



# Dynamic

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## Piano Scales

### 10 Expert Tips

A thorough study of piano scales is vital to playing musically and with confidence.

Nonetheless, while virtually all piano music has scales literally left and right, all too many students view scales as needless tedium rather than essential elements of music's expressive vocabulary. Here are 10 practice tips for students and teachers:

1. **Begin with the black keys** (B major, D-flat, G-flat). The five black keys promote a natural position of the hand, since the longer fingers play the shorter (i.e., black) keys and vice versa. Chopin always started his students with these keys and ended with C major as the most physically difficult. Unfortunately, nowadays C major is almost without exception the first piano scale learned, since the most difficult to play is also the easiest to read. However, even Vladimir Horowitz made this observation about C major: With his reputation as the greatest virtuoso of his time (his sheer variety of touch at all speeds has hardly been excelled), whenever interviewers asked him to name the most difficult piece he ever played, he would offer one of two replies, either Liszt's startlingly difficult etude 'Feux follets' or the C major scale. He wasn't being entirely facetious.

2. **Practice chromatically rather than through the circle of fifths.** Chromatic progression has the advantage that the fingers are forced to adjust to a very different pattern from one scale to the next. Similarly, it's useful to practice *parallel* keys side-by-side. Thus, a great daily warm-up is: D-flat major, C-sharp minor; D major, D minor; E-flat major, E-flat minor, etc. Alternatively, you can progress backwards chromatically starting with B major and ending with C, as per Chopin's suggestion.

3. **Always practice musically!** This point cannot be stressed enough. It is absolutely vital that the mind and emotions be connected with your fingers at all times. There is no such thing as "just" a scale or "just" an arpeggio. Practicing musically means varying your touch and articulation, the intensity of the sound, and sometimes even the tempo within a scale. Thus, crescendo and decrescendo as well as accelerando and ritardando, however subtle, are all

expressive means that belong in the scale practice regimen of every pianist. Experiment with communicating various emotions simply through piano scales. Piano scales are at particular risk of sounding mechanical, and we need to do everything to make them as musical as possible.

**4. Develop an accurate inner pulse.** Practicing scales is one of the few areas in which regularly practicing with a metronome is desirable. The vast majority of piano students play scales very unevenly, and they cannot hear their unevenness. The metronome is therefore useful for correcting this problem. Nonetheless, it's important not to have to rely on it. Subtle, controlled fluctuations in tempo are very often a desirable effect. Musicians need to be equipped both to play strictly in time and to deviate from absolute time in a beautifully controlled manner. For scale practice, rhythmic evenness should be given by far the greatest emphasis. (I actually had to practice, rather extensively at that, playing scales **unevenly** to achieve a desired effect, only to be criticized by a colleague for "not having practiced my scales"!)

**5. Never play too fast.** Evenness is much more important than speed. Speed will come over time, all by itself, given proper concentration and regular work. Velocity is in any case never an end in itself, no matter how "showy" the music.

**6. You can't force anything.** Attempting to "force" your way to play something before your mind and body are able will always backfire. Thus, practicing scales slowly and evenly, without any excessive tension, will pave the way much more quickly to brilliant scales than will trying to play too fast too soon.

**7. Use the thumb properly.** A true, literal legato connection can only be achieved in slow to moderate tempi. At faster speeds trying to play *legatissimo* creates an awkward manipulation of the playing mechanism that inhibits muscular freedom. Instead, listen very carefully (as always!) to match the articulation of each and every note, without any unnecessary tension. More legato will come over time when practicing this way; however, a perfect legato is not necessarily desirable in the fastest tempos—only a legato effect.

**8. Practice different rhythmic groups.** Practice piano scales first in quarter notes, then eighths, then eighth-note triplets, then sixteenths. Even slightly accenting every fifth note can be a challenging change of pace for advanced students.

**9. Look straight ahead!** It's important to develop proper *proprioception*. That's a complicated word that simply means the awareness of the body in space, something that athletes and dancers have to often an astonishing degree. Musicians need this faculty as well, and the less we rely on watching our hands, the more secure becomes our playing. This

strategy has auxiliary benefits as well: Not only is looking up better for posture and muscular freedom (and hence tone production), but closing our eyes allows our minds to focus more on the sound, for the simple reason that there's less "processing" for our brains to do.

10. **Practice regularly.** Regular practice will accomplish significantly more in the long run than will general neglect interspersed with occasional heavy scale practice. I find that scales make for the best warm-up, both for the fingers and for the mind and ear. It's therefore recommendable to start off a practice session by carefully going through scales in all keys. As long as you work consistently it will take only a few minutes to keep the mechanism in shape.

By adhering to these guidelines you'll be certain to gain not just proficiency in piano scales but greater freedom of expression from your playing in general.

