

Pentatonics For The Mountain Dulcimer

by Dave Murray

Pentatonic scales have five notes. The pentatonic scales that are most pleasing to the most ears are *nonhemitonic* (no half steps). It is said that it's hard to hit a sour note on a diatonic scale. Nonhemitonic scales go a step farther, it's hard to hit a wrong note.

Major Pentatonic

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15
Mixolydian	I	II	III		V	VI			I	II	III		V	VI			I	II
Ionian	V	VI		I	II	III			V	VI		I	II	III			V	VI
Dorian 6+		V	VI		I	II	III		V	VI		I	II	III			V	VI
Lydian	II	III		V	VI		I	II	III		V	VI		I	II	III		V

This may be the most popular scale in the world. If you have a 6+ fret, pretend that you don't for a moment. Start at the nut (Mixolydian) and play the scale, but to not play any semitones (skinny fret spacing). You just played the major pentatonic scale. It's very easy to see starting there. An interesting thing about nonhemitonic pentatonic scales is that the two modes going counterclockwise on the circle of fifths will also have that same pentatonic scale. It will be less obvious since you will use a narrow fret spaced fret, but the interval is correct.

This means that you can find the major pentatonic scale at Lydian (fret 6), Ionian (fret 3), and Mixolydian (fret 0). If you have a 6+ fret, you can play Mixolydian from the Dorian (fret 4), so you can also play the major pentatonic scale there. Four keys that you can improvise, using this scale, with virtually any Major music, not to mention that there are many major pentatonic songs.

Blues Minor Pentatonic

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15
Aeolian	<i>bVII</i>	I		<i>bIII</i>	IV	V			<i>bVII</i>	I	<i>bIII</i>	IV	V				<i>bVII</i>	I
Locrian 6+		<i>bVII</i>	I		<i>bIII</i>	IV	<i>bV</i>	V		<i>bVII</i>	I		<i>bIII</i>	IV	<i>bV</i>	V		<i>bVII</i>
Dorian	IV	V		<i>bVII</i>	I	<i>bIII</i>			IV	V	<i>bIII</i>		I	<i>bIII</i>			IV	V
Phrygian	<i>bIII</i>	IV	V		<i>bVII</i>	I			<i>bIII</i>	IV	V		<i>bVII</i>	I			<i>bIII</i>	IV

The minor pentatonic scale is also very popular, and useful. It can be used for improvising on most minor songs, and it is often played in blues, jazz, and rock, over major chord structures. It can be most easily seen by dropping the semitones from the Phrygian mode at fret 5. Once again, since the two modes going counterclockwise on the circle of fifths also have the notes that you need, you can play the blues minor pentatonic scale from Aeolian (fret 1), Dorian (fret 4), and

Phrygian (fret 5). If you have a 6+ fret you can also use the Locrian (fret 2) for this scale. In addition, since the Locrian has a flat V, you can play a blues scale there.

Chinese Pentatonic

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6+	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	13+	14	15
Mixolydian	I	II		IV	V	VI			I	II		IV	V	VI			I	II
Aeolian 6+		I	II		IV	V	VI		I	II		IV	V		VI			I
Ionian	V	VI		I	II		IV		V	VI		I	II		IV		V	VI
Dorian	IV	V	VI		I	II			IV	V	VI		I	II			IV	V

The third useful nonhemitonic pentatonic scale, I call the Chinese pentatonic scale, since it sounds Oriental. The famous Japanese song Sakura can be played on this scale. The interesting thing about this scale is that it is neither major or minor, so it might work with any song, except perhaps an different pentatonic song.

It can most easily be found by dropping the semitones from the Dorian mode. Once again, the two modes going counterclockwise on the circle of fifths will work, so you can play this scale at Mixolydian (fret 0), Ionian (fret 1) and Dorian (fret 4). If you have a 6+ fret, you can also play it at the Aeolian (fret 1).