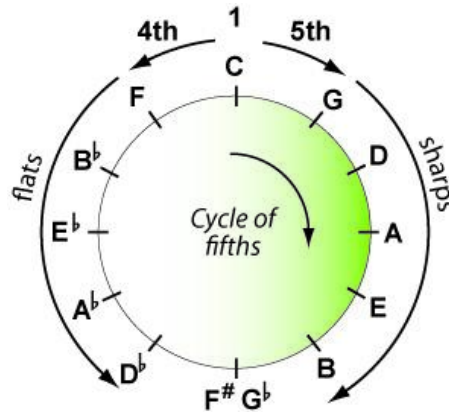


The essentials of the cycle of fifths

Jacques Chaurette, March 2025

The cycle of fifths is the ordering of 12 major scales with different tonics such that each tonic is the fifth of the previous one. This puts side-by-side scales that have common notes or chords.



Another feature of the cycle is it separates major scales that have flats and sharps. As each major scale is generated with the fifth of the previous one we add a sharp. For example, the G scale has an F#, the D scale has an F# and a C#, etc. The same is true regarding scales with flats, we can generate scales with flats by using the fourth of a major scale to generate the new scale. For example, the F scale has a B $\flat$, the B $\flat$ scale has an E $\flat$, etc. (see next figures). All major scale tonics are separated by the interval of a fifth or a fourth.

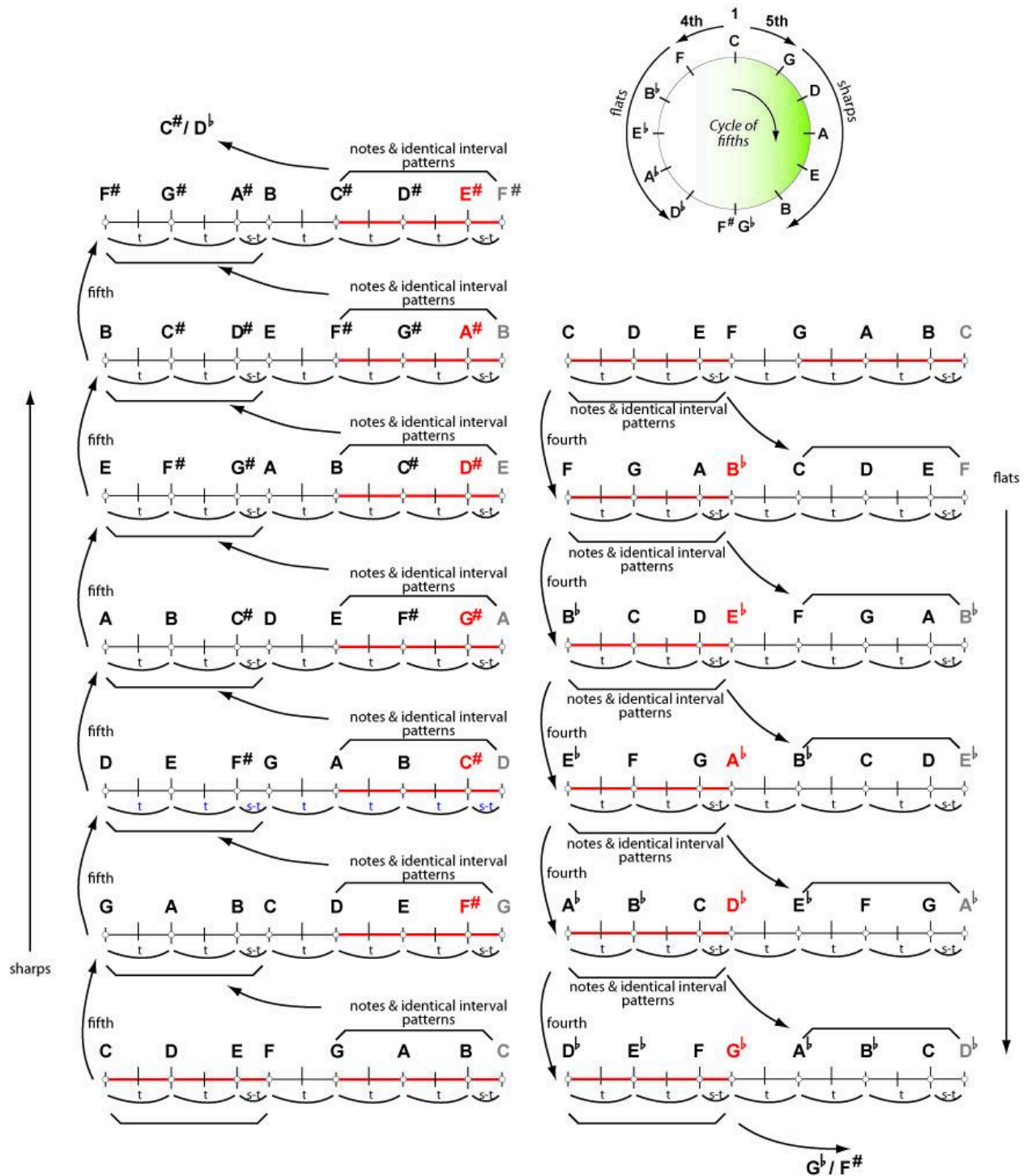
Major scales that are close in an ascending sequence such as C, G, D, etc. will contain notes that have sharps to ensure that no note letters are repeated. In a descending sequence such as C, F, B $\flat$, etc. the scales will have flats for the same reason.

