

SCALES & ARPEGGIOS

TIPS FROM RACHMANINOFF,
LISZT, CHOPIN & BRAHMS

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As we grow as pianists, we must continuously strive to hone our technique; not for the sake of impressing others with scales performed at breakneck speed but rather for the sake of our **expressivity** and **musicality**.

Russian pianist and pedagogue *Josef Lhévinne* believed that a pianist with poor technique was no better than an actor who could not speak simple phrases correctly.

In this PDF, we explore scales and arpeggios as the backbone of a pianist's technical training and, more importantly, as a vehicle for developing our own musical fluency and eloquence.

Table Of Contents

- 5-Finger Exercises
- What To Listen For?
- Keep Things Interesting
- Arpeggios
- Keeping Your Eyes On The Prize

5-FINGER EXERCISES

According to Liszt, before we practice scales, we should first master five-finger exercises.

Liszt assigned these exercises to his students before teaching them scales, because they allow us to strengthen our fingers equally without worrying about the passing-under of the thumb.



Since five-finger exercises rarely require changes in hand position, they allow us to focus on developing skills like finger independence.

Liszt, for instance, would have his students strike each note of a five-finger exercise six-to-twelve times while they held down the notes not involved, paying special attention paid to the weak fingers (e.g. the ring finger and pinky).

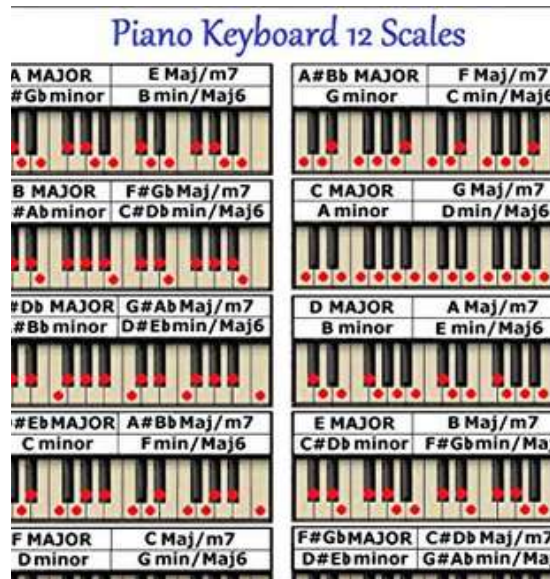
**FIVE-FINGER EXERCISES ALLOW US TO FOCUS ON
DEVELOPING SKILLS LIKE FINGER INDEPENDENCE.**

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR?

When we graduate from five-finger exercises & begin our study of scales, what should we listen for?

Our primary focus should be on the evenness of our sound; i.e. no single note should stick out as louder than the rest.

When we shift hand positions, there should be no noticeable hiccup in our dynamic level or rhythm.



Chopin believed that evenness of sound depended on the equal strengthening of all fingers and the flexibility (souplesse) of the thumb and entire arm (wrist, elbow, etc.).

KEEP THINGS INTERESTING

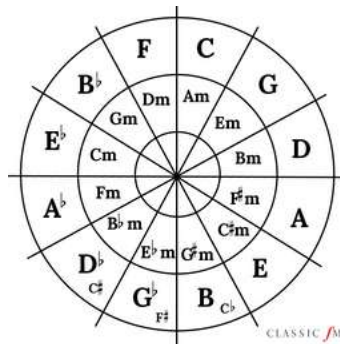
While developing an even sound, we should challenge ourselves to make our scale practice as enjoyable and rewarding as possible.

1. PRACTICE DIFFERENT KEY ORDERS

We must learn to play scales in every key. Which keys, though, should we practice first? It's really up to us – or our teachers!

Liszt had his students begin with C major followed by its relative minor. They would then move on to other keys in chromatic scale order (i.e. Db major and Bb minor, D major and B minor, etc.).

Many of us practice scales in the key order of the Circle of Fifths.



Chopin had yet another approach: since he believed that the hand's natural contour fit the B major scale more than any other, he had his students begin with this key before moving on to E, F#, G#, and A# major – C major was learned last.

KEEP THINGS INTERESTING!

So, change things up! While it's certainly helpful to enter the practice room with a plan, it's also important to keep things fresh for ourselves – repertoire often asks us to change keys unexpectedly, so we should train ourselves to stay on our toes!

