



The Pentatonic Scale: The Musician's Staple

By Scott Blanchard

Today I'm going to introduce you to two forms of the pentatonic scale. The pentatonic scale is one of the most-used scales across many genres of music, played on all Western pitched instruments, and is commonplace in Western and Eastern cultures. As you know, **a scale is an arrangement of notes in a specific order of whole and half steps, and can be played from any starting note.** We hear this scale all the time in rock, jazz, blues, acoustic, and even some examples of classical and orchestral music. So why is this scale so fun, accessible and cosmopolitan? Read on below to find out more.

Major Pentatonic

The pentatonic (major or minor) scale is a five-note scale (hence the prefix penta, meaning five). We'll take a look at the major pentatonic first. The formula for this scale is simple, and we'll derive it from the major scale in which you are probably already familiar. Let's build a C Major Pentatonic scale using this formula (shown below): scale degrees 1, 2, 3, 5, 6.

Guitar

The guitar notation shows the C Major Pentatonic scale on a six-string guitar. The treble clef staff contains six notes: C4, D4, E4, G4, A4, and C5. Below the staff, the fingering is listed as 4, 1, 3, 1, 3, 1 and the scale degrees as 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 1. The bass clef staff shows the fret numbers for each note: 8, 5, 7, 5, 7, 5.

Fingering:	4	1	3	1	3	1
Scale degree:	1	2	3	5	6	1

T
A
B


8	5	7	5	7	5
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Keyboard

The keyboard notation shows the C Major Pentatonic scale on a piano. The treble clef staff contains six notes: C4, D4, E4, G4, A4, and C5. Below the staff, the fingering is listed as 1, 2, 3, 1, 2, 4 and the scale degrees as 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 1.

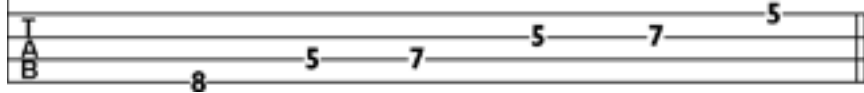
Fingering:	1	2	3	1	2	4
Scale degree:	1	2	3	5	6	1

Bass



Fingering: 4 1 3 1 3 1

Scale degree: 1 2 3 5 6 1



Minor Pentatonic

Now, let's take a look at the minor pentatonic scale. As you may have guessed, we'll also derive this scale from the major scale. Let's construct a C Minor Pentatonic scale using this formula: scale degrees 1, lowered (b) 3, 4, 5, lowered (b) 7. Here's a diagram of what we just did:

Guitar



Fingering: 4 2 4 1 4 1

Scale degree: 1 b3 4 5 b7 1



Keyboard

Fingering: 1 2 3 1 2 3



Scale degree: 1 b3 4 5 b7 1

Bass



Fingering: 4 2 4 1 4 1

Scale degree: 1 b3 4 5 b7 1



Be sure to play the major and minor pentatonic scales built from the same tonic back to back to hear their similarities and differences.

Playing the Minor Pentatonic Scale Starting from a Different Note

Okay, let's build an A Minor Pentatonic scale using our formula. Look at the diagram below, and you'll notice the notes low to high are A, C, D, E, G (high A to begin the next octave).

Guitar

The diagram shows the A Minor Pentatonic scale on a guitar staff. The notes are A, C, D, E, G, and A (one octave higher). The notes are written as half notes. Below the staff, the fingering and scale degrees are listed. The scale degrees are 1, b3, 4, 5, b7, 1. Below the staff, the fret numbers are listed: 5, 8, 5, 7, 5, 7.

Fingering: 1 4 1 3 1 3
Scale degree: 1 b3 4 5 b7 1

T
A
B
5 8 5 7 5 7

Keyboard

The diagram shows the A Minor Pentatonic scale on a keyboard staff. The notes are A, C, D, E, G, and A (one octave higher). The notes are written as half notes. Below the staff, the fingering and scale degrees are listed. The scale degrees are 1, b3, 4, 5, b7, 1.

