

Perfect Pitch Playlist: 12 Memories

by John Guarente

When I began my first undergraduate music class over 12 years ago, there was a questionnaire that we had to fill out, and the last question read: “Do you have perfect (absolute) pitch?” I had never heard this terminology before. Prior to this I had just assumed that anyone who was musical could sing the various pitches if they concentrated. I thought to myself, “If this means that I can recognize and perform the 12 pitches with no reference pitch, then I guess I have perfect pitch.”

Having this apparently rare talent certainly has its advantages, but mostly I’ve observed that other musicians become unnecessarily fascinated with you, as though you have some special gift that has been randomly bestowed upon you by the fates. I would like to take a moment to point out some things about perfect pitch that might not be so immediately apparent.

I’ve often been asked, “Were you born with perfect pitch?” Well, no. No one can be born with perfect pitch because pitch frequency is something that was decided by committee in the 1930’s. Hypothetically, if a person were born in the Australian outback with no access to a computer, TV or radio for the first 20 years of his/her life, they could probably never have perfect pitch, because they would never have gotten to know any of the standardized pitches, and thus have no cognitive reference as to what pitch is.

To be clear, each of the 12 pitches is a unique sound that requires an accurate memory of the frequency in order to reproduce it exactly. A better label for perfect pitch, in my opinion, would therefore be “acute pitch memory”. In other words, everyone who uses perfect pitch is *remembering* the pitches that they have *learned*.

So why is it that those few people have the memory for perfect pitch and most others do not? I can’t really answer that, although I have been told that scientists have discovered some wrinkle in the temporal lobe of the brain that has been linked to perfect pitch. A lot of good that does.

What I can tell you is that like any memory-based task, perfect pitch is strengthened through reinforcement. If all of the sudden I stopped playing and listening to music altogether (perish the thought), I reckon my perfect pitch would go away within a year or two. Memories fade. The brain gets older, slower. I can no longer spell the names of my teachers in middle school because I haven’t seen them in print in years. So if the pitches were no longer there, my brain would eventually flush out

that information to make room for something that I was actually using.

How does this help you ask? I will let you in on a little trade secret. Once I declared my perfect pitch freshmen year, I quickly discovered that I would be asked to demonstrate my abilities with increasing frequency (no pun intended). I was soon moved into the highest level aural skills class with all of the instrumentalists who also had perfect pitch. So in order to keep a leg up, I made myself a mix CD of songs in all of the 12 major keys that I could pop in every now and then to fortify my pitch memory. It worked like a charm, and I almost never had to do my homework for aural skills. :-)

I’m not selling this as a way to “develop” perfect pitch, although depending on a person’s memory it could possibly work to that effect. For most people though, it should at least help improve their relative pitch and perhaps nail down three or four pitches that for whatever reason naturally imbed themselves in their cognitive tank. You can’t just use any 12 songs. Some songs may be in a certain key but not really define it very well. You want songs that really “pound out” that pitch from start to finish. Pop music is most preferable to classical music of course, because classical music modulates every five seconds. In fact, I would not choose any songs that change keys whatsoever; it kind of defeats the point. I have my playlist organized in ascending 4ths, because that’s what makes sense in my mind, but you can organize it chromatically or whichever way helps you the best. Most of all, they should be songs that you won’t mind having stuck somewhere in your head for the rest of your musical career.

Or, feel free to copy mine:



A: “Maybelle” by Ida (2000)

This band has been one of my favorites for my entire adult life, and this song pretty much defines

their sound. It features a harmonium in the background of their rich, acoustic guitar-based soundscape. The harmonium helps burn the A natural into the brain along with the steady pedal A string throughout this 6.5-minute folk anthem.

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D: “You Wouldn’t Like Me” by Tegan and Sara (2004)

There are so many pop songs in D major that one can easily find an appropriate choice. This one solidifies D major

through the use of power chords and a searing organ part that rings out in the big choruses. Some other options I’ve used are “Portions for Foxes” by Rilo Kiley (2004), and “Gepetto” by Belly (1993).



G: “Nightswimming” by R.E.M. (1992)

G major is another extremely popular key for pop music because of how easy it is to play in this key on the guitar.

Ironically, my choice has no guitars whatsoever. It does however have a nice, bright electric piano and a perfectly tuned oboe accompanying Michael Stipe’s repetitive little ballad, which centers around G below middle C.



