

XII. Pentatonic Scales

A. Formation

A “pentatonic” scale is simply any scale that consists of 5 notes. There are a few pentatonic scales that are more frequently used than most, and when someone speaks of a pentatonic scale, chances are, they are speaking about one of these.

The “Major Pentatonic Scale” is identical to a major scale with the 4th and 7th degrees omitted. This results in a very stable sonority because it does not possess any prime dissonance (i.e. no tritones, no minor 2nds, no major 7ths, and no minor 9ths).

The intervallic formula for the Major Pentatonic scale is: 1 2 3 5 6 1

So, a C major pentatonic scale consists of the following pitches: C D E G A C

It can also be thought of as resulting from the first 5 notes of a cycle of 5ths. (E A D G C)

There are two pentatonic scales that are often called “Minor Pentatonic” scales. The first one is actually a mode, or rotation, of the major pentatonic scale. If you begin the C major pentatonic scale on A, you will have the A Minor Pentatonic scale. (A C D E G A) This is the scale that I will be referring to when I speak of the “Minor Pentatonic Scale”.

The intervallic formula for the Minor Pentatonic scale is: 1 \flat 3 4 5 \flat 7 1

So a C minor pentatonic scale consists of the following notes: C E \flat F G B \flat C

C minor pentatonic is the same pitch collection as the E \flat major pentatonic scale.

The relationship between the major pentatonic scale and its relative minor pentatonic scale is the same relationship that the major scale has to its relative minor scale. Eg. C major is relative to A minor and visa versa.

The image displays four pentatonic scales on a grand staff (treble and bass clefs).
1. **C Major Pentatonic**: Treble clef, notes C4, D4, E4, G4, A4, C5. Fingerings: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 1.
2. **A Minor Pentatonic**: Treble clef, notes A3, C4, D4, E4, G4, A4. Fingerings: 1, \flat 3, 4, 5, \flat 7, 1.
3. **C Minor Pentatonic**: Bass clef, notes C3, E \flat 3, F3, G3, B \flat 3, C4. Fingerings: 1, \flat 3, 4, 5, \flat 7, 1.
4. **E \flat Major Pentatonic**: Bass clef, notes E \flat 3, G3, A3, B3, C4, E \flat 4. Fingerings: 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 1.

Notice that the notes of C maj pent are the same as those in C6(add9) and the notes of A min pent are the same as those in Am7(11). C min pent = Cm7(9) and E \flat maj pent = E \flat 6(9).

The other pentatonic scale that is sometimes called a “minor pentatonic” has the following intervallic formula:

1 2 \flat 3 5 6 1

This is like a major pentatonic scale with a flatted 3rd.

I will not be referring to this scale very often within this book, and if I do, I will refer to it by its intervallic formula rather than as the “minor pentatonic scale”.

Note: Jerry Bergonzi's book about pentatonic scales has a wealth of material dealing with pentatonic scale-types that I will not be covering here. All his books are great. Check them out.

Here is the position-style fingering for C major pentatonic, and A minor pentatonic, in Position V.

Position V C major pentatonic scale: C5 (4), D5 (1), E5 (3), F5 (1), G5 (3), A5 (1), B5 (4), C6 (1), D6 (3), E6 (1), F6 (3), G6 (1), A6 (3), B6 (1), C7 (4).
 Position V A minor pentatonic scale: A5 (4), G5 (1), F5 (3), E5 (1), D5 (3), C5 (1), B4 (4), A4 (1), G4 (3), F4 (1), E4 (3), D4 (1), C4 (4).

This is one of the most common finger patterns on the guitar, period. It has been used in every rock and blues guitar solo under the sun (mostly in the min pent form) because it is so easy to play, but also because it simply sounds good! Learn it well.

Here are a few of the more popular position-style fingerings for the C major pentatonic, and A minor pentatonic, scales.

Position II C major pentatonic scale: C4 (2), D4 (4), E4 (1), F4 (4), G4 (1), A4 (4), B4 (2), C5 (4), D5 (2), E5 (4), F5 (2), G5 (4), A5 (1), B5 (4), C6 (2).
 Position II A minor pentatonic scale: A4 (4), G4 (1), F4 (3), E4 (1), D4 (3), C4 (1), B3 (4), A3 (1), G3 (3), F3 (1), E3 (3), D3 (1), C3 (4).

Position VII C major pentatonic scale: C5 (2), D5 (4), E5 (1), F5 (4), G5 (1), A5 (4), B5 (2), C6 (4), D6 (2), E6 (4), F6 (2), G6 (4), A6 (1), B6 (4), C7 (2).
 Position VII A minor pentatonic scale: A5 (4), G5 (1), F5 (3), E5 (1), D5 (3), C5 (1), B4 (4), A4 (1), G4 (3), F4 (1), E4 (3), D4 (1), C4 (4).

Position X C major pentatonic scale: C5 (1), D5 (3), E5 (1), F5 (3), G5 (1), A5 (3), B5 (1), C6 (3), D6 (1), E6 (3), F6 (1), G6 (3), A6 (1), B6 (3), C7 (1).
 Position X A minor pentatonic scale: A5 (3), G5 (1), F5 (3), E5 (1), D5 (3), C5 (1), B4 (4), A4 (1), G4 (3), F4 (1), E4 (3), D4 (1), C4 (4).

Position XII C major pentatonic scale: C5 (4), D5 (1), E5 (3), F5 (1), G5 (3), A5 (1), B5 (4), C6 (1), D6 (3), E6 (1), F6 (3), G6 (1), A6 (3), B6 (1), C7 (4).
 Position XII A minor pentatonic scale: A5 (4), G5 (1), F5 (3), E5 (1), D5 (3), C5 (1), B4 (4), A4 (1), G4 (3), F4 (1), E4 (3), D4 (1), C4 (4).

This last one is quite popular as well with rock/blues players, and everyone else.

- Learn to play the major/minor pentatonics in every other position.
- Learn them on single strings also.
- Get to know where these notes lie everywhere on the fret board.