Fingering: 1 2 3 1 2 3
Scale degree: 1 b3 4 5 b7 1

Bass

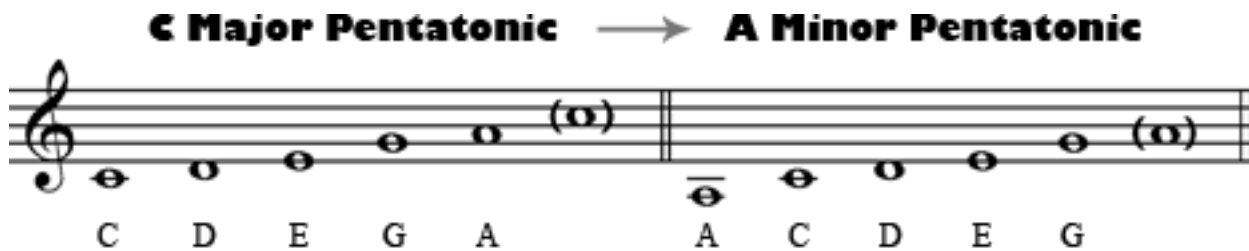
The diagram shows the A Minor Pentatonic scale on a bass staff. The notes are A, C, D, E, G, and A (one octave higher). The notes are written as half notes. Below the staff, the fingering and scale degrees are listed. The scale degrees are 1, b3, 4, 5, b7, 1. Below the staff, the fret numbers are listed: 5, 8, 5, 7, 5, 7.

Fingering: 1 4 1 3 1 3
Scale degree: 1 b3 4 5 b7 1

T
A
B
5 8 5 7 5 7

Relative Relationships in Major and Minor Pentatonic Scales

Wait one minute! The notes of the A Minor Pentatonic scale are the same notes of the C Major Pentatonic scale we built a little earlier. Those notes were C, D, E, G, A. **If your two pentatonic scales (a major and a minor) share the same key signature, as C Major and A Minor do (no sharps and no flats), the scales will contain the same pitches.** This means that if you know your major pentatonic scale, you can start on the fifth note of the scale to find the tonic of the relative minor scale (called relative because they share the same key signature, or identical set of notes). Or, say you know your minor pentatonic scale, you can start on the third note of the scale to find the tonic of the relative major scale. When you learn one pentatonic scale, you've really learned two. This is shown below:



Application

Now that you have a general introductory knowledge of these two forms of pentatonic scales, how do you use them? You now know that a major and minor form sharing a key signature contain the same pitches. Applying them to a song or progression takes some practice, and as a general rule while still getting your feet wet, emphasize the tonic scale degree. For example, if you're playing in D Major, and playing a D Major Pentatonic scale over the chords, emphasize the D note to differentiate it from the B Minor Pentatonic scale, which contains the same notes (when playing in B Minor, emphasize the B note). There are endless rock, jazz, blues, and other genre and stylistic opportunities to employ this powerful, melodic scale. Chances are, if you listened to the radio today, you heard this scale in a popular recording, or even in the vocal melody of a song you heard.

Want to play some awesome pentatonic licks? Check out the Licks section of this newsletter for some guitar, piano and bass licks, complete with a rockin' notated drum groove. You can either play these examples solo or with some friends! In addition, be sure to check out some of the beginning guitar lessons in blues (taught by Dennis McCumber, Jeff Bihlman, Scott A. Smith and Reggie Chavez), jazz (taught by Tom Dempsey and Amanda Monaco) and rock (taught by Tim Quick, Alex Nolan, Tobias Hurwitz, Ralph Agresta, Geoff Hartwell and Paul Howard). Pianists will want to check out Andrea Amos and Leo Marchildon's Adult Refresher lesson "In Other Modes." Bassists will enjoy lessons on the minor pentatonic scale taught by Dave Overthrow and Sharon Ray. Practice these scales up, and you'll be showing off at the next band practice!