The cycle of fifths is typically presented in a circular fashion since if you start on any given tonic and go up by fifths you will circle back to the initial tonic. In practice on an instrument, we cannot keep ascending for 12 tonics and we will be forced to go down an octave to stay within range of the instrument every 2 or 3 tonics.

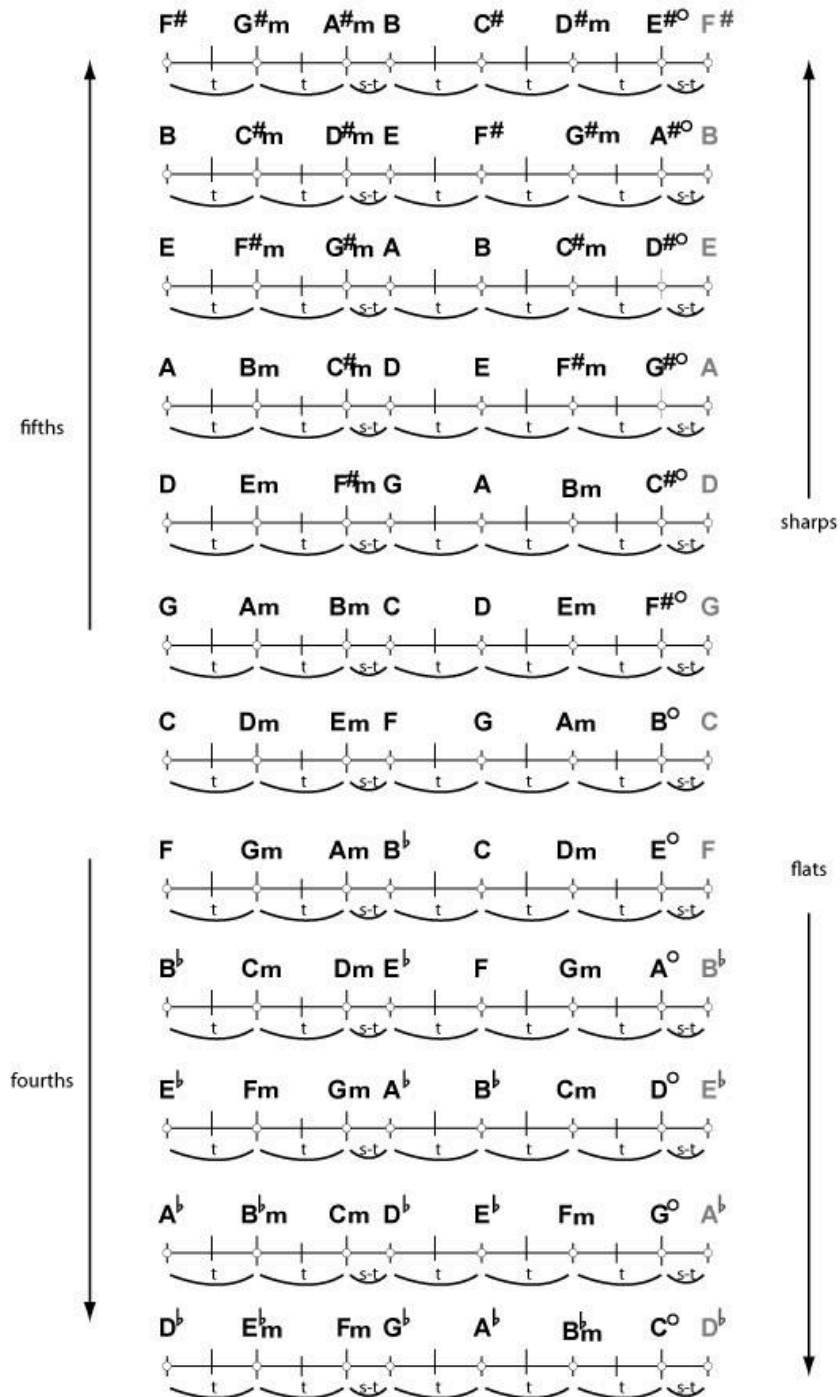
We can also represent the cycle in a linear fashion with the C major scale in the middle and going upward C, G, D etc, and downward C, F, B $\flat$, etc. In this format we can add the diatonic chords of each tonic and make the common chord relationships easy to see.

The cycle of fifths can also be used to immediately find any note of any tonic given the tonic and the scale degree of the note. First, we need to remember the list of all 12 tonics in the correct order. This is made much easier by noticing that there is a keyword, BEAD in the sharp section and the flat section of the cycle. Since we know that the sequence of any 3 tonics is the scale degrees 5 - 1 - 4; mentally we can determine the 5 and the 4 of any tonic. The rest of the notes: 2, 3, 6 and 7 can be deduced from the 5, 4 and 1 (see attached figure).

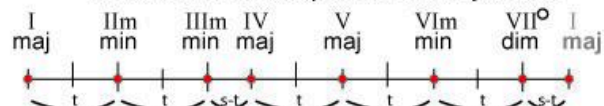
The cycle of fifths and the relationship between diatonic notes and chords of the 12 tonics



The cycle of fifths and the relationship between diatonic notes and chords of the 12 tonics



Diatonic triad chord qualities in a major scale



The cycle of fifths remembering the notes of different tonics

keyword
BEAD

5

1

4

keyword
BEAD

Example: the notes the E^b major scale

2 s-t 1 s-t 2 s-t 1 s-t

1 F G 4 5 C D 1

E^b 2 3 A^b B^b 6 7 E^b