C: “Wake Up” by Arcade Fire (2004)

I had originally thought of using “Intervention” off their second record instead because of the huge organ part, but alas, it modulates to G

major towards the end. This track features C in almost every single chord, and the melody is performed in octaves, something that always helps to define the center of the pitch. “Narcolepsy” by Ben Folds Five (1999) is another good option for this key.



F: “We’re from Barcelona” by I’m from Barcelona (2006)

This key doesn’t present itself a great deal in pop music because guitars tune to E. Unless a band

uses capos or features a brass section, they are likely to avoid F major. This happy tune works well because the band forges this infectious melody in not one, but three octaves. The only other song I have used for F is “Whip-Smart” by Liz Phair (1994).



B \flat /A \sharp : “This Time” by The Smashing Pumpkins (2000)

This is the first pitch I realized that I could easily recall because I grew up playing brass instruments in middle

school and high school band. In high school, we had a machine that would generate a piercing B \flat in any octave, and the sound just stuck in my brain. The chorus of this lesser-known Pumpkins anthem repeats the pitch in triplicate each time it comes around. Another catchy option for this key would be “Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da” by The Beatles (1968).



E \flat /D \sharp : “When You’re Gone” by The Cranberries (1996)

E \flat is another great key for brass ensembles. It also shows up a lot in pop/rock music because bands have a tendency to

down-tune their guitars to make it easier on the lead vocalist (the Smashing Pumpkins are indeed another example of this). “When You’re Gone” has a memorable “doo-be-dup” hook on the tonic pitch that pervades the entire song. Other good options for this warm key are “Special” by Garbage (1998) and the overture to the Bjork film “Dancer In the Dark” (2000), performed by brass ensemble.



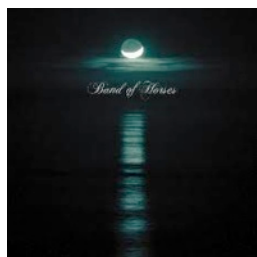
A \flat /G \sharp : “A&E” by Goldfrapp (2008)

If you’ve never heard this song before, it is probably one of the best songs on this playlist, and it happens to be a great example of A \flat major.

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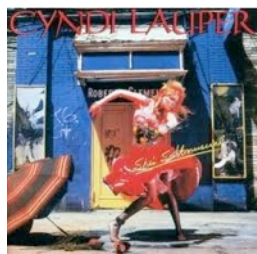
The sweeping synth sounds keep the key center alive throughout, and the song is timeless enough that you won't soon get sick of it. "All I Want Is You" by U2 (1988) is another useful song for this key, although U2 has long since started performing it in lower keys because of Bono's aging tenor voice.



D^b/C#: "Is There a Ghost?" by Band of Horses (2007)

I challenge anyone to find a better example of a song that hammers away at D^b major like this one. Once the

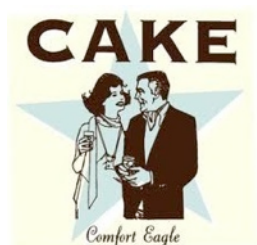
distorted guitars kick in after the first refrain it's nothing but intense major triads outlining the home key for 2.5 minutes. You'll never mistake this for D major again.



G^b/F#: "Girls Just Want to Have Fun" by Cyndi Lauper (1983)

I know. I could hardly have picked a more dated, and arguably irritating track for this key, but hear me out.

This song would not have been so popular if it *didn't* get stuck people's heads. Furthermore, if you analyze the song for a moment, you might find that the way Cyndi Lauper unfolds the different variations on the chorus is very clever, and never boring. Notice the way she uses canon in the extension of the big tune. This 80's classic is also interesting because it is difficult to tell where the chorus begins or where it ends. In any event, it's one of the more infectious songs in F# major ever written.



B: "Pretty Pink Ribbon" by Cake (2001)

I was happy when I stumbled across this track when looking through my iTunes playlist because it meant that I no longer had to

use "Yellow" by Coldplay (2000) for this seldom-used key. Cake must have liked the way this key sounded for this particular tune because they use trumpet in almost all of their songs, and as we well know, it is much easier to play in B^b for the trumpet. To my ears, B major always sounds more like C major, only with a much warmer, easier color. Of course in the Baroque era, B major *was* C major, but that is another topic altogether.



E: "Crash Into Me" by Dave Matthews Band (1996)

I sure wish I could find a better song that defines E major as well as this silly old top 40 hit. That open E string on Dave

Matthews's Chet Atkins just keeps on going for the whole darned thing. I have a feeling that even if I supplant this track with something different in the future, I will still harken back to this whenever I'm recalling E natural. Oh well. At least it means that a part of me will always feel like it's still in high school.

JG