

Ten Minute Tech

The Pentatonic and Blues Scales

Musical notation for the A minor Pentatonic scale. The top staff shows the scale in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The bottom staff shows the guitar fretboard with strings T, A, and B labeled. Fingering numbers 5, 7, 8 are indicated for the notes.

A minor Pentatonic

Here is the same scale as the E Minor pentatonic we started with but now in the key of A instead of E.

This is a moveable scale. I.E. if we move the whole thing up 1 fret (so starting on the 6th fret) we get A sharp Minor Pentatonic. If we move it up yet another fret we get B Minor Pentatonic and so on.

Musical notation for a warm-up exercise. The top staff shows a sequence of four ascending and descending pentatonic scale patterns. The bottom staff shows the guitar fretboard with strings T, A, and B labeled. Fingering numbers 5, 7, 8 are indicated for the notes.

Above is the pattern we have been using in class as a warm-up, playing to the metronome and using alternate picking all the way up and down.

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The image shows a musical score for the C Major Pentatonic scale. It consists of two staves. The top staff is a treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. The notes are C4, D4, E4, G4, and A4. The bottom staff is a guitar fretboard diagram with strings labeled T, A, and B. The frets are numbered 1 through 8. The notes are indicated by vertical lines and horizontal lines with finger numbers (5, 7, 8) below them. The first three frets (1-3) have notes on the 5th and 7th frets. The next three frets (4-6) have notes on the 5th, 7th, 5th, and 7th frets. The final two frets (7-8) have notes on the 5th and 8th frets.

C Major Pentatonic

Now this is where it gets a bit complicated! In music we have a thing called relative major and minor. See the download on relative Major and Minor on the website.

So- C major is all the white notes on the piano. If we play the C major scale starting and ending on C it sounds nice and "happy". If we start and end on an A (the 6th note of the C Major scale), playing the same notes, the sound is distinctly more sad. Some think it sounds more "Spanish" as well. Both keys have no sharps or flats and are played on the white notes (no black notes) of the piano. So in music we call these Relative. A minor is the relative minor of C Major and C Major is the relative major of A Minor (depending on what key you started in!).

This works for the major and minor scale but also works for the Pentatonic scale above as well. The pentatonic scale is created by missing a couple of notes of the original major or minor scale- a normal scale has 7 notes, the pentatonic (as in pentagram, pentagon etc) has 5.

As you may see above- these two scales - the A Minor and C Major Pentatonic are the same scale- If we start on the first finger (5th Fret) we have A Minor Pentatonic. If we start on the 4th finger (8th fret) we have the C Major pentatonic.

The first sounds more "Blues" and the second more "Country".

Try playing the first scale over an A minor chord, and the second over a C Major chord. Emphasise the root note to really hear the "home" sound of the scale and how it fits with the chord.

What I have done here is simplified the explanation, as music theory can get pretty complicated. As you play more and become more experienced, the theory behind all this will become clearer!

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T
A
B

5 8 5 6 7 5 7 5 7 8 5 8 5 8 5

The Blues Scale

Above is the Blues scale in A. As you will see, it is almost identical to the A minor Pentatonic. The only difference is the extra note known as the "blues note". It is highlighted here in blue.

This note sounds very cool, but is better used as a "passing note".

A passing note is a note that we use between two other notes. Landing on the blues note can sound good but nearly always sounds better when it is resolved by playing a "nicer" note afterwards. Experiment and find where it sounds good- music is subjective after all!

In theory, any chromatic notes (from the chromatic exercise we learned before) could work as passing notes. But you must have a destination in mind- I.E. don't just play chromatic notes at random, use them to get to a desired note in the scale (also know as a "target" note). Here is a quick example using the A blues scale above. Remember it's pretty much just the A Minor Pentatonic scale anyway!

The Blues Note is in blue, the chromatic passing notes are in red. As always, don't throw notes in for the sake of it, use them sparingly and tastefully!

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T
A
B

7 5-7-8 5 8-7 5 7-5 7 5-7-8 5-6-7-8 5