

TUTION TIP: TRANSPOSING



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Tuition Tips. Each issue
Andrew will be featuring
a specific class taught at
the school, giving you a
bite-size chunk of the
lesson, and an insight
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Skill Level:

Transposing a piece of music involves preserving the relationships and intervals between all of the notes, but moving them to a lower or higher pitched starting point. One of the most common reasons for doing this is when playing a cover-version of a song, and the singer that you're playing with has a different vocal range to the original artist. However annoying you may find this, try to bear in mind that this isn't their fault, as not everyone is born with the exactly the same vocal chords! Being able to quickly transpose bass lines into different keys is a very valuable asset and may well give you the edge over other bass players in your area.

Many of our live performance classes at Tech Music Schools involve playing current and classic songs, so key choice and transposition are hot topics. Sometimes students are given two keys to learn the tune in, the original plus one other; and on our higher level courses they have to be prepared to play some of the songs in any of the 12 possible keys! This can be quite a daunting prospect to start with, so we look at various strategies for dealing with transposition.

QUICK METHOD

If you are asked to play a song a semitone (one fret) or a tone (two frets) higher or lower, it is possible just to move your fretting hand position up or down accordingly. Although not perfect, this can get you through a lot of situations and requires little or no knowledge of music theory.

However, this won't work for notes played on open strings, or in a very low position. In order to combat this, try learning the song using fretted notes as much as possible. One of the benefits of playing 5-string is that you can fret a low E, and if you are required to play down a tone, you just move two frets down to D and then use the same fingering. If in the same scenario you're playing a four-string bass, then this gets tricky as you will now have to go up to D and this may not make the bass line sound jumpy and awkward. It may be better to change the rest of the bass line to the higher octave so that the bass line flows more smoothly – you will have to decide what's best.

EXERCISES 1 - 3

Transpose the bass lines written to a semitone lower, a tone lower, and then a semitone higher and a tone higher. If you run out of low notes on your bass, decide where to shift the bass line up to the higher octave. Try out a few options and go with what's best for you.

This quick method of transposition is limited, especially if you have to transpose further

than a tone. A more secure way of doing it involves harmonic analysis, which with practice can become just as speedy.

FULL METHOD

If we learn a bass line in enough detail, it is possible to be fluent at transposing that bass line into any key, even with little or no advance warning. What we need to do is to harmonically analyse each piece of musical information. What this means is to consider each note as a number and how it is positioned within the scale, as opposed to just treating them as individual notes, or frets on your bass. The numbers to give the notes are taken from each note's position in the major scale – see table 1.

EXERCISES 4 – 6

These exercises are just chord charts for you to put your own bass line to. Exercise 4 is in C major, and analysing/numbering the chords gives us 1, 6, 4, 5. Try transposing this chord sequence to A major, and then any other key you fancy. With a good knowledge of the major scale in every key, chord charts such as these can be transposed very quickly.

If you come across a chord built on a note that isn't in the major scale, then you use the nearest number and include a flat or sharp to indicate if it is a semitone lower or higher than the note in the scale. For example, Exercise 6 is in the key of A major, and the third note in the A major scale is C#. One of the chords in the exercise is C instead of C#, so it would be numbered as flat 3. This system of numbering can apply to notes as well as chords, which could mean the bass line or even the melody.

Learning songs this way will be more time consuming at first, but there are many advantages, and not just in the case of transposing. It will enable you to see the relationships between the chords and notes in a song, and not just think of them as isolated events. Once you've analysed a few songs this way, you'll start to recognise familiar patterns, making them easier to remember and making your understanding of harmony deeper. It also means that any riffs or licks you work out for one situation can then be applied elsewhere when you have a similar harmony.

Try analysing a song you already know in this way. Not only will this enable you to then play it in a different key, but you will also understand the music at a deeper level. Let me know how you get on!

Any questions or thoughts about this article, or anything you'd like me to cover, email me on andrew@guitar-x.co.uk - see you next time.

EXERCISES 4 – 6

4. C Am F G



A single bass clef staff with a key signature of one flat (Bb) and a common time signature (C). The staff is divided into four measures, each containing a whole note chord. The chords are C, Am, F, and G. The notes in each measure are represented by diagonal slashes. The staff ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

5. F Gm Am Bb



A single bass clef staff with a key signature of two flats (Bb, Eb) and a common time signature (C). The staff is divided into four measures, each containing a whole note chord. The chords are F, Gm, Am, and Bb. The notes in each measure are represented by diagonal slashes. The staff ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

6. A C D Bm



A single bass clef staff with a key signature of two sharps (F#, C#) and a common time signature (C). The staff is divided into four measures, each containing a whole note chord. The chords are A, C, D, and Bm. The notes in each measure are represented by diagonal slashes. The staff ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.