

The Power of Scales

For more information about this topic, check out the "Scale Sunday" series of articles on my website, aaronhodgson.ca.

Introduction

Like all musicians, I was introduced to scales as soon as I received an instrument. In high school band, we had scale tests every month, and my trumpet teachers not only asked me to learn five-note and full-octave scales but also Clarke studies and other scale pattern exercises.

Recently, my approach to scales has changed, and it has been the most beneficial development to my playing in the past three years. The benefits have been huge, and in areas I never expected to benefit from the practice of scales. This class explains my approach, talking about (1) what I play, (2) how I practice it and (3) why I practice it.

Basic scales

Like all exercises, scales should be *progressive*, meaning you start with something easy and gradually work toward more difficult exercises. If you are a beginner, you might find it easiest to start with five-note scales. These have a narrow range and are easy to learn, especially for minor keys:

C major



D-flat major



Continue up and down from the middle register as your range permits.

Once you know your five-note scales (all of them, from memory), move on to full octave scales. Here are two ways – the first goes to the octave, and the second to the ninth:

F major

Many students learn to play extremely well in a few keys (C, F, Bb, Eb) and flounder in many others. I set up a regular three-day rotation for *every* part of my practice routine so I always play every key twice a week:

- Day 1 (Sunday, Wednesday): C, Eb, F#, A
- Day 2 (Monday, Thursday): C#, E, G, Bb
- Day 3 (Tuesday, Friday): D, F, Ab, B

This schedule offers a nice balance between high and low, easy and more challenging. It keeps me from skipping the hard keys when I feel lazy, or from skipping the easy keys because I think I know them already.

Scale patterns

As your confidence with basic scales grow, start playing more advanced scale patterns. Ask yourself – just because you can play up and down a scale, does that mean you are totally confident playing in that key? It's amazing how simply rearranging the order of those seven notes changes our ability to play them. Here are some basic scale patterns:

3-note pattern

4-note pattern

Musical notation for a 4-note pattern in 4/4 time. The treble staff contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass staff contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5.

Musical notation for a 4-note pattern in 4/4 time. The treble staff contains a sequence of quarter notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass staff contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5.

Clarke, Technical Study No. 2

Musical notation for Clarke, Technical Study No. 2. The treble staff contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass staff contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5.

3: Chromatic three note pattern

Musical notation for a chromatic three note pattern in 4/4 time. The treble staff contains a sequence of eighth notes: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5, A5, B5, C6. The bass staff contains a sequence of eighth notes: C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5.

Many more scale patterns can be found on my website, aaronhodgson.ca.

How to practice scales and scale patterns

I have a few “ground rules” for myself:

1. *Practice every key at least once a week. Rotate regularly between major, minor and other scales (chromatic, whole-tone, etc.)*
2. *Memorize the pattern and work it out in every key from memory*

For the last few years, I have avoided *reading* patterns in each key. Instead, I try to see and understand the patterns, and then I close the book and work out the pattern in a new key from memory. At first, it was very painful to learn scales this way, but I found that this difficulty actually *helps* me learn better. I learn more, and the learning *sticks* longer.

3. *Do a little bit every day, instead of longer sessions less frequently*

It's very easy to “burn out” and lose motivation. I usually play scale patterns for 5-20 minutes a day. Five minutes a day might not seem like much time, but do the math: that's 2.5 hours a month, or 30 hours a year! That's right, in 2014 I spent more than an entire *day* practicing scales!

Of course, it's just as important to use your time well, rather than just playing on autopilot. This brings us to the next few rules...

4. Practice with *intent*

Make sure you have total focus in the practice room. Turn off your phone, computer or television. Pick an exercise. Pick a key. *Decide* how you want it to sound. *Decide* how fast or slow to play. *Listen* to your results and *decide* how to proceed based on that. Especially for technical practice, autopilot is the enemy of progress!

5. Practice with *variety*

Variety doesn't just mean changing key, it also means switching up *how* you play a particular exercise, and also regularly rotating your exercises. I try to switch to a new scale pattern every week, but if you are a beginner you may change less frequently, every few weeks or even every few months.

I've attached one of the articles from my website to this handout, which explains how you can incorporate *variations* into your practice to mix up how you approach a particular pattern or technical excerpt.

6. Practice with *creativity*

It might seem like “creativity” and “scales” don't belong in the same sentence, but viewing your practice as creative is a powerful way to engage yourself in the practice room. This is especially true for technical practice, which often seems dull or mechanical. Keep trying new ways of playing and new ideas and explore your capabilities! Treat technical exercises as *musical* activities and play them beautifully!

Why practice scales?

So how have scale patterns helped my playing? The benefits of the past few years have been enormous and often unexpected:

Finger technique

There is a world of difference between fast notes and fast fingers. This is something I overlooked in the past. I could play fast passages, but my fingers were not necessarily moving fast enough or in a coordinated fashion.

Range

Most of my scale *patterns* don't move in a straight line. There is alternating motion – for every short-term ascent there is a corresponding descent. This helps keep things “low” and reduces tension. For me, scale patterns were a huge breakthrough and my range has improved dramatically in the past few years. My range was also improved because I started playing by *ear* rather than by *sight*. I asked myself: why does it sound different when I play C and when I play D-flat? Does this scale have to sound different just because it's a fourth higher?

Flow

My sense of flow has also improved. Over longer phrases, I have a much better ability to connect different registers of my range. However, the improvement was even more noticeable on a note-by-note basis. Small intervals (semitones, tones, etc.) became much more fluid and connected, and much more consistent in every key or mode. I also strive to maintain even airflow whether I am playing a valve slur or a lip slur, and the repetitiveness of scale patterns helps reinforce this idea.