



Pentatonic Scales

On the keyboard, play only the black keys in any order.

This is the sound of a pentatonic scale.

The pentatonic scale is the easiest scale to use when learning to improvise melody over chord changes, especially for basic country (major pentatonic) and blues (minor pentatonic) progressions.

What is a pentatonic scale?

The concept is really simple: the major pentatonic scale is just 5 of the 7 notes from the major scale. The major pentatonic scale is like the major scale but without the 4th or 7th scale degrees. So for example in the key of C Major, this would eliminate the notes F and B, leaving the pentatonic scale as C D E G A.

The Pentatonic scale generates a pleasant melody, even if it is just the execution of this scale form up and down. Players memorize the pentatonic scale and then, when improvising in a song in a major tonality, play the notes of the pentatonic scale and it will work.

The pentatonic scale played backward or forward is nice; played from the middle to the end is nice, from the end to the beginning is nice.

Major and Minor Pentatonic Scale

The pentatonic scale can be major or minor. The **major** pentatonic scale has the 5 notes of the major scale; the **minor** pentatonic scale has the 5 notes of the minor scale. Here is the C major pentatonic scale:

The image displays the C major pentatonic scale in two parts. The top part is a musical staff in treble clef, 4/4 time, showing the scale in two phrases: an ascending phrase starting on G4 and a descending phrase starting on E5. The bottom part is a guitar fretboard diagram with two strings shown (3rd and 2nd strings). The ascending phrase is fretted on the 3rd string (G4), 2nd string (A4), and 1st string (C5). The descending phrase is fretted on the 1st string (C5), 2nd string (A4), and 3rd string (G4). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above or below the notes.

Here is the A minor pentatonic scale:



Pitches in Major and Minor Pentatonic Scales

Compare these scales (C major pentatonic and A minor pentatonic) with the C major and A minor scales. Notice that the major pentatonic took the 1, 2, 3, 5 and 6 degrees from the major scale. In other words, it removed the 4th and 7th degrees. The minor pentatonic took 1, 3, 4, 5 and 7 degrees from the natural minor scale. In other words, it removed the 2 and 6 degrees of the natural minor scale.

The Pentatonic scales do not contain any half steps!

The intervals between notes are all Major 2nd or Minor 3rd.

Pitches of the C Major Pentatonic scale: **C D E G A C**
1 2 3 5 6 1
W W m3 W m3

Pitches of the A Minor Pentatonic scale: **A C D E G A**
1 3 4 5 7 1
m3 W W m3 W

Notice these are the same pitch set, just starting on a different note.

Pitches in C minor Pentatonic are taken from the key of Cm (its relative major is Eb): **C Eb F G Bb**
1 3 4 5 7

A Major pentatonic is: **A B C# E F#**
1 2 3 5 6

When improvising over most progressions with a happy Major feeling like country or pop music, the major pentatonic scale works well. When playing blues or blues-rock, the minor pentatonic scale based on the same root works well.

Try playing both major and minor pentatonic scales over a standard 12 bar blues progression and note the difference in feeling.

12 Bar Blues in C

| : C | F | C | C7 | F | F7 | C | C | G7 | F7 | C | G7 : |