

The Pentatonic Scale

Pentatonic scales have only five notes (“penta” means “five”). There are two common pentatonic scales: the major pentatonic and the minor pentatonic.




“penta” = 5

Major Pentatonic Scale


The major pentatonic scale shares five notes with the major scale. The first, second, third, fifth, and sixth notes of the major scale become the five notes in the major pentatonic scale.

C MAJOR SCALE



C D E F G A B C
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

C MAJOR PENTATONIC SCALE




C D E G A C
1 2 3 5 6 8

The image shows two musical staves. The first staff is labeled 'C MAJOR SCALE' and contains eight notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. Below each note is a pink number: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. The second staff is labeled 'C MAJOR PENTATONIC SCALE' and contains six notes: C, D, E, G, A, C. Below each note is a pink number: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8. The notes F and B from the major scale are omitted in the pentatonic scale.

Minor Pentatonic Scale

Remember the relative minor scale? The relative minor scale uses the same notes as the major scale but starts on the sixth degree of the major scale.

C MAJOR SCALE



C D E F G A B C
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

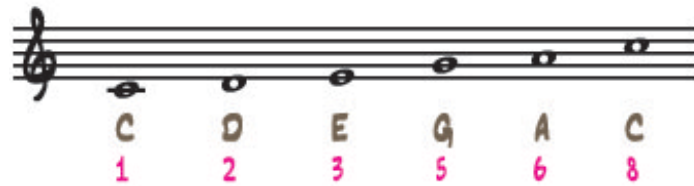
The image shows a musical staff labeled 'C MAJOR SCALE' with eight notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C. Below each note is a pink number: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. The note A (degree 6) is circled in blue.

A MINOR SCALE



The minor pentatonic scale uses the same notes as the major pentatonic scale, but starts on the sixth degree of the major pentatonic scale.

C MAJOR PENTATONIC SCALE



A MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE



Exercise #1

Draw a line to match the major pentatonic to its relative minor pentatonic.

(Answers on page 7)

Major Pentatonic

C Major Pentatonic

G Major Pentatonic

Bb Major Pentatonic

A Major Pentatonic

Eb Major Pentatonic

D Major Pentatonic

F Major Pentatonic

Minor Pentatonic

B Minor Pentatonic

C Minor Pentatonic

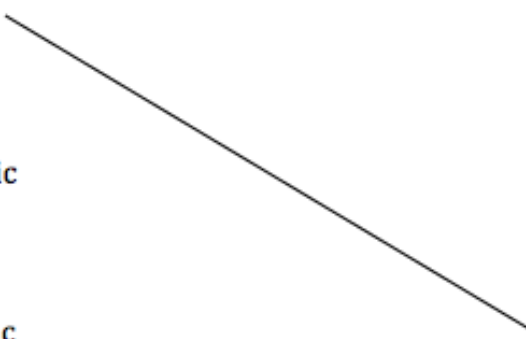
F# Minor Pentatonic

D Minor Pentatonic

A Minor Pentatonic

E Minor Pentatonic

G Minor Pentatonic



Exercise #2

Label the scale degrees of the major pentatonic scales. Then notate its relative minor scale and its scale degrees.

(Answers on page 7)

D Major Pentatonic _____ Minor Pentatonic



A musical staff in treble clef showing the D Major Pentatonic scale. The notes are D4, E4, F#4, G4, and A4, marked with dots.

Eb Major Pentatonic _____ Minor Pentatonic

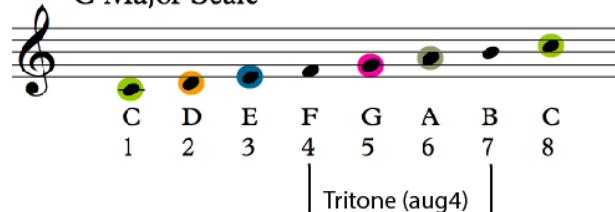


A musical staff in treble clef showing the Eb Major Pentatonic scale. The notes are Eb4, F4, G4, Ab4, and Bb4, marked with dots.

A Closer Look at the Major and Minor Pentatonic Scales

In the traditional Ionian (major) and Aeolian (natural minor) scales, there exists a tritone (augmented 4th/diminished 5th) between the 4th and 7th scale degrees in Ionian and the 2nd and b6 scale degrees in Aeolian.

C Major Scale

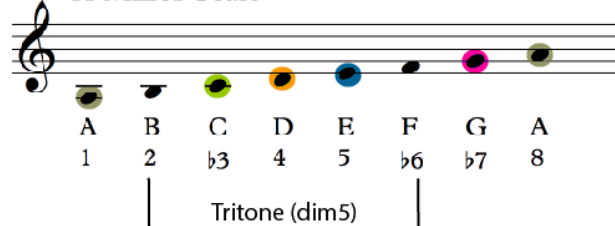


A musical staff in treble clef showing the C Major Scale. The notes are C, D, E, F, G, A, B, C, marked with colored dots. A bracket below the 4th and 7th degrees (F and B) is labeled "Tritone (aug4)".

