Instrument Transpositions

Here is the **CORE ISSUE**: when some instruments play a (written) C, you hear a C. When other instruments play a (written) C, you **DO NOT** hear a C. This is why some instruments are called B♭ instruments, F instruments, E♭ instruments, and so on (see the next page for details). When someone plays a (written) C on one of these instruments, you **HEAR** a B♭ or an F or an E♭ or whatever. In these cases, what is written is called the **WRITTEN** pitch, and what you actually **HEAR** is often called the **CONCERT** pitch--hence, "concert B♭" or whatever.

In most cases, what you **HEAR** when a B♭, F, E♭, A, or G instrument plays a melody sounds **LOWER** than what you **SEE**--the concert pitch is *lower* than the written pitch.[1]

Some common transposing categories and what they mean

B♭ instruments: most all of these **sound** a M2 lower than what's written.

When you **see** this: you **hear** this:

F instruments: most all of these **sound** a P5 lower than what's written.

When you **see** this: you **hear** this:

E♭ instruments: most all of these **sound** a M6 lower than what's written.

When you **see** this: you **hear** this:

A and G instruments: these are pretty rare, but you still need to be aware of them. A instruments **sound** a m3 lower than what's written. G instruments **sound** a P4 than what's written.

Writing for transposing instruments

Most of these instruments **sound lower** than they are written. Consider this: if you want a B♭ trumpet to *play* something which **sounds** like a B♭ (B♭ concert pitch), you actually have to *write* a C a M2 higher. When the trumpet player *plays* this C, you will *hear* the B♭ a M2 lower. More generally, if you've got some tune and you want it to *sound* in some particular key, then you have to *write* it a M2 higher if a B♭ instrument will be playing it. If an F instrument will be playing it, then you have to *write* it a P5 higher for it to sound where you want it. If an E♭ instrument will be playing it, then you have to *write* it a M6 higher. If an A instrument will be playing it then you have to *write* it a m3 higher. If a G instrument will be playing it then you have to *write* it a P4 higher.

So, when figuring out an instrument's transposition level, consider **all** of the following:

- Are you starting out from the concert (heard) key or the written (seen) key?
- What "direction" are you thinking--from written to sounding, or vice versa?
- What is the **specific interval** of transposition involved (size, quality, *direction*)?

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[1]There are a few exceptions to this rule. For example, the E♭ "soprano" clarinet sounds a m3 **higher** than what's written. Learn these few instruments as exceptions to the "rule."

Transposing categories for common instruments (listed vertically in *score order*)

Notes:
- This table is set up to show **sounding** pitch--that is, what you **hear** when a given instrument plays a written line. In other words, this is set up so that if you *look* at a band or orchestra score, this is what you'll ***hear***. Remember that you go the opposite direction to write something. Here's an example: let's say that you have some melody and you want to write it out for B♭ trumpet. In order for it to *sound* where you want it, you have to write the trumpet part a M2 ***higher***.
- Those instruments marked with an asterisk (*) involve some sort of **octave transposition**--they sound a P8 (or a P8 + X) above or below written pitch. The arrows show where something sounds. Examples: when a piccolo player plays his/her part, what you ***hear*** is a P8 higher than what you ***see***. When a contrabass player plays his/her part, what you ***hear*** is a P8 lower than what you ***see***.When a baritone sax player plays his/her part, what you ***hear*** is a P8 *plus* a M6 lower than what you ***see***.

	C instruments (sound as written)	B♭ instruments (sound M2 lower)	F instruments (sound P5 lower)	E♭ instruments (sound M6 lower)	A instruments (sound m3 lower)	G instruments (sound P4 lower)
Woodwinds	*C Piccolo (P8↑) C Flute Oboe Bassoon	B♭ Clarinet *B♭ Bass Clarinet (P8 + M2↓) B♭ Soprano Sax *B♭ Tenor Sax (P8 + M2↓)	English Horn	E♭ Alto Clarinet E♭ Alto Sax *E♭ Baritone Sax (P8 + M6↓)	A Clarinet	Alto Flute
Brass	C Trumpet (rare) Trombone and Euphonium Tuba (including B♭ Tuba)	B♭ Trumpet B♭ Baritone	Horn in F (French Horn)			
Percussion, etc.	Marimba, Chimes Vibraphone *Xylophone (P8↑) *Glockenspiel (two P8s↑) Piano, Organ, Harp *Guitar (P8↓)					
Strings	Violin, Viola, Violoncello *Contrabass (i.e. Double or String Bass) and Bass Guitar (P8↓)					

So always remember:
Written
⇑
⇓
Sounding

Example: in order for these instruments to "sound" the following excerpt (that is, play it in the concert key of the excerpt), their parts must be written in the "higher" keys that correspond to their interval of transposition.