The Piano Teacher's Survival Guide

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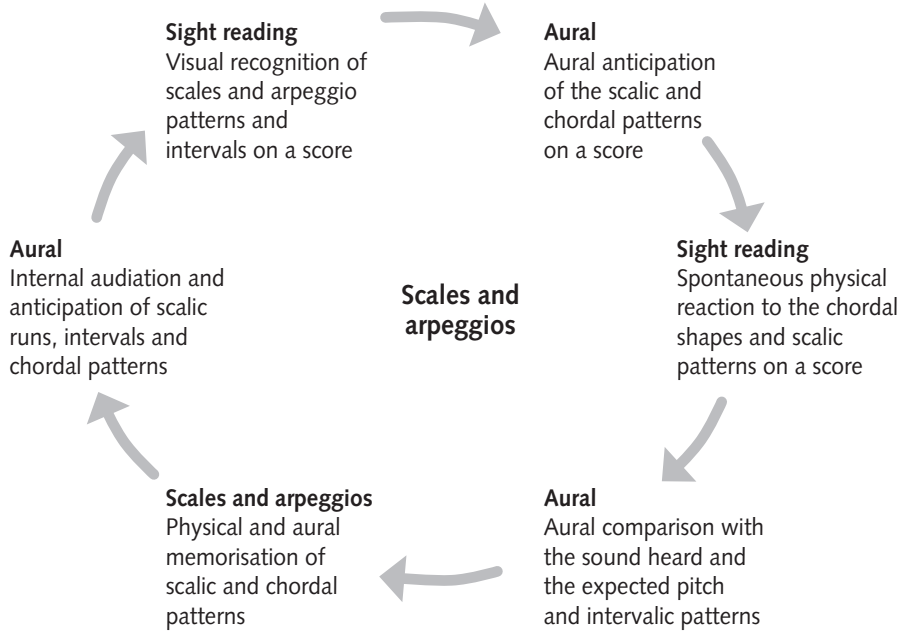
FABER MUSIC

6 Foundation skills: scales and arpeggios

There are certain indisputable foundation skills that support the progress and musical development of the instrumentalist. Their value is incontrovertible and they formed part of the education of every great pianist from C.P.E. Bach to Daniil Trifonov. Not one of these skills is in any way mutually exclusive; all are inextricably intertwined and essential to a musician's health and well being. Historically, they have been separated for the purposes of assessment by exam boards into Scales, Sight-reading and Aural for good reason from an assessment point of view, but unfortunately this has resulted in a highly distorted approach to instrumental teaching. The idea of these three separate elements is now so engrained in our music education that I have reluctantly dealt with each separately below, though it goes against every instinct to do so and I therefore hope the links between them all become clear.

Example of the connections between the foundation skills and scales and arpeggios



For many, scales and arpeggios are an academic, dry and soulless part of learning the piano, and have to be practised because, like cod liver oil, they are 'good for you'. The lack of a communicative context in their assessment for music exams reinforces this perception and they have sadly and unjustly acquired a bad reputation. They are not however a mechanical and drilled vehicle to develop technical athleticism or an exercise to be endured as part of a warm-up routine. They are the musical and physical grammar of tonal piano music, the quickest way of developing an awareness of melody, harmony and structure and the very best shortcut to fluent playing. Above all they are the ingredients for the most special moments of beauty, passion and lyricism in some of the greatest music ever written.

They are, in fact, so valuable to musical and pianistic progression that if we didn't have them we'd have to invent them. They are so prevalent in our standard repertoire that, given time and a vast expanse of carefully selected pieces, a pianist will eventually play all scales and arpeggios in all keys.

How much quicker is it to isolate these patterns and learn them independently? Like steppingstones across a river, they make the route to the other side so much shorter, rather than deliberately spending years looking for an alternative place to cross.

Knowing your scales and arpeggios:

- will enable fingers to instinctively follow chordal or scalic consistency patterns within a key and to adapt at a modulation
- makes reading tonal music aurally and physical more predictable
- enables the ability to traverse awkward memory slips or stumbles
- will help with memorisation (including physical aural and visual memory)
- will give performers the confidence to extemporise
- enhances harmonic and structural understanding
- supports sight-reading
- makes the compositions of the great composers from the eighteenth century onwards so much more physically predictable and approachable.

Musical context and practical example

Musical context Play a simple melody 'by ear' (in this case *Baa baa black sheep*) in G major, and then add simple left-hand triadic harmonies. This will soon reveal the value of scales and arpeggios in being able to hear and anticipate melodic lines and harmonies.

Basic strategy Practise the scale and broken chord of G major as well as the related keys of the subdominant and dominant (C and D or even D7) until the hands fall naturally over the chordal and scale shapes that provide the harmonies and melody. There will be a feel for G major and its related keys and with a little adjustment students will find anticipating the patterns relatively straightforward.

