

3. ACCIDENTALS

In music theory, the term "accidentals" is used to describe some notes which have been slightly altered. Accidentals are the symbols which are placed before the note on the staff - they can be "sharps", "flats" or "naturals".

In this unit we'll have a look at what accidentals are exactly and how they are used in music theory.

THE OCTAVE

To begin, let's look at a piano keyboard again.



How many different notes are there between two Cs (don't count the C's twice)?

If we count all the black and white notes, we'll find there are 12 different notes. (Don't count the C twice!) This span of notes is called an "octave".

This isn't only true for the piano – every instrument uses the same series of notes.

SHARPS AND FLATS

So, we have 12 different notes, but we only use 7 letters of the alphabet. We use the words "sharp" (=higher) and "flat" (=lower) with a letter name, to cover all those "in-between" notes. Sharps and flats are two kinds of "accidentals". We can use symbols for accidentals, instead of the words sharp and flat.

Sharp symbol

♭ Flat symbol

Find the notes C and D on the keyboard (they are both white notes).

In between them, you'll see a black note.

We can say that this note is a bit higher than C, so it is "C **sharp**" (C#), or we can say it is a bit lower than D, so it is also "D **flat**" (Db).

NATURALS

The third type of accidental we are going to look at is called the "natural".

We use the word "natural" (or the symbol \natural) to say that a note is neither sharp nor flat. This is very useful, because sometimes when a note has already been altered by an accidental (flat or sharp), we need to put a natural sign in to tell the player that it isn't flat or sharp any more.

Flats, sharps and naturals make up the main accidentals, and they are the only accidentals you need to know for grade one music theory.