



Jr. High/Middle School

Getting students to learn scales

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Please note that even though this is written from a band perspective, many of the ideas can also be applied to other instrumental music classes, such as orchestra and guitar.

I remember attending a UMEA conference when I was a young band director and going to a session that discussed the State Core Standards for Music. In that discussion, they were trying to decide how many scales junior high or middle school students should be able to play before they get to high school. When it was proposed that they should be able to play eight or even all twelve major scales, I immediately put my hand up in protest and questioned the sanity of the person who came up with this idea. At the time, I was happy if my students could play three scales and thought that was good. Fast forward several years, and now I shake my head because of my low standards and clouded vision. Since then, I've come to realize that our students are much more capable than we think and just need to be shown how to be successful in this sometimes ominous task of learning scales.

Start Early:

It's never too early to start learning scales. Usually, I have my beginners start learning their first concert B^b scale as soon as they have learned their first few notes. At the beginning of class, I have students turn to the back of their method book to their scales or to their scale sheet and then give them a minute to look-up the fingering of the first two notes on their fingering chart (be sure to explain how to do this). I then let them go ahead and play the notes on their own while asking them to check their neighbors to make sure they also have the right notes. After that, we play the first two notes of their new scale as a class a few times, going up and then down in half notes (a mini two-note scale). Sometimes I will go around the room and have everyone play those notes for me. This only takes a couple of minutes and ensures that everyone knows and can play the notes correctly. I can even give a short mini-lesson to each student as we go, addressing tone, embouchure, air, posture and hand position, if needed. Next, I have them turn their stands around and play those notes from memory a few times. I then ask, "Who has that memorized?" and lots of hands enthusiastically go up! This gives every student a chance to taste success and realize how

easy it is to start learning and memorizing their scales. The next time we have class, I have them learn and add one more note using the same method. Now they know three notes of their scale and know them well. We add another note each time we meet and before we know it, we have the first scale learned!

With this method, there are a couple of problems, when doing this with beginners – especially in the fall. Clarinets and "the break:" When clarinets get past their A and now have to play B and C, which are over the break, I just tell them to do the best they can. I don't make a big deal about it, and I especially don't tell them, "We are now going to play over the break." As far as they are concerned, this is just another note and another fingering. I will help them by having them play the B and C fingerings without the octave key, and then I will add the octave key for them, so they can get a feel for how to play these notes until they can do it on their own. It's amazing how many clarinets are able to play over the break the first time or within a few days of doing this, and all of them can do so easily before the first quarter is over.

Brass Range: brass players will sometimes have a hard time playing the higher notes until their embouchures get stronger. Again, I just tell them to do the best they can and to not get discouraged, and eventually, they can play all the notes in the scale. The good thing about learning scales is that they are progressing and expanding their range stepwise. Combine this with long tones, and they will develop and strengthen their embouchure at the same time. Not only that, but they will develop amazing tone.

Review Often:

After my beginning band students have learned a scale, we review it every day. I will usually have them play it once with their music, if they would like (most of them like to show off and turn their stands around), and then once from memory. I will also offer them extra-credit, if they can play it from memory (it is amazing what they will do for extra credit). After that, we move on and start learning the next scale the same way.

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MRJH BAND LEVEL PASS-OFFS



Level 1	3 Scales (1 minute max; less than 4 mistakes/scale) Concert Bb, Eb and Ab Scales Memorized in order
Level 2	6 Scales (1 minute max; less than 4 mistakes/scale) Concert Bb, Eb, Ab, Dd, Gb and B Scales Memorized in order
Level 3	9 Scales (2 minute max; less than 4 mistakes/scale) Concert Bb, Eb, Ab, Dd, Gb, B, E, A and D Scales Memorized in order
Level 4	12 Scales (2 minute max; less than 4 mistakes/scale) Concert Bb, Eb, Ab, Dd, Gb, B, E, A, D, G, C, and F Scales Memorized in order
Level 5	Chromatic Scale (1 minute max; less than 4 mistakes) 2 octave Concert F Chromatic Scale Memorized
Level 6	3 Scales 2 Octaves (1 minute max; less than 4 mistakes/scale) 2 Octave Concert Bb, Eb and Ab Scales Memorized in order
Level 7	6 Scales 2 Octaves (1:30 minute max; less than 4 mistakes/scale) 2 Octave Concert Bb, Eb, Ab, Dd, Gb and B Scales Memorized in order
Level 8	9 Scales 2 Octaves (3 minute max; less than 4 mistakes/scale) 2 Octave Concert Bb, Eb, Ab, Dd, Gb, B, E, A and D Scales Memorized in order
Level 9	12 Scales 2 Octaves (3 minute max; less than 4 mistakes/scale) 2 Octave Concert Bb, Eb, Ab, Dd, Gb, B, E, A, D, G, C, and F Scales Memorized in order
Level 10	Full Range Chromatic (1 minute max; less than 4 mistakes) Full Range Chromatic Scale Memorized
Level 11-22	Technical Exercises from Foundations for Superior Performance Book (Bb, Eb, Ab, Dd, Gb, B, E, A, D, G, C, F) Choose any Key that hasn't been passed off Play all exercises except bottom line of Chord Study 2 Major and Minor 2 Octave Scales Memorized Harmonic and Melodic Minor 2 Octave Scales Exercises marked with * will have randomly chosen articulation patterns applied



