

Major Scales 101

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In this lesson we will begin with a basic A major scale:

The image shows the ascending A major scale on a guitar. The treble clef staff contains the notes: A4 (2nd fret), B4 (4th fret), C5 (5th fret), D5 (7th fret), E5 (7th fret), F#5 (9th fret), G#5 (10th fret), and A5 (12th fret). Below the staff, the strings are labeled T (Treble), A (Middle), and B (Bass). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below notes and 5-7 below fret numbers. The fingering sequence for the treble string is 2, 4, 1, 2, 4, 1, 3, 4, 1, 3, 4, 2, 4, 1, 2. The fingering sequence for the middle string is 4, 6, 7, 4, 6, 7. The fingering sequence for the bass string is 5, 7, 4, 5, 7, 4, 6, 7.

Mechanics

The mechanics of the above scale pattern make it an excellent scale for the beginning and intermediate guitar player. The scale never goes lower than your 4th fret and never higher than your seventh fret. Therefore we will finger this scale as follows:

- 4th fret – always 1st finger
- 5th fret – always 2nd finger
- 6th fret – always 3rd finger
- 7th fret – always 4th finger

A good exercise to do when you are not playing but just holding the guitar is to stretch your 4 left hand fingers along the 4th to 7th frets on a single string using the fingering given above (one finger per fret). Try this on all strings and feel the difference as you move from string to string. Try it in other 4 fret areas up and down the neck i.e. 2nd to 5th frets, 7th to 11th frets, etc.

When practicing the scale pay close attention to the following:

- Even tempo (use a metronome)
- Even Volume
- Good tone (play with tips of fingers, right ‘behind’ the fret with knuckles bent)

Once you are comfortable with the fingering of the scale, add the descending scale:

The image shows the descending A major scale on a guitar. The treble clef staff contains the notes: A5 (12th fret), G#5 (10th fret), F#5 (9th fret), E5 (7th fret), D5 (7th fret), C5 (5th fret), B4 (4th fret), and A4 (2nd fret). Below the staff, the strings are labeled T (Treble), A (Middle), and B (Bass). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below notes and 5-7 below fret numbers. The fingering sequence for the treble string is 2, 1, 4, 2, 4, 3, 1, 4, 3, 1, 4, 2, 1, 4, 2. The fingering sequence for the middle string is 5, 4, 7, 5, 7, 6, 4, 7, 6, 4. The fingering sequence for the bass string is 7, 5, 4, 7, 5, 4, 7, 5.

These scales are not only an excellent exercise for your fingers, but an excellent one for your ears. Chances are you've heard this scale enough times to recognize it (Do-Re-Mi-Fa-Sol-La-Ti-Do) so you will know when you are playing it correctly by the sound of it.

The Musical Alphabet

The musical alphabet goes from A-G and then starts over again on A.

Whole and Half Steps

Whole and half steps refer to the musical 'distance', or interval, between two notes. On the guitar the frets are placed a half step apart. Therefore, on the preceding scales (or any other music for that matter), the distance between frets 4 and 5 on the A string is a half step; the distance between frets 5 and 7 is a whole step. If you have access to a keyboard, whole and half steps are somewhat easier to see. Two white keys separated by a black key is a whole step. The interval between a white key and black key is a half step. Two white keys right next to each other are also half steps.

Note that E&F and B&C are the only two pairs of notes not separated by a black key. In other words, they are the only two pairs of notes in western music not separated by a half step. Remember this. It becomes important when you work on getting to know where the notes are on the fretboard.

Octaves

An octave is the distance between one note and the next occurrence of that note, for example the distance from A to the next A. Most scales are comprised of eight notes, therefore the term OCTave.

Roots

The root note of a scale is the note that the scale starts and ends on. So a one octave A scale goes from the root of A to the next A. Roots are also the tonal base of a chord, therefore the root of a C Major chord is a C, likewise the root of a C minor chord, C7 chord, C diminished chord, etc.

The Major Scale - Musically speaking

The major scale can be considered a musical foundation of sorts. All other scales in western music are derived from it. As with all scales, the major scale is comprised of a set pattern of whole and half steps:

Root – Whole – Whole – Half – Whole – Whole – Whole – Half.

Now repeat after me:

Root – Whole – Whole – Half – Whole – Whole – Whole – Half.

When you listen to a major scale and it sounds familiar, one reason is that your ear is familiar with this pattern. If you change any note in the scale it will sound different not only because of the different note, but because the series of whole and half steps changes. For instance if you 'flat' the third note of a major scale you will wind up with one of the minor scales (Melodic Minor) and the series of steps changes to:

Root – Whole – Half – Whole – Whole – Whole – Whole – Half.

If you play the A major scale on one string, the series of whole and half steps is much easier to see on the guitar:

T
A
B 0 2 4 5 7 9 11 12

See the whole vs. half steps ? Now look what happens when we ‘flat’ the third to create an A minor scale:

T
A
B 0 2 3 5 7 9 11 12

The above minor scale has a flatted third which changes the pattern of whole and half steps. All the various scales and modes (more on modes in another lesson) are defined by their respective series of whole and half steps (also known as intervals). Intervals are the building blocks of music.

Putting it all together

Because the musical structure of any given scale is the same, the physical pattern of that scale on the fretboard will also be the same regardless of what key you play the scale in. Therefore, once you are familiar with the physical pattern and sound of the A scale in this lesson; you can play the major scale in other keys simply by shifting where you start the pattern.

- G major – start on the third fret of the 6th string
- B major – start on the seventh fret of the 6th string
- C major – start on the eighth fret of the 6th string
- D major – start on the tenth fret of the 6th string

When you are ready, practice the major scale in all the above keys. Maybe even add C# major (you should be able to determine what fret that starts on by now). You will notice that the distance between the frets becomes smaller as you go ‘up’ the neck. Therefore the G major scale will stretch your fingers more than the D major scale.

The major scale is the first step to take in the journey of learning other scales. Practice it, have fun with it, you will be glad you did !