Refined strategy Experiment with the notes of G major in the right-hand over a simple 'vamp' in the lower half of the piano (provided by the teacher). Focus on the top of the scale and the 'Have you any wool?' line. Swap sides so the pupil plays the first three notes of the broken chord while the teacher improvises a simple melody in G, perhaps adding a deliberate F♮ or 'rogue note' for the pupil to spot.

Further ideas Think of other scale melodies with simple accompaniments. Explore these in the key of G and notice how much harder they are to anticipate and play in less familiar keys.

The connection between scales and arpeggios and other foundation skills

Scales and arpeggios require excellent aural skills and are inextricably linked to notational shapes and patterns. Fluent scales and broken chords require:

Aural skills

- an aural memory of the sound of each mode or scale
- an anticipation of the next interval, hearing the semi-tone/tone/intervallic step from the note played to the next
- an excellent sense of pulse
- an awareness of harmony, cadence points and the relationship between keys.

Sight-reading skills

- a visual and aural recognition of step-wise movement up and down the stave, of small intervals and of chord patterns
- a physical sense of key
- an anticipation of the next note or chord within a key
- an instinctive geography of the keyboard.

Scales, arpeggios and technique

Scales and arpeggios can be useful for developing technique but this is not their primary use and focussing on this can isolate them from musical context, creativity and communication. Central to good scale playing is the 'thumb under' technique which is clearly explained in a later chapter (see Chapter 16, 'Thumb Under' Technique, page 73). Encouraging musical scales can also improve the control and develop an awareness of articulation tone and shape.

Learning scales and arpeggios

The notes and finger-patterns are best tackled by grouping them together. The structure of scale-learning for exams is not a curriculum; a scale such as B♭ major is one of the most difficult and yet is traditionally learnt early merely because it has only two flats, yet the five flats of D♭ major are far easier to learn.

Learning scales

General hints and tips

- All major scales have the same melody differing only in the register of the note they start on.
- Harmonic and melodic minors are a variant on the natural minor scale (the minor scale using just the notes dictated by the key signature) so it is best to learn this first.
- Aural familiarization with the sound of the scales should always be the starting point.
- Find out if pupils have the sound of the natural minor and major scale in their head by asking them to discover it from any starting note.
- Key signatures are the way we get the sequence of notes to conform to the 'sound' of the major and natural minor scale, and can therefore be worked out by young pupils by ear for themselves.
- Every scale has the same repetitive fingering pattern, they just start at a different point in the sequence.
- You can learn most scale patterns by learning the shapes made by the black notes.
- To encourage the feel for the three/four fingering pattern, play B major. The thumb is placed on the only white notes.
- In the black note flat majors the right-hand's fourth finger is always on B♭.
- In the black note flat majors the left-hand's fourth finger is always on the last flat in the key signature.

Standard 'C major fingering' scales (C, D, E, G, A major and minor)

- It is best to learn these first as a template to develop a confident physical knowledge of the three/four pattern.
- The fourth finger only plays one specific note in each hand (e.g. B in right hand for C major, or a D in the left hand).
- Notice that in each scale the same finger occurs in each hand on the third and sixth degree of the scale as well as thumbs on the key notes in the middle.
- Imaginative teaching games and strategies can be used to exploit this. (See the clinic at the end of the chapter for some specific examples.)

F and B major and minor

- Here one hand uses a standard fingering, and the other has a slight change.
- Start the B major left-hand scale on the thumb and similarly finish F major with the thumb in the right hand.
- Then discuss how pragmatic it is to change the thumb to a fourth finger.

B♭ and E♭ major and minor

- These major scales have the same fingering.
- The natural minors are easy as the thumb is the only finger on a white note, and always the white note to the right.
- The harmonic and melodic minors can develop from this.

D♭ and A♭ (G♯) majors and minors:

- These match exactly in both hands.
- Keep the standard patterns consistent and logical.

F♯ major and minor

- The left-hand fingering of both the major and minor is unique.
- Exploit its 'specialness' to aid memory.

C♯ and F♯ melodic minors

- These are colourful scales full of personality.
- The fingering has to change on the way down to compensate for the black note patterns.

Scales a third and sixth apart

- These are not new scales, simply the normal scale where one hand starts late.
- In C major for instance, the left hand starts the scale when the right hand gets to E. Thinking in this way can help make sense of the fingering.

Other scales – whole tone/blues/pentatonic/ modes

- These are wonderful scales for improvisation and can put many other scales into context.

Learning broken chords and arpeggios

General hints and tips

- Broken chords and arpeggios rely on a standard set of fingerings that relate to chordal playing. Many compositions have an expectation of these.
- Learning the triadic three-note and four-note broken chords with standard fingerings in all keys is as essential as learning the arpeggios.
- Broken chords and chords permeate all piano music and the standard fingerings of arpeggios are even more relevant than for scales, particularly in the left hand.
- Arpeggios can be grouped with the scales and independently, as shown below.
- Arpeggios that begin on a white note have standard fingering.
- For arpeggios that begin on a black note, the thumb should be placed on the first available white note in the arpeggio.

Standard fingering
(All the white-note majors and minors, F♯ major, E♭ minor)

- Opinions vary on whether to use a fourth or third finger in the left hand as 'standard fingering' but there is no right and wrong.

