

Scaling New Heights

SCALES DON'T HAVE TO BE AS EASY AS ABC!

■ A musical scale is simply defined as a sequence of notes progressing up, and then down, at specified intervals. That means there are almost endless possibilities beyond the familiar major and minor scales. In fact, the music of many non-Western cultures is based on scales that may sound exotic to our ears.

Here are some of the more common of the “uncommon” scales:

PENTATONIC

Pentatonic scale patterns are common in Eastern music, as well as in blues, jazz, and Celtic folk music. The scale consists of only five pitches (typical major and minor scales have seven) and uses the interval sequence: whole step, whole step, minor third, whole step, (and a minor third to bring you to the octave). A pentatonic scale starting on C, for example, is made up of the notes, C, D, E, G, A, (C), as shown in the ascending pattern below. The interesting thing about pentatonic scales is that they don't contain any dissonant intervals; all of the notes harmonize well together. For an easy way to create your own tunes using pentatonic tonality, try playing with only the five black keys of the piano, which conveniently fall into the pentatonic pattern.



OCTATONIC

The octatonic scale, as its name suggests, is made up of eight pitches. The pattern has been used in classical music since the early 1800s, popularized by composers including Liszt, Rimsky-Korsakov, Debussy, and Messiaen. It is also found in jazz, where it is referred to as the diminished scale. The octatonic scale uses alternating whole-step and half-step intervals, creating a symmetrical pattern. The ascending octatonic scale below is an example of the pattern beginning with a whole step.



CHROMATIC

The chromatic scale is a real workout—it uses all 12 pitches, all a half-step apart. In other words, you play every note of the piano—black and white—in succession. Music is understood to have chromatic tonality, as opposed to diatonic tonality, if it has frequent accidentals (notes not in the key signature). An ascending chromatic scale starting on C is shown here.

