



Lesson: Pentatonic Composition Activity

OVERVIEW

This lesson will introduce students to the pentatonic scale and guide them through the process of creating short melodies that can be performed with those of other students.

LEARNING GOALS

Students will:

- Consider how the elements of music convey musical affect.
- Compose a variation of a familiar theme using traditional musical notation.

RESOURCES & MATERIALS

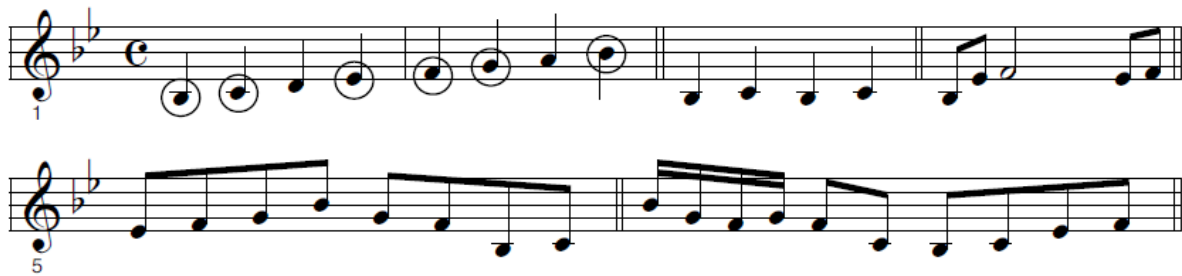
- [Pentatonic Scales](#) reading
- [Pentatonic Composition Worksheet](#)

PROCESS

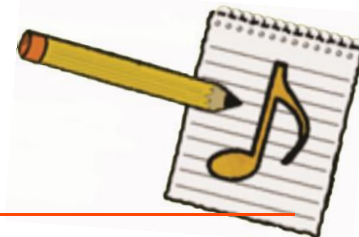
1. Have students read the [Pentatonic Scales](#) reading aloud or individually. Watch the Bobby McFerrin video.
2. Select a concert key with which the band is familiar and ask each student to write out the scale appropriately transposed for their instrument on their [Pentatonic Composition Worksheet](#).
3. After completing the scale, ask students to circle the first, second, fourth, fifth, and sixth notes of the scale.
4. Then ask students to write four short melodic patterns in 4/4 time. The first melody should use two of the circled notes, the second melody should use three, the third melody four, and the fourth melody all five of the circled notes. The melodies should utilize notes of both longer and shorter duration.
5. Once the students complete their written melodies, the teacher may ask several different students to perform combinations of their two-, three-, four-, and five-note melodies together. Some of the melodies for the various instruments may be copied on a transparency for use at a later rehearsal so that entire sections of the band may perform them together.

- Students may also use the circled scale notes to improvise melodies while other sections of the band perform the written melodies, especially the melodies containing a more limited number of notes or notes of longer durations.

Example:



Pentatonic Scales



In measures 1 – 11 of *A+: A Precise Prelude and An “Excellent” March*, composer Thomas C. Duffy asks the woodwinds to play a **pentatonic** scale.

A pentatonic scale is a scale consisting of five-notes, instead of the traditional seven note scale (such as the major and minor scales). There are many different pentatonic scales found in music around the world. The most common pentatonic scale has three whole steps and two minor thirds within an octave. Below is an example of this kind of pentatonic scale, starting on middle C:



You can also play a pentatonic scale by playing just the black keys on a piano.

You might notice that when you play a pentatonic scale, all of the notes sound “good” together. Try making up songs alone or with a friend using the pentatonic scale.

Many folk songs from around the world are based on the pentatonic scale. A few songs you might recognize are *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*; *The Bonnie Banks o’ Loch Lomond*; *Oh, Susannah* and *Goodbye, Old Paint*. Can you think of any other songs you know that use the pentatonic scale?

Several classical composers have also used pentatonic melodies in their music. French composer Claude Debussy (1862-1918) was one of the first Western composers to extensively use pentatonic scales in his music. His work *Estampe: Pagodes* is almost completely composed using pentatonic scales.

Two other examples of pentatonic scales in classical music: Tchaikovsky’s *The Magic Castle* (first 16 measures) and Ravel’s *Passacaille* from his *Piano Trio*.

In this video, composer Bobby McFerrin and an audience sing an **improvised** melody using the pentatonic scale:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ne6tB2KiZuk>



Name _____

PENTATONIC COMPOSITION WORKSHEET

Write your **two-note** melody here:

Write your **three-note** melody here:

Write your **four-note** melody here:

Write your **five-note** melody here:

Don't forget to include a clef and a key signature!