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Intro to Playing Piano

Discover how to play piano by improving your understanding of music theory.

by Thomas Hlubin

Founder of OnlinePianoLessons.com



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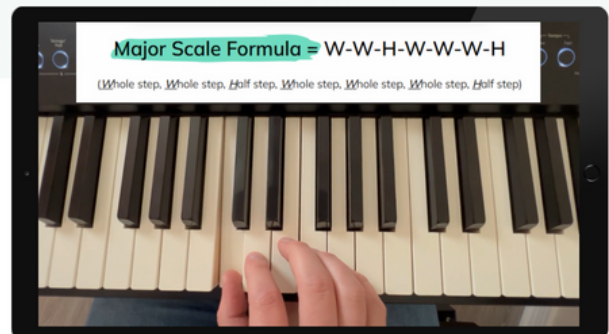
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Music theory is the language of music, a set of guidelines and principles that help musicians understand the structure and mechanics of music.

For pianists, mastering music theory is essential not only for reading and interpreting sheet music but also for creating unique melodies, harmonies, and compositions.

This guide will delve into how music theory works on the piano, covering everything from reading sheet music to constructing chords and scales, as well as applying these concepts to create your own music.





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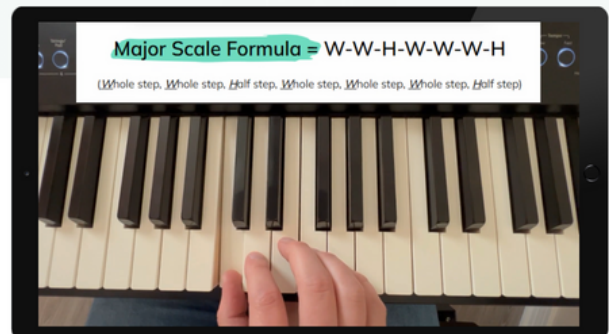
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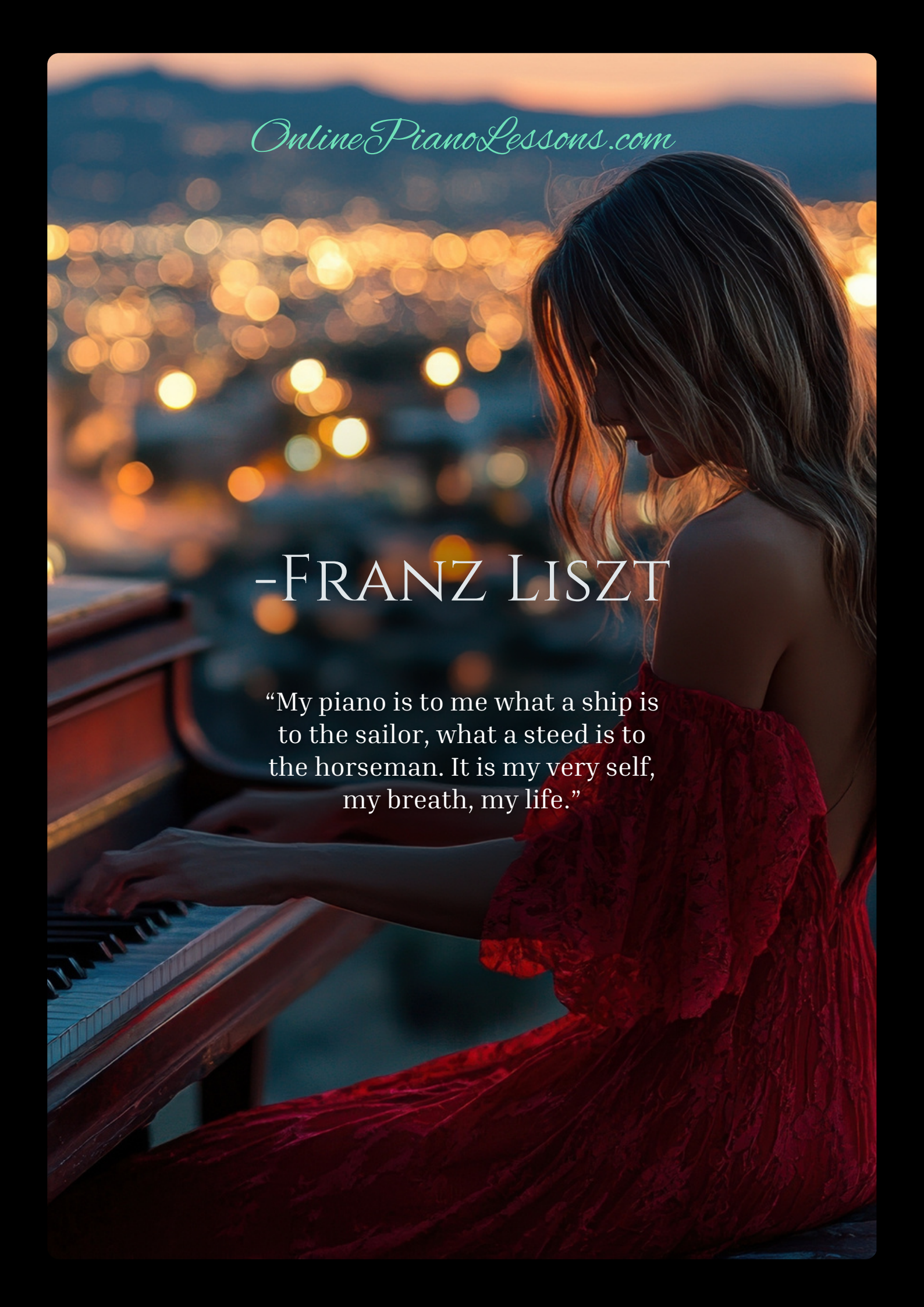


