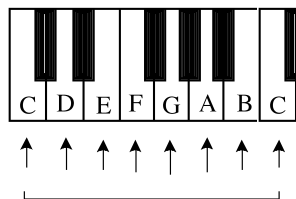


## THE MAJOR SCALE

A **major scale** is a selection of **eight** notes arranged in a particular order of half and whole steps. It is usually heard and recognized in ascending order. The **Major Scale** is one of the most fundamental musical entities and most music we know utilizes this scale (or the minor scale...stay tuned).

There is, as we should have come to expect, more than one way to understand how a major scale is put together. Before we look at the science of the scale, let's return to the keyboard. It is no coincidence that if we play from C up to the next C (i.e. the white keys) we will have played a C major scale. So the scale gets its particular name from its first note (called the **Tonic**—which is also the *last* note in the scale).



*This is probably not the first time you have heard this sequence of notes*

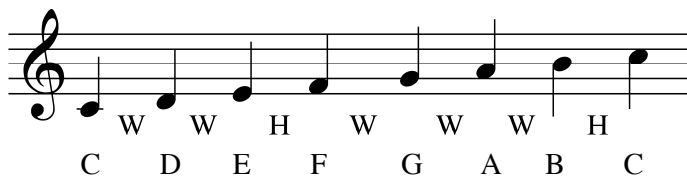
Once you familiarize yourself with this sound (ascending and descending), notice some important facts:

- With the exception of the tonic note, **each note name is used once and only once**.
- There is a particular arrangement of half (H) and whole (W) steps from one to the next:  
W<sup>h</sup>W<sup>h</sup>W<sup>h</sup>W<sup>h</sup>H



- Each note in the scale represents a different scale degree (1-8). The half steps are between degrees 3-4 and 7-8.

Here is how the ascending C Major scale looks in notated form:



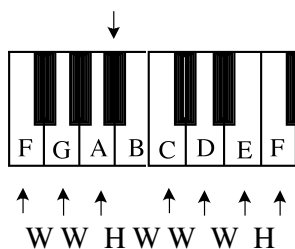
## KEYS

Pieces of music tend to limit the number of scales they use similarly to how paintings may limit their colors. This means that the notes used in a song tend to be limited to the notes belonging to a particular scale. Instead of saying that a song is using a particular scale (and therefore a particular set of notes), we describe the song as being in a particular **Key**. The key has the same name as the primary scale used. The Beatles' *Let it Be* is in the key of C Major ("CM"), for example. Most of the notes in that song are from the C Major scale (with a few deviations). This is one example of the significance and applicability of the major scale...and why it is so important to understand.

## SCALES USING BLACK NOTES (FLATS)

You may have noticed that the C Major scale does not use any black notes. Since the scale actually existed first (chronologically), we might appreciate that the white notes were patterned after that scale. But a major scale can start from any other note (and have any note as the tonic). Since the major scale is based on a pattern of half and whole steps (and NOT simply a sequence of white notes), a major scale that has a different tonic than C Major will require the use of black notes (accidentals).

If we start a major scale from F and adhere to the WWHWWWH pattern, we get the following sequence:  
F G A B $\flat$  C D E (F)



One good question that may arise is: why is the black note in the above scale a B $\flat$  and not an A $\sharp$ ? The answer is that a scale, for the sake of consistency and clarity, **uses each letter only once**. In the case of F Major, the A $\sharp$  was already used as the third note of the scale. The successive note (the fourth note in the scale), regardless of it being white or black, will be some kind of B (simply because B always follows A). So we can say that the FM scale has one flat note (B $\flat$ ).

The scale that has two flat notes (we say "two flats") is B $\flat$ .

*Notice that either  $\sharp$  or  $\flat$ , the notes successively fill in each line and space from B to B.*



(Remember Enharmonic Equivalence? You could rename this scale A $\sharp$ M and the notes would be A $\sharp$ , B $\sharp$ , C $\times$ , D $\sharp$ , E $\sharp$ , F $\times$ , G $\times$ , A $\sharp$  – which is more confusing than B $\flat$ , C, D, E $\flat$ , F, G, A – but we will return to this issue later. Don't think more about it now).

Notice that the scale with two flats (B $\flat$ M) has inherited the flat note (B $\flat$ ) that was in the FM scale. It is as if the B $\flat$ M scale is the addition of one flat to the FM scale. The scale with three flats (E $\flat$ ) will have the two flats from the B $\flat$ M scale, plus A $\flat$ .



*E $\flat$  Major*

**Play these different scales. While they are different in some ways, they also sound the same because they follow the same pattern of half and whole steps. Each scale follows the same sequence of notes.**

## SCALES USING SHARPS

A major scale never mixes accidentals. Either there will be no accidentals (C Major only) or there will be only flats or only sharps.

The scale with one sharp is GM:



Like the "flat" scales, it follows the same WWHWWWH pattern.

The scale with two sharps is DM:



Three sharps, AM:



Notice that like the flat scales, each successive sharp scale incorporates the previous scales' accidentals.