from "Scales," page 6

For my second-year players, we start with the first scale, just like we do with the beginners, but we learn two notes every time. I still give them a minute to look up any fingerings they might have forgotten and ask them to be sure to check their neighbors, seeing that they have it right, as well. After we have completed reviewing or relearning a scale,

they pass it off for a grade. During the pass-off, if a student is unable to play the scale from memory, I have them go into a practice room with someone who knows it to teach them the scale until they can play it. I like to challenge my over-achieving students at this level, as well. For their pass-off, I offer them extra-credit if they can play a two-octave scale and/or the arpeggio from memory. I am always amazed at how many students will do this.

For my third year players, we work out of the *Foundations for Superior Performance* book by Jeff King and Richard Williams. This book has one to two pages dedicated to each scale (or key). We will usually spend two to three days going through those pages, which have several technical exercises devoted to them. There are other similar methods out there that would work just as well, or you can even come up with your own. After we complete the page(s), students pass-off the scale but this time, they use a metronome and play the scale pattern at a quarter note = 120. Extra-credit is also offered to those who can play two octaves at that tempo.

Learning Scales in their Language:

A few years ago, I went to the directors of the schools I feed and asked them what they wanted my students to know by the time they reach high school. Both of them responded, "Their scales!" With this in mind, I broke down the twelve major scales into a learning sequence that I thought was achievable and assigned each sequence a "level" (see illustration, p.7). Students at this age love video games and are always trying to see if they can get to the next "level." This turns learning scales into a game. You can even have incentives for levels such as bringing doughnuts when all of the students in a section pass off Level 1 or pizza for the class when everyone passes off Level 4. The levels are also progressive so if students do not pass off a level, they stay on it until they can complete it before moving on to the next level. This helps to keep students from getting overwhelmed and discouraged by not adding more to what they are still trying to achieve.

Students start passing-off levels, starting with the last quarter of their first year. They are welcome to pass them off earlier, if they would like, and many do. Since we are on a "block

schedule," this gives us a nice break in the middle of class. We will usually take about 5-10 minutes to do pass-offs, which can include scale level pass-offs. By the middle of the third quarter, I already have over half of my beginners with Level 1 passed off. I have a few that have passed off Levels 2 and 3 and a couple that have already passed off Level 5. To contrast this, if we had just been playing sequentially out of our method book, we would have just barely learned our first scale, concert B \flat .

Our goal is to have all of our beginners passed off on Level 1 by the end of their first year, and we usually come really close to meeting that goal. After that, we require each student to pass off a level each quarter. This is basically asking them to learn and memorize one new scale every three weeks. If students stay on track, they will have all 12 major scales and their two-octave chromatic scale learned by their third year (Level 5). Once students have passed off Level 5, they can choose to either progress on to the other levels (most choose to do this) which are the two-octave scales, or they can choose to pass-off Levels 4 and 5 again (this is mainly for brass players, because it is more difficult for them to play most of their two-octave scales at this age).

When I came up with the Levels, I never expected any of my students to really make it past Level 10, but it was not long before many did and were wondering what level they could do next. As a result, after talking to the high schools I feed into, we decided to add Levels 11-22, based on the *Foundations for Superior Performance* method. Yes, we have had some students complete all 22 levels (those overachieving flute players!) but have not yet added anything new (much to their disappointment).

Other Ways to Learn Scales:

There are several ways to learn scales. Use what works for you. This is just one way that I have found works for us. If it works for you, please feel free to use it, tweak it or make it better. I realize it is not perfect, so please share your ideas with me on how to make it better. One of the reasons we have students learn their scales in the circle of 4^{ths} is because that is the same order our high schools use for their auditions. That order also fits well for jazz chord progressions. The levels progress this way but realize that at the same time, we are learning all the scales in class. For instance, our beginners already have eight of their major scales learned by the middle of the third quarter and will have all twelve learned by the end of the year.

Some directors like teaching scales by having students play through the circle of 4^{ths} or 5^{ths} starting with just the root and then adding the second and so on. You could also use mini scales or tetra chords. This works especially well for beginners, because it keeps everything in their range.

No matter which method you choose, I hope you choose something and show them how to succeed. Too many times, directors tell their students to go learn their scales and never show them how. It becomes overwhelming to them. My first scout leader told me that yard by yard is hard, but inch by inch is a cinch. These methods approach learning scales with this philosophy. If your students know their scales, they can play in any key that's thrown at them, and you spend very little time correcting notes, which means you get to spend more time creating music. In the end, isn't that what it is all about?

