

Relationship of Key

The Cycle of Fifths

The diagram below demonstrates the twenty-four keys centers used in tonal harmony. This diagram is often referred to as the 'Cycle of Fifths'. This term is used because when rotating clockwise the key centers move in P5ths. As we learned when inverting intervals, a P5th is equal to a P4th when inverted. Consequently, when rotating counterclockwise around the 'Cycle of Fifths' the key centers move in P4ths. Either form of rotation helps to distinguish how close or remote the relationship is between keys by the progressive increase in accidentals. Note the arrow moves in a counterclockwise fashion. This is because most harmonic progressions in Jazz move in P4ths not P5ths. 'So why not make it a Cycle of P4ths', you say. Because in traditional harmony, keys an ascending P5th apart are considered closer because the first five notes of both scales belong to the original, i.e. CDEFG and GABCD both belong to the C Major scale. On the other hand, CDEFG & FABbC require two different scales.

Many musicians use the Cycle of Fifths as a tool for composition and improvisation, particularly in a counterclockwise manner. It also is an especially common practice tool in Jazz because many of the common chord progressions move in P4ths. For example, lets take a ii – V7-I chord progression in the key of Bb Major. Can you locate the roots of each chord when rotating the cycle counterclockwise?

