What is the circle of fourths/fifths?

The circle of fourths is an arrangement of all the twelve notes of music in a clock so that each note going in one direction (anticlockwise in the diagram above) is an interval of a fourth higher; and, going in the other direction (clockwise in our diagram) is an interval of a fifth higher.

(On an ukulele, a fourth is two whole-steps and a half-step higher (five frets or half-steps higher); a fifth is two whole-steps, a half-step, and a whole-step higher (seven frets or half-steps higher).)

Why should I learn the circle of fourths?

- It makes memorising many common chord progressions easier.
- It makes transposing (changing keys) easier.
- It helps you learn how many sharps or flats are in each key/scale.
- It helps you learn which notes are sharp or flat in each key/scale.

How do I memorise the circle of fourths?

I suggest first memorising the entire circle in the direction of fourths (‘C, F, B-flat, E-flat, A-flat, D-flat, G-flat, B, E, A, D, G, C’). After you are able to do that, memorise just over half the circle in the direction of fifths from F to B (‘F, C, G, D, A, E, B’).

Some mnemonics you could use (or make up your own):

- ‘C the Fabulous BEAD Gees BEAD Gees’ (the first BEAD Gee is flat).
- ‘Father Christmas Gave Dad An Electric Blanket’.

Eventually, you should aim to be able to start from any part of the circle and recite them in either direction.
How do I practise with the circle of fourths? How do I use it?

Common chord progressions

The movement of sound up a fourth is the most common and harmonious musical sound.

- **I-IV-V7 (blues and folk type tunes):** Grouped together as V7-I-IV in the cycle. Examples: F-Bb-C7 in the key of F; A-D-E7 in the key of A. Some example songs include La Bamba, CC Rider, Midnight Special, Knocking on Heaven’s Door, Feeling Groovy, You Are My Sunshine.

- **I-vi-ii-V7** (‘rhythm’ or ‘doo-wop’ changes): Grouped together as vi-ii-V7-I in the circle. Examples: C-Am-Dm-G7 in the key of C; G-Em-Am-D7 in the key of G. Some songs include Oh Donna, Diana, I’ve Got Rhythm. Sometimes the IV chord is used instead of the ii chord in this progression (I-vi-IV-V7).

- **ii-V7-I (jazz):** Example: Cm7-F7-BbMaj7 in the key of Bb.

- **iii-VI-ii-V7 (jazz):** Example: Bm7-E7-Am7-D7 in G.

- **Some parts of some songs go through part of the cycle in seventh chords.** They are VI7-I17-V7-I or III7-I117-V7-I tunes. Examples: Sweet Georgia Brown (E7-A7-D7-G in G); Five-Foot-Two (‘...E7eyes of blue, but A7oh what those five foot could do, has D7anybody G7seen my C7girl?’ in the key of C); The bridge of I’ve Got Rhythm (‘old man trouble...’) (D7-G7-C7-F7 in Bb).

- **The natural chords in any major key are grouped in the following order on the circle: vii (half-diminished), iii (minor), vi (minor), ii (minor), V7 (dominant seventh), I (major), IV (major).** Example in C: Bm7b5-Em7-Am7-Dm7-G7-CMaj7-FMaj7. Example in Bb: Am7b5-Dm7-Gm7-Cm7-F7-BbMaj7-EbMaj7.

Analyse songs that you know in terms of Roman numerals. As you strum the chords, say the Roman numerals out loud. For example, Feeling Groovy in C is F-C-G7-C (IV-I-V7-I). So, say and strum: [F] ‘four’ [C] ‘one’ [G7] ‘five’ [C] ‘one’. Always listen for the movement of a fourth. The V7-I sound is the easiest to hear.

Memorise this order: ‘seven, three, six, two, five, one, four’. You can break it up into bits to memorise: ‘five-one-four’; ‘two-five-one’; ‘three-six-two-five’. Memorise that the V chord is usually a dominant seventh (V7); I and IV are usually major; iii, vi and ii are usually minor.

Transposing

Analyse common songs in terms of Roman numerals. Then just apply the Roman numerals to a different part of the circle to transpose the tune. Practise by playing songs that you know by heart in different keys. For example, to play Feeling Groovy in G is C-G-D7-G (IV-I-V7-I in G). For a challenge, play any progression or song in all twelve keys in the order of the cycle.

How many flats/sharps in each keySCALE?

- **Each fifth (clockwise) key or scale from C adds one sharp.** G has one sharp; D has two sharps; A has three sharps; E has four sharps; B has five sharps.

- **Each fourth (anticlockwise) key or scale from C adds one flat.** F has one flat; Bb has two flats; Eb has three flats; Ab has four flats; Db has five flats; Gb has six flats.

Which notes are flat/sharp in each keySCALE?

- The order of sharps is FCGDAEB (‘Father Christmas Gave Dad An Electric Blanket’). The one sharp in G is F#; the two sharps in D are F# and C#; the three sharps in A are F#, C# and G#; and so on.

- The order of flats is BEADG (‘BEAD Gee’). The one flat in F is Bb; the two flats in Bb are Bb and Eb; the three flats in Eb are Bb, Eb and Ab; and so on.

Further Information


Joel Mabus. [http://www.joelmabus.com/mabus wheel of fifths.htm](http://www.joelmabus.com/mabus wheel of fifths.htm)

musictheoryguy. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfrD6IOTqKY&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VfrD6IOTqKY&feature=related)