. So we're stuck with shared key signatures and having to work out whether the music is in the major or its relative minor.

5. What's the point?

All this key signature stuff. Why bother? Instrumentalists have to take notice to ensure they put their fingers on the right notes. As a singer, understanding about the key signature helps you to know which notes to expect and make more sense of the accidentals – lots of those in the Gloria.