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A woman with long, wavy hair, wearing a red, textured, off-the-shoulder dress, is seated at a piano. She is looking down at the keys, her hands positioned on the keyboard. The background is a blurred cityscape at night, with numerous warm, golden lights creating a bokeh effect. The sky is a deep blue with some light clouds. The overall mood is romantic and artistic.

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-FRANZ LISZT

“My piano is to me what a ship is
to the sailor, what a steed is to
the horseman. It is my very self,
my breath, my life.”

UNDERSTANDING THE BASICS OF MUSIC THEORY

Music theory is the study of the practices and possibilities of music. It involves understanding the fundamentals of rhythm, melody, harmony, form, and texture. For pianists, music theory helps in decoding sheet music, improvising, composing, and developing a deeper appreciation for the art of music.

THE MUSICAL ALPHABET

The musical alphabet consists of seven letters: A, B, C, D, E, F, and G. These letters correspond to the white keys on the piano. After G, the sequence starts over at A. This sequence is the foundation for building scales, chords, and melodies.



NOTES & PITCHES

A note is a symbol that represents a musical sound, while pitch refers to how high or low a note sounds.

On the piano, each key corresponds to a specific pitch. The notes repeat in a series of octaves, where each octave is a set of 12 keys, including both white and black keys.



INTERVALS

An interval is the distance between two notes. Intervals are the building blocks of melodies and harmonies.

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They can be described by their size (e.g., second, third, fourth) and quality (e.g., major, minor, perfect). Understanding intervals is crucial for constructing scales and chords.



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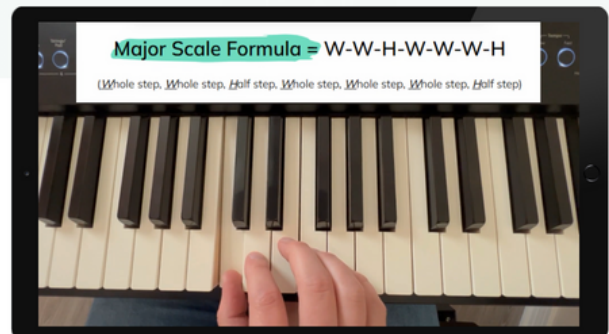
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READING SHEET MUSIC

THE STAFF, CLEFS, & NOTES



Sheet music is written on a staff, which consists of five horizontal lines and four spaces. Each line and space represents a different pitch. The clef at the beginning of the staff indicates which notes correspond to which lines and spaces. The most common clefs in piano music are the treble clef (for higher pitches) and the bass clef (for lower pitches).





