

Major Scales for Piano

Instructions

Group One

The 12 major scales can be divided into four different fingering patterns. Group One consists of all the scales that begin on white keys except for F and B, so Group One includes **C, G, D, A, E**. The easiest way to understand the fingering for these five scales is to first practice them in contrary motion. Start with both thumbs on the tonic; play 1, 2, and 3; then use “sneaky thumb” and play 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5, ending on the next tonic. The tricky part about contrary motion is that, though you will use the same fingers at the same time, you are not playing the same notes at the same time, so it can be a bit of a challenge to keep track of the sharps. Once the scales are mastered in contrary motion, students may begin to play them in parallel motion.

Group Two

The Group Two keys are actually the easiest. There are only three of them, **D^b, G^b, and B**, but each of the keys has an enharmonic buddy (**C[#], F[#], and C^b**). The cool thing about these keys is that they all use all five black keys. The trickiest thing about these keys is knowing which white key to play between the groups of two black keys and three black keys. It helps to say the scale pattern in your head (whole, whole, half, whole, whole, whole, half). For these scales you use the 2nd and 3rd fingers on the group of two black keys in both hands, and the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers on the group of three black keys in both hands. The white key in between the sets of black keys is played with the thumb. To help students get used to how it feels, I like to teach them to play the notes in blocks, like this:

For D^b major scale

- Play D^b and E^b simultaneously with the 2nd and 3rd fingers in both hands.
- Play F with the thumbs.
- Play G^b, A^b, and B^b simultaneously with the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers in both hands.
- Play C with the thumbs.
- Position the 2nd and 3rd fingers over the D^b and E^b, but play just the D^b this time.

Once students have the feel of the pattern under their fingers it's a simple transition to play the notes one at a time. B will feel a bit different at first because it starts on a white key, but just remember to start it with the thumb and follow the pattern for the groups of two and three black keys.

Group 3

There are also three Group 3 keys, **B^b**, **E^b**, and **A^b**. I think of the Group 3 keys this way: the right hand follows the Group 2 fingering, and the left hand always starts with the 3rd finger, plays 3, 2, 1, and then crosses over with the 4th to play 4, 3, 2, 1. Now, the right hand may not seem like it follows the Group 2 pattern at first because, unlike in Group 2, not ALL the black keys are used. However, if you will think of the 2nd and 3rd fingers going with the group of two black keys, and the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers going with the group of three black keys, things will work out just right. In case you're confused, B^b starts with the 4th finger, E^b starts with the 3rd finger, and A^b starts with the 3rd finger. You will only use the thumbs on the white keys that come between the groups of black keys.

Group 4

Group 4 really isn't a new group at all. In case you're counting there's only one of the 12 scales that has not been covered, and that is **F** major. The left hand is straight up Group 1 fingering, easy as pie. The right hand uses Group 2 fingering, thumb on the white notes between the black key groups, and the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers matched up with the groups of two and three black keys, even though only one black key is used in the key of F. For me, the key of F is the most difficult major scale, and I find that students struggle the most on the way down.

Mastering the Major Scales

- 1) Start students early playing one octave scales, first in contrary motion (out, then in), advancing to parallel motion (up and then down).
- 2) Next, introduce two octave scales, up and then down. Group 1 keys use the 5th finger, and for multiple octave scales, the thumb needs to be substituted for the 5th finger on all but the first and last notes of the scales.
- 3) Finally, teach students to play in succession a one octave scale in quarter notes, a two octave scale in eighth notes, a three octave scale in triplets, and a 4 octave scale in sixteenth notes. All scales should be played up the scale and then down again with no stopping in between rhythms. This is a great opportunity for practice using an electronic metronome and also can be used to develop the metronome inside the student. Both have great value.