

Transposition

Transposing means moving every note of a piece by the same distance, so the tune keeps its shape but sits in a new key. You do it to suit a singer, to make a part easier to read, or because the instrument you are writing for hears a different note from the one it reads.

HOW TO TRANSPOSE A MELODY — FOUR STEPS

- 1 Find the interval between the old key and the new one, and its direction. C to E $\flat$ is a minor 3rd up.
- 2 Write the new key signature first, before any notes. E $\flat$ major takes three flats.
- 3 Move every note the same number of letter names. A 3rd up means two letters up: C→E, D→F, G→B — the shape on the staff stays identical.
- 4 Copy every accidental's effect, not the sign. A note raised a semitone above the scale stays raised — the sign may change from # to $\natural$.

THE SAME TUNE IN THREE KEYS

In C major	C	D	E	C	G	E	D	C
Up a tone · D	D	E	F $\sharp$	D	A	F $\sharp$	E	D
Up a minor 3rd · E $\flat$	E $\flat$	F	G	E $\flat$	B $\flat$	G	F	E $\flat$

Every row uses the same pattern of steps, so all three sound like the same tune. Only the pitch level — and the key signature that carries the sharps or flats — has changed.

TRANSPOSING INSTRUMENTS

INSTRUMENT	WRITTEN C SOUNDS	SOUNDING → WRITTEN	KEY SIGNATURE
Clarinet in B $\flat$ · Trumpet in B $\flat$	B $\flat$ below	Up a major 2nd	Two sharps more than concert pitch
Horn in F · Cor anglais	F below	Up a perfect 5th	One sharp more than concert pitch
Alto saxophone in E $\flat$	E $\flat$ below	Up a major 6th	Three sharps more than concert pitch
Tenor saxophone in B $\flat$	B $\flat$ an octave and a tone below	Up a major 9th	Two sharps more than concert pitch
Double bass · Guitar · Piccolo	An octave away	Octave only	Unchanged

Read the third column when you have the sound you want and need the part on paper. Reverse it — down instead of up — to work out what a written part will actually sound like.

WORKED EXAMPLE · A B $\flat$ TRUMPET PART

WHAT YOU WANT TO HEAR	MOVE IT UP A MAJOR 2ND	WHAT THE PLAYER READS
A fanfare in concert E $\flat$ major, starting on the note E $\flat$ above middle C.	E $\flat$ becomes F. Every other note moves the same distance — one letter name up, keeping the interval major or minor as it was.	A part in F major — one flat instead of three — beginning on F. The trumpet plays F and E $\flat$ comes out.
Count letters, then check quality. Get the note names right first by counting up the alphabet; only then decide whether each one needs a sharp, flat or natural.	Watch the range. A tune that sat comfortably in C may run off the end of the instrument in A $\flat$. Check the top and bottom notes before you commit to a key.	Label the score. Write "in B $\flat$ " beside the instrument name. A part with no label is guesswork for whoever plays it next.