A B C D E F G A B C
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Tritone (aug4)

A Minor Scale



A musical staff in treble clef showing the A Minor Scale. The notes are A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A, marked with colored dots. A bracket below the 2nd and b6 degrees (B and F) is labeled "Tritone (dim5)".

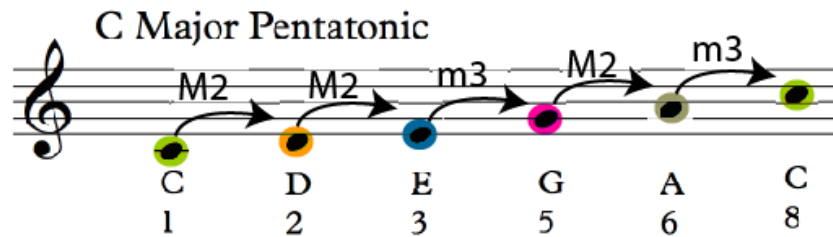
A B C D E F G A
1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7 8

Tritone (dim5)

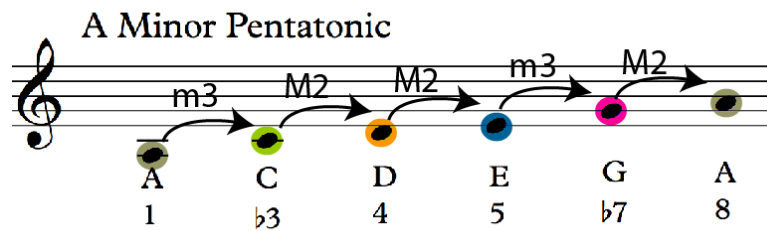
Major and minor pentatonic scales avoid significant harmonic dissonance by adverting this tritone.

Intervallic Patterns in a Pentatonic Scale

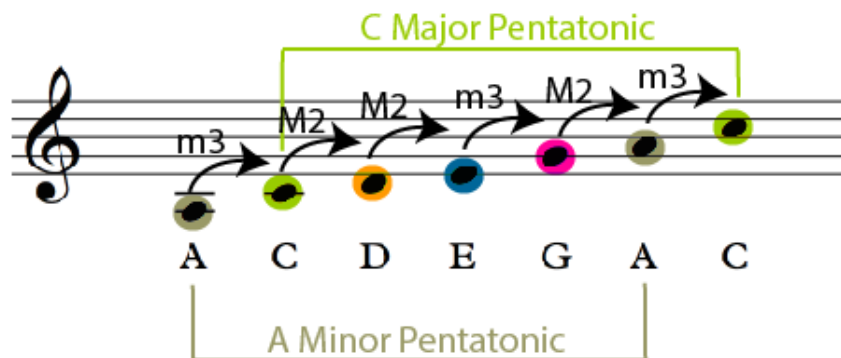
Scales have a set *intervallic* pattern (or in most cases “steps”), which begin on the scale’s root. For example, the Ionian (major) scale has a stepwise pattern of WWHWWWH (“W” means whole step and “H” means half step). The major pentatonic scale has an intervallic pattern of a M2, M2, m3, M2, and a final m3 (“M” represents major and “m” represents minor), which leads to the octave of the root.



The minor pentatonic scale has its own intervallic pattern of a m3, M2, M2, m3, and a final M2, which leads to the octave.



The image below shows us how these major and minor pentatonic intervallic patterns relate to one another.

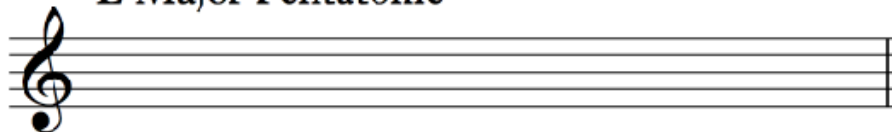


Exercise #3

Using the pentatonic intervallic patterns, build the pentatonic scales indicated below.

(Answers on page 7)

