

TRANSPOSITION: NOT A FOUR-LETTER WORD

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Why learn this advanced technique in this day and age of transposer dials on so many instruments? No less a composer than Irving Berlin had a movable piano keyboard that could mechanically shift from side to side in order to move the key up and down. It was an analog version of today's digital devices. This is not to say that these technological aids have no value for us or for the composer, but that they are not a replacement for our own skill.

Four of the five Guild Examinations include a transposition requirement at the keyboard: Service Playing, Colleague, Associate, and Fellow levels. Here is a table illustrating how the challenge increases with each level of examination:

Our need to transpose is not just for the purpose of satisfying a requirement on a Guild examination. Indeed, it is not just a stunt for purposes of display. Transposition, like other techniques, should be part of our total musicianship. It says something that the Guild exams require the acquisition of this skill to some degree depending on the level of difficulty of the test. It is important that the examinations reinforce the need for this important skill in order that we may add beauty to our service playing.

Here are a few ideas suggesting why the technique of transposition is important for us:

1. When altering the key of a hymn to make the hymn more comfortable for our congregation to sing. Usually this means moving it down a half step or a whole step.
2. When changing keys from one hymn verse to another (modulation). The hymn needs to be reproduced in the new key.
3. When working with choirs, moving the pitch of a piece to change the vocal color of the music. Moving up from G major to A-flat or A, for example, can make a lively piece have a special "ring" to it. Likewise, a move down to G-flat or F may render a quiet or reflective piece yet more somber. Even if the piece is to be sung a cappella, the rehearsal pianist or organist (you) will need to play the correct pitches at some stage in teaching the piece to the choir.
4. When times arise where the tenor or soprano section in the choir has suffered loss of personnel or the whole group is a bit on the tired side and needs a break. Dropping the pitch of the anthem may give the singers the help they need on that particular day.
5. Transposition during improvisation. In this case transposition may not only mean changing the melodies and harmonies to another key, but making a mode shift from major to minor or vice versa.

Playing the organ literature requires a particular discipline. Other advanced techniques require regular and disciplined practice in order for them to become part of your "tool kit" and help make your musicianship complete. Let's take a look at some ways to approach this musical challenge and try to demystify the technique of transposition.

Exam	Requirement	Preparation	Interval
S2	Your choice of any one hymn from the Examination Hymn Booklet. May not play in the original key for test. Pedal not required. Two of four possible intervals chosen by proctor.	In advance, up to nine months; possible to begin practice in July and take the exam the following April.	Up/Down M2nd, m2nd
C7	One original example given. May not play in the original key for test. Pedal not required. Two of four possible intervals specified.	During 20-minute preparation time at the piano.	Up/Down M2nd, m2nd
A3	One original example given. May play in original key first. Pedal optional. Two of four possible intervals specified.	One minute scan.	Up/Down M2nd, m2nd
F5	One original example given. May not play in original key first. Pedal optional. Two of eight possible intervals specified.	One minute scan.	Up/Down as far as M3rd, m3rd

Methods of Transposition

I. Reading note-for-note: The simplest kind of transposition involves imagining a new key signature to move the passage up or down a half or whole step.

Let's consider the key of C. Going up a half step may mean thinking the passage in C-sharp or D-flat. Going down a half step may mean thinking the passage in C-flat or B-natural. The note-for-note method would call for C-sharp going up and C-flat going down. You need to choose which of the two enharmonic keys to use. This example is a tough one, as we don't use those keys very often. Developing some degree of fluency in these odd keys, though, may not be a bad thing!

Let's choose a key that's a little more "user-friendly," such as A major. Moving up a half step will mean a choice of either B-flat or A-sharp. Moving down will mean either A-flat or G-sharp. A-flat will be your easier, note-for-note choice when going down a half step.

Try experimenting with all twelve major keys and discover the useful note-for-note possibilities. This technique can quickly become a useful part of your arsenal.

A helpful hint: Scan the example you're transposing for accidentals that need to be accounted for in the new key. Let's say, for example, that your original passage is in A

major. A cadence on the dominant (V, or an E-major chord) will mean seeing a D-sharp appear as an accidental (V/V, or a B-major chord). Now, let's say you're transposing down to A-flat major. Be prepared to translate the old D-sharp into a new D-natural. The new V/V, or B-flat chord, contains that D-natural, which moves the harmony to V, an E-flat chord. (See also Section VI. Harmonic Analysis, Hint #2.)

II. Using G, F, and C clefs to move the pitches up or down: This is probably the least useful method for most of us in most cases. Symphony conductors need to be fluent in all clefs in order to accurately read the notes for all of the instruments in the orchestra. Most of us only work in the G treble and F bass clefs. Some of us might have a useful knowledge of the alto and tenor C clefs if we are also violists, cellists, or trombonists. Few of us would have any need for a fluency in the soprano or mezzo-soprano C clefs or the baritone F clef. It is possible, though, to let substitutions of the different clefs transpose our music. For the sake of information and understanding, let's see how transposition with clefs works. Perhaps this knowledge can become a component in your acquisition of skill in transposition.

The seven clefs that concern us are:

Ex. 1



The seven clefs will change the line or space on which a note appears. For our purposes here, we won't be concerned with the octave position of the notes, just the location

on the line or space on the staff and the note name. Using C as an example, let's see where it would fall in each of these seven cases.

Ex. 2