TREBLE CLEF & BASS CLEF

Treble Clef: The treble clef, also known as the G clef, is used for notes that are higher in pitch. The lines represent E, G, B, D, and F, while the spaces represent F, A, C, and E.

Bass Clef: The bass clef, also known as the F clef, is used for notes that are lower in pitch. The lines represent G, B, D, F, and A, while the spaces represent A, C, E, and G.

NOTE VALUES & RHYTHMS

In sheet music, different symbols represent different note values, indicating how long a note should be held. The most common note values are:

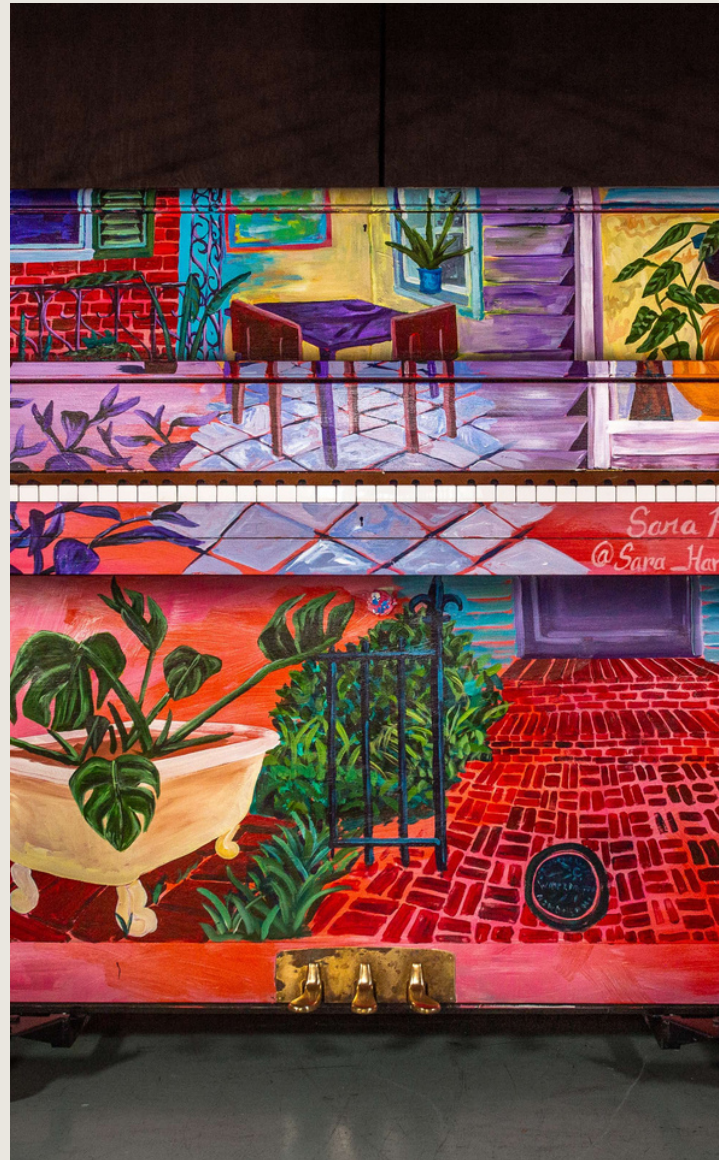
- Whole Note (Semibreve): 4 beats
- Half Note (Minim): 2 beats
- Quarter Note (Crotchet): 1 beat
- Eighth Note (Quaver): 1/2 beat
- Sixteenth Note (Semiquaver): 1/4 beat



The aforementioned note values are essential for understanding the rhythm of a piece, which is how the music moves through time. Rhythms are created by combining different note values.

TIME SIGNATURES

The time signature, found at the beginning of a piece of music, tells you the number of beats in each measure and which note value receives one beat. For example, in 4/4 time, there are four beats per measure, and the quarter note gets one beat.