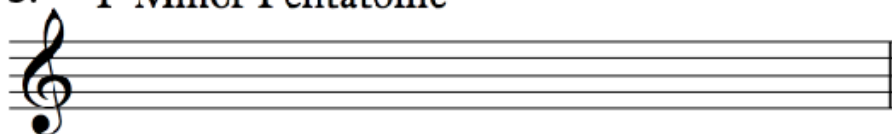
1. E Major Pentatonic



2. F Major Pentatonic



3. F Minor Pentatonic

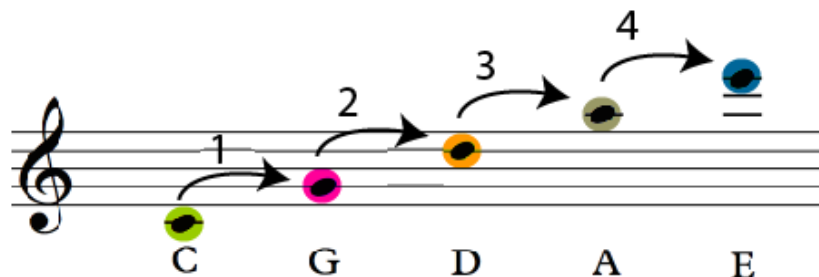


4. Bb Minor Pentatonic

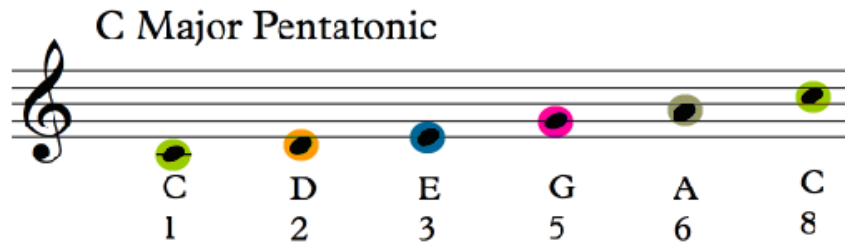


Building a Pentatonic Scale Using Fifths

The major and minor pentatonic scale can also be built using four consecutive intervals of a *perfect fifth* (P5).

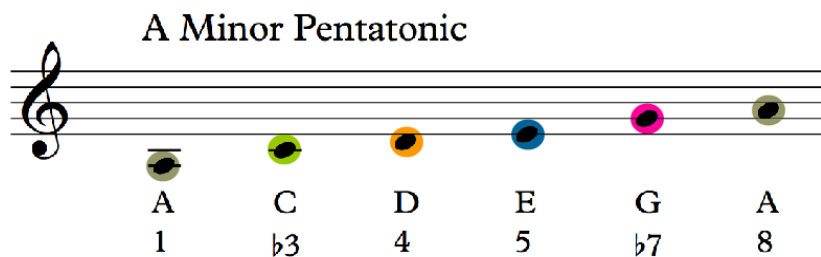


Arranging these notes into a single octave with our first note of C as the root, we can create the major pentatonic scale, C, D, E, G, and A with scale degrees of 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6 (8 representing the root's octave) as seen below:

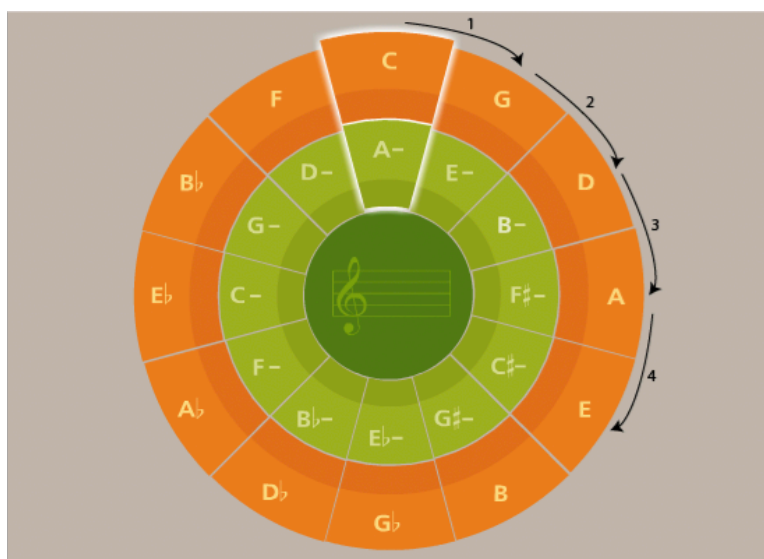


C's relative minor pentatonic scale, A minor pentatonic, begins on the 6th scale degree of the major pentatonic scale (shown above).

A minor pentatonic contains scale degrees 1, b3, 4, 5, and b7.



Using the *circle of fifths* as a tool we can see how this works in a sharp direction. The image below represents four consecutive perfect fifths in the *circle of fifths* starting on the root of C and continuing in a sharp direction:



Answer Key

Exercise #1

Major Pentatonic

C Major Pentatonic

G Major Pentatonic

Bb Major Pentatonic

A Major Pentatonic

Eb Major Pentatonic

D Major Pentatonic

F Major Pentatonic

Minor Pentatonic

B Minor Pentatonic

C Minor Pentatonic

F# Minor Pentatonic

D Minor Pentatonic

A Minor Pentatonic

E Minor Pentatonic

G Minor Pentatonic

Exercise #2

D Major Pentatonic: 1 2 3 5 6 8

B Minor Pentatonic: 1 b3 4 5 b7 8

Eb Major Pentatonic: 1 2 3 5 6 8

C Minor Pentatonic: 1 b3 4 5 b7 8

Exercise #3

1. E Major Pentatonic

E Major Pentatonic: 1 2 3 5 6 8

2. F Major Pentatonic

F Major Pentatonic: 1 2 3 5 6 8

3. F Minor Pentatonic

F Minor Pentatonic: 1 b3 b4 5 b7 8

4. Bb Minor Pentatonic

Bb Minor Pentatonic: 1 b3 b4 5 b7 8