

Music Theory MADE REALLY EASY

Illustrated
with Playing
Examples
for Guitar
and Banjo

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3.5 Transposing Instruments

3.5.1 Introduction

What is a transposing instrument?

Every instrument has a range of notes it can play. These notes don't always fit nice and neat on the treble clef. If we didn't do something about it we might end up trying to read the music on a bunch of ledger lines above or below the staff. So, by using this system of notation we can get as many notes as possible on the staff where they are easy to read.

Also, if you play an instrument like a sax that comes in different sizes, it's nice to learn to read just once and not have to read differently for each size saxophone you pick up. If you learn the fingering for one size of sax and then use that same fingering for a different sized instrument - guess what - the note is **different** because the instrument is a **different physical size**.

3.5.2 Guitar and Banjo Are Transposing Instruments

Believe it or not, the guitar and the banjo are transposing instruments!

When we play the guitar or the banjo, we are not actually playing the notes as written. You may say, "You gotta' be kidding me. When I see an 'A' on the staff I play an 'A', so how can you say I'm not playing the note as written?" The simple answer is that we are playing an octave lower than what is written.

For guitar and banjo we are pretty lucky. The note names are still the same, but we are playing an octave lower than what is written. Notation for some instruments is transposed at an interval other than an octave. Can you imagine the score that a conductor has to deal with? One piece of music could have several different key signatures!

3.5.3 The A440 Tuning Fork: A Bit of Music History

The A440 tuning fork shown in Figure 3.5 can help us understand this situation.



Figure 3.5 A440 Tuning Fork

For you youngsters out there, here is a little bit of music history. In the old days before electronic tuners we would use an A440 tuning fork to get the first string in tune. Then we would tune the other strings accordingly. Where is A440? In standard tuning for the guitar it is on the first string at the 5th fret, and for the banjo it is on the first string at the 7th fret as shown in Figure 3.6 below.

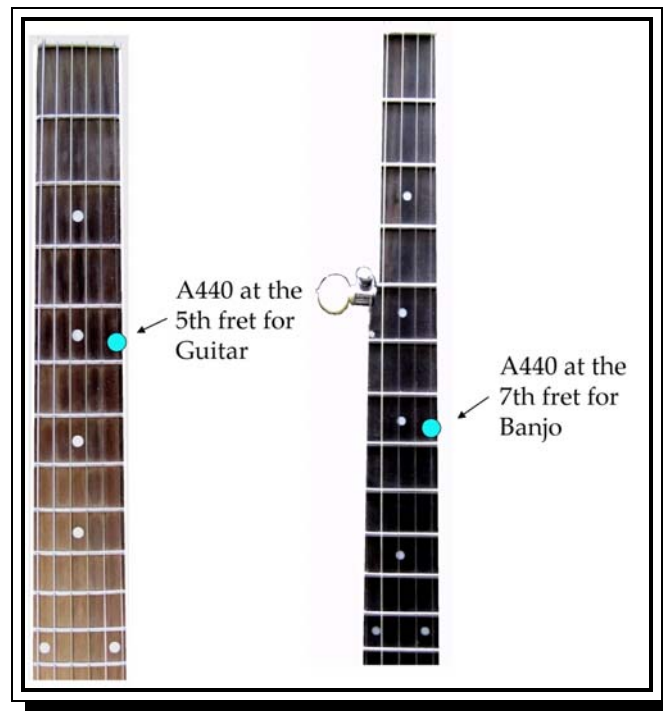


Figure 3.6 A440 on the Guitar and Banjo

So, we would rap the tuning fork on our knee, touch it to the bridge, and magically we would hear this beautiful tone. Then we would fret the string and tune it up to match.

So here's the thing. Concert pitch A440 is defined as "the A above middle C." It's also called A4 because it occurs in the octave that starts with the fourth C on the standard 88 key piano. Figure 3.7 shows where it is on the staff.



Figure 3.7 A440 on the Treble Staff

BUT when we see a note on the 2nd space of the treble clef we play the third string at the 2nd fret. This is actually an octave below the real A440. Hence, we are playing an octave lower than what is written. Wow! Long explanation for a simple concept, but I hope it makes sense.

Does knowing the guitar and banjo are transposing instruments really matter? Probably not.

Many times you will see a little "8vb" below the clef sign.
This comes from the Italian "ottava bassa" or "at the octave below."

OK, now we're going to have some fun looking at key signatures! Ready?