KEY SIGNATURES

The key signature indicates the key of the piece, showing which notes are to be played as sharps or flats throughout the piece. This is crucial for playing the correct notes and understanding the scale and mode of the music.



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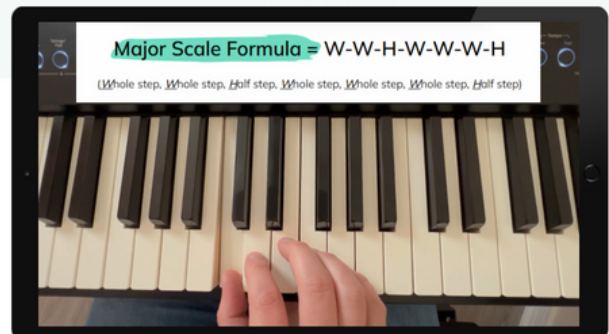
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SCALES & CHORDS

SCALES & MODES

MAJOR & MINOR SCALES

Scales are sequences of notes ordered by pitch, serving as the foundation for melodies and harmonies. The two most common types of scales in Western music are the major and minor scales.



MAJOR SCALE

The major scale has a bright, happy sound. It follows the pattern: Whole, Whole, Half, Whole, Whole, Whole, Half. For example, the C major scale consists of the notes C, D, E, F, G, A, B, and C.

MINOR SCALE

The minor scale has a darker, sadder sound. There are three types of minor scales: natural, harmonic, and melodic. The natural minor scale follows the pattern: Whole, Half, Whole, Whole, Half, Whole, Whole. For example, the A minor scale consists of the notes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, and A.



MODES

Modes are variations of scales that start on different degrees of the major scale. Each mode has its own unique sound and is used in different musical contexts. The seven modes are:

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- **Ionian:** Same as the major scale.
- **Dorian:** Starts on the second degree of the major scale.
- **Phrygian:** Starts on the third degree.
- **Lydian:** Starts on the fourth degree.
- **Mixolydian:** Starts on the fifth degree.
- **Aeolian:** Same as the natural minor scale.
- **Locrian:** Starts on the seventh degree.

Understanding modes allows pianists to explore different tonalities and create more varied and interesting music.

CHORDS & HARMONY

Triads

A triad is the simplest type of chord, consisting of three notes. There are four main types of triads:

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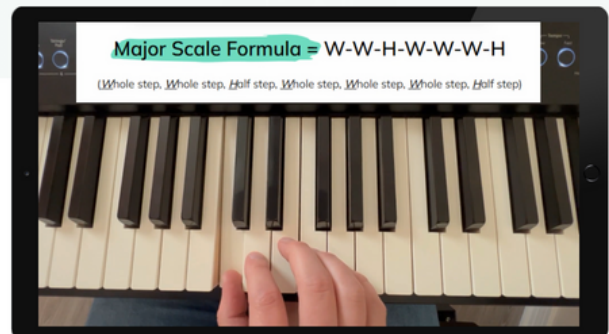
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A woman with long, wavy blonde hair, wearing a bright red sleeveless dress and a gold watch, is seated at a dark wooden piano. She is looking upwards and to the left, with her hands resting on the keys. Sheet music is visible on the piano stand. The background is softly blurred, showing a room with a lamp and a framed picture.

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-VLADIMIR HOROWITZ

“The most important thing is to transform the piano from a percussive instrument into a singing instrument.”



- **Major Triad:** Root, Major Third, Perfect Fifth
- **Minor Triad:** Root, Minor Third, Perfect Fifth
- **Diminished Triad:** Root, Minor Third, Diminished Fifth
- **Augmented Triad:** Root, Major Third, Augmented Fifth

Triads are the building blocks of harmony and are used to create chord progressions.

Seventh Chords

Seventh chords are four-note chords that add a seventh interval above the root of a triad. The most common seventh chords are:



- **Major Seventh:**
Major triad + Major Seventh
- **Minor Seventh:**
Minor triad + Minor Seventh
- **Dominant Seventh:**
Major triad + Minor Seventh
- **Diminished Seventh:**
Diminished triad + Diminished Seventh

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Seventh chords add depth and complexity to harmony and are often used in jazz, blues, and classical music.