Arpeggios that start on a black note
(D♭ major and minor, E♭ major, F♯ minor, A♭ (G♯) major and minor, B♭ major)

- The same fingering can be used for all of these – fourth fingers in both hands.

B♭ minor (the odd one out)

- This is easy because it is unique, starting black/black/white.

Diminished and dominant sevenths

- The fingering of these is relatively straightforward and the notes are easy to remember.
- In an exam, a starting note will be given for the diminished seventh broken chord, and a key will be given for the dominant seventh.
- The key of a diminished seventh is a semitone below the lowest note (so in C, the arpeggio is B, D, F and A♭).

Teaching strategies for scales and arpeggios

- Find interesting, imaginative, musical contexts to inspire repetition and internalise the fingering patterns (dynamics, articulation, colours, balance, repeating sections as hands ascend/descend in melodies etc.).
- Don't teach according to an exam syllabus; there are reasons for the syllabus groupings and these are not wholly related to a pupil's progression.
- Use the context of a piece to reinforce or even introduce them.
- Work in related keys, especially if the piece itself modulates, this also helps harmonic knowledge and understanding.
- Include the shape, colour, articulation, rhythm and coordination from pieces being learnt into the scales. Everything is therefore linked and feeds into all aspects of playing.
- Invent duet accompaniments or riffs to help musically shape the scales.
- Play scales alongside your students in 3rds, 6ths etc.
- Look through their pieces or Classical concertos to find scalic bars that can be played or even practised with harmonic sequences underneath.
- Jazz groove accompaniments work well for a change of idiom.
- Perhaps work at some modes and blues/pentatonic scales at the same time.
- Use an App, record or use music software to compose backing tracks to scales at different tempi for pupils to use at home.
- Vary the tempo and dynamic in every scale. The right tempo is the speed that conveys musical direction.
- Discuss a character or colour for each key and note which have particular idiosyncrasies.
- As exams approach, help your pupil organise their scales.
- Use homemade 'scale boxes' or apps as the exams approach to develop a quick response to 'random' requests.
- Work on them by key note (i.e. all the scales and arpeggios beginning on F♯).
- Scales only need to be practised over two octaves at various registers as this covers all the patterns essential to three or four octaves.

My pupil has problems remembering the fingering and patterns.

- Ask pupils to practise in finger groups: the thumbs play on their own but all other fingers play as a cluster chord.
- Call this the 'noisy' tune and tell young pupils that Mum and Dad will hate it (so they practise it!).
- They can try this technique for both scales and arpeggios, consolidating the physical and visual pattern.
- Ask them to practise in finger groups over two octaves with hands together.
- Accent all fourth fingers saying 'four' as the finger goes down. Do the same with the thumb or call out the note played by the 4th finger or thumb.
- Encourage the pupil to learn the 'shape' made by the accidentals in each scale e.g. in A♭ major play A♭, B♭, D♭ and E♭ together as a chord.
- Ask them to say the fingering out loud as notes are played.
- Play the scale/arpeggio deliberately missing out the thumbs.

My pupil is having problems playing evenly in tone or rhythm, or giving scales musical shape.

- Ask the pupil to practise in dotted rhythms and then reverse them.
- Practise accenting every other note with a high finger lift, and then reverse it. This is most effective when the unaccented note is *pianissimo*.
- Play the scales across two, three or four octaves in clear rhythmic groupings (groups of three, four, five, six etc.). Find out how many times you have to play the whole scale before you return the emphasis to the first note.
- Hold down the cluster chord of the scale/arpeggio (i.e. all the notes except the thumb notes) and practise moving the thumb quickly from the surface of its starting note forward to cover the next note it plays, using the lateral movement of the wrist (see Chapter 16, 'Thumb Under' Technique, page 73).
- Ask them to play each note in turn, releasing the weight behind the hand and circling the relaxed wrist clockwise on the way up and anticlockwise on the way down, 'walking the weight' from note to note.
- Ask pupils to invent short scalic melodies and rhythms that cover the more awkward shifts of fingerings along the way (so back and forwards across the top of C♯ melodic minor for instance).
- Play with one hand louder than the other; one hand with a *crescendo* and the other a *diminuendo*; one hand plays *staccato* and the other *legato* etc.
- Play the right hand just behind the left hand, and then swap around.

My pupils are reluctant to practise their scales and arpeggios.

- Encourage them to perform scales with the 'character' of an Auntie/Uncle/pet, using any rhythm.
- Ask them to perform their scales as if in a storm, hail, skating, on a boating lake or in a 'mood'.
- Ask the pupil to imagine they are performing the scale in a Mozart Piano Concerto, perhaps with a short introduction from the teacher. You could

find some actual examples (these are particularly prevalent in the early Mozart concertos).
- Invent accompaniments for them or play the scales as duets in thirds/sixths/octaves.
- Hold 'scale request parties' with rewards for convincing scales requested by other pupils in a particular mood/style/character/speed.