2. PRACTICE WITH DIFFERENT ARTICULATIONS

Since scales are built on stepwise motion, they provide us with a wonderful opportunity to practice our legato.

Rachmaninoff warns us against playing scales with an insensitive, mechanical touch: “...*imagine that you are actually playing upon the wires, ringing them with soft felt covered hammers and not with hard metal bars...*”



Rather than striking the keys with a typewriter-like, downward motion, we should imagine ourselves “grasping” or stroking them at a more oblique angle. Imagine playing into or through the key-bed, as if it were made of play-dough or jelly instead of wood.

KEEP THINGS INTERESTING!

While scales lend themselves to legato playing, we can also practice them with other articulations: Liszt, for instance, encouraged his students to practice scales in staccato octaves, “lifting up the hand quickly on each octave so as to acquire a free and flexible strength...”

3. PRACTICE IN CONTRARY MOTION



When we learn to play scales with both hands, we often start with parallel motion – it’s easier to keep track of our hands when they’re moving in the same direction! Eventually, however, we can challenge ourselves to play scales in contrary motion. This not only keeps things interesting but also trains our peripheral vision.

Paradoxically, scales that use “C-major fingering” (C, G, D, E major; A, E minor) are actually easier to coordinate in contrary motion. The reason is that these scales take advantage of the “mirror image” relation of the two hands, so that the same finger

KEEP THINGS INTERESTING!

numbers in the ascending hand are use simultaneously in the descending hand. For scales that require other fingerings, however, contrary motion proves much more challenging!

4. PRACTICE YOUR INTERVALS

When we learn to play scales with both hands in parallel motion, we often start with octaves. Later, however, we can challenge ourselves to play our scales in thirds, sixths, tenths, and even double thirds, as taught in the Russian school of piano playing. This not only develops another level of mental and physical coordination, it also develops the ear's sensitivity to polyphony.



KEEP THINGS INTERESTING!

5. RACE YOURSELF!

When we practice scales slowly, we have the time to devote our attention to everything that we should be listening for in our playing: evenness, musicality, etc.

The faster we play, the harder it is to focus on these qualities. Nevertheless, we must reserve practice time for training our hands to play comfortably at quick tempos. Here, the metronome is our friend, and patience is the key!



Even Chopin, whose works require virtuosic dexterity, had his students practice scales very slowly at first. Eventually, however, we can challenge ourselves to perform scales in groups of eight 32nd-notes to the beat at 120 BPM!

In Rachmaninoff's time, Russian pianists were tested at this awesome tempo in their fifth-year conservatory exams.

ARPEGGIOS

We should try to make our arpeggio practice routine as engaging and varied as our scale playing.

PREPARATORY WORK FOR ARPEGGIOS.

Godowsky.



Brahms encouraged his students to strengthen their fingers individually by accenting different notes of their arpeggios.

One of Clara Schumann's daughters, Eugenie Schumann, recalled that Brahms would instruct her to play arpeggios in groups of four sixteenth notes and groups of triplets and sextuplets, accenting the first note of each group.

He would also have her accent each note of an arpeggio individually, beginning with the first, then the second, and so on.

KEEP YOUR EYE ON THE PRIZE

Schumann dismissed the idea of practicing scales and arpeggios for the sole purpose of developing technical prowess: “That is as reasonable as trying to recite the alphabet faster and faster every day. Find a better use for your time.”



We must remember that practicing scales and arpeggios is a means to an end rather than an end in itself. We train our fingers so that in performance we can focus on our musicality and expressivity rather than worry about whether or not our hands will fail us.

When we sit down at the piano to practice our scales and arpeggios, let’s remember, then, to keep our eye on the prize!

“PRACTICING MECHANICAL EXERCISES FOR MANY HOURS A DAY IS AS REASONABLE AS TRYING TO RECITE THE ALPHABET FASTER & FASTER EVERY DAY.” - ROBERT SCHUMANN

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

We hope you found these tips on scales and arpeggios helpful! If you're interested in learning more about piano technique, a perfect follow-up to this PDF would be **Garrick Ohlsson's lesson "On Touch"** where he teaches the crucial art of touch, or in other words, applying pressure to the keys. As he describes, the piano is "a box of decrescendos" and ultimately a note's dynamic level cannot be controlled once a key is depressed. Therefore, one must fool the ear into thinking one note is connected to another when playing crescendos or cantabile style.

To access Garrick Ohlsson's full lesson, head over to tonebase.co/piano or simply click the image below!





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