CHORD PROGRESSIONS

Chord progressions are sequences of chords that create the harmonic foundation of a piece of music. Common chord progressions include:



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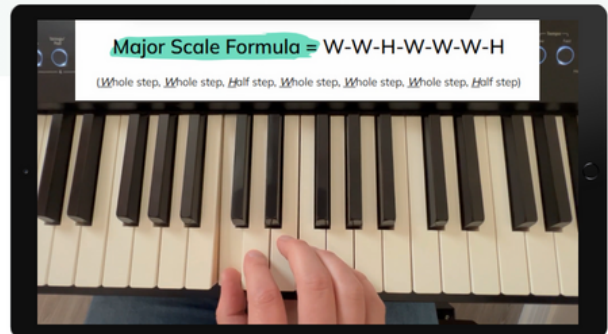
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- **I-IV-V:** A simple and popular progression in many genres.
- **ii-V-I:** A common jazz progression.
- **I-vi-IV-V:** Also known as the "50s progression," used in many pop songs.

Understanding chord progressions is essential for both performing and composing music.

CREATING MELODIES & SONGS

MELODIC STRUCTURE



A melody is a sequence of notes that is musically satisfying. Melodies are often based on scales and modes and are shaped by the intervals between notes. The structure of a melody can be simple or complex, depending on the desired effect.

- **Phrase:** A musical sentence, often four measures long.
- **Motif:** A short, recurring musical idea.
- **Theme:** A longer, more developed musical idea that serves as the main subject of a piece.





HARMONY & COUNTERPOINT

Harmony is the combination of different musical notes played or sung simultaneously.

Counterpoint is the relationship between two or more independent melodies played together. These concepts are used to create rich, textured music.

COMPOSING YOUR OWN MUSIC

Once you have a solid understanding of music theory, you can begin composing your own music. Start by choosing a key and scale, then create a chord progression.

From there, develop a melody that fits the harmony. Experiment with different rhythms, modes, and textures to create unique and expressive music.

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Music theory is a vast and complex subject, but it is essential for anyone serious about playing the piano. By understanding the basics of music theory, you can read sheet music, construct chords and scales, and create your own melodies and songs. Whether you're a beginner or an advanced pianist, mastering music theory will open up a world of possibilities and enhance your musical journey.



Founder of OnlinePianoLessons.com,
Creator of the Piano for Beginners
Course, Pianist Composer, and Creator of
this very eBook.

Thomas Hlubin

Check out my
original piano songs
on Spotify ➡



As a fan of piano music, as a pianist composer, and as a digital marketing professional, I sought to and aim to create the best piano site I can. I looked around at the current landscape of piano sites and decided to add what was missing - a single space to find the best online piano lessons, numerous free resources (regarding how to play piano, deep dives into music theory, and any and all piano goodness), a top-tier and affordable piano course (the Piano for Beginners Course), a prodigiously comprehensive Piano & Music Theory Glossary, a very rewarding Affiliate Program where musicians, content creators, and entrepreneurs can quickly and effectively launch a side-hustle or even a high-paying career, an educational and fun piano forum (coming soon), and much more!

I hope my passion project, OnlinePianoLessons.com, resonates with you too, and most of all, I hope that you find value from it. Lastly, thank you for reading and I wish you the best.

Musically,
Thomas Hlubin

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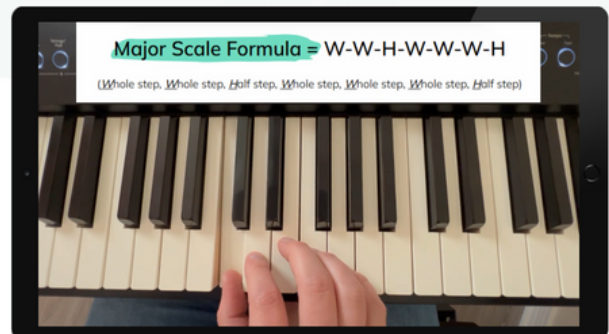
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