Violin

Scales and Arpeggios: Why and How

by Sally O'Reilly

I'm back on my soapbox, folks! Recently I confronted a situation with a graduate student from a highly-regarded school who had never learned scales and arpeggios in a methodical way. The notion that all major scales are constructed identically and may be played with the same finger patterns was foreign to her. She had begun memorizing scales for me by thinking individual pitches rather than intervallic relationships—whole step, whole step, half step, whole, whole, whole, half. (How *did* she survive freshman theory!?!) At the rate she was going, note by note, she'd be on Social Security before she completed minor scales!

She could play a three-octave C Major Scale, so I moved her back to B♭ and had her use the same fingering on each scale, moving chromatically scale by scale up to G♭. Because of their positions, G, A♭ and A use different finger patterns. She was shocked to realize that once you know *one* scale, you *ought* to know them all. Yet through all the Carl Flesch three octave scales, she had not made the connection.

Back to the drawing board! What was different in the way my preparatory students learn scales from the process at an advanced level? With my elementary-age students, I use Hrimaly *Scales* because I value the progressive presentation. While he begins with relative major and minor scales and arpeggios in first position, first in large note values (I dispense with the rhythms) and then in sixteenth notes, he presents major and minor scales in separate groups in two octaves, moving chromatically up the G string as the starting point. This approach emphasizes a consistent finger pattern for each group of scales. I realize that this is the reason that students I train at this early level have a clear understanding of scale construction based on intervals and finger relationships. My students are required to mark the half steps in each scale. I also use *Books I* through *IV* of Maia Bang, published by Carl Fischer, as a fundamental method. It contains scales and arpeggios in the first five positions which serve as a review for Hrimaly *Scales*.

For years, I have had my older students go through Carl Flesch *Scale System* in the following way: Nos. 1–4 in all twenty four keys; No. 5 in all twenty-four keys; Sixths (No. 7) in all major keys, then minors; Octaves, Tenths, and fingered octaves the same way. I did this assuming that college students who come to me have a basic comprehension of scales. Some do. Some don't. So I am going to begin to teach scales the say I teach Sixths and Thirds — majors first, minors second.

By the way, I teach Sixths before Thirds because they sound the way they are fingered. Majors are a whole step apart. Minors are a half step. Thirds, alas! are the opposite of the way they sound, and they *cannot be played by ear*. (If they are, please let me know beforehand so that I may flee!) I always preface the study of double-stops with Sevcik *Op. 9*, a wonderfully ordered and graduated exploration of all intervals.

It is important to make scales and arpeggios a regular part of every lesson. My mother used a three-minute egg-timer with her students. They had to get through all their scales before the sand ran out. If they failed, they had to stop and try again at the next lesson. Remember: Students practice *only* the material we hear. If it is important enough to assign, it *must* be important enough to hear.

Scales and arpeggios need to be the cornerstone of every responsible warm-up. Josef Gingold reminded his pupils frequently that playing through the circle of fifths gave a person the opportunity to play in *every* key *every* day. This lessens the jolt of finding oneself in a piece in F♯ minor — something that *will* happen eventually.

Music is based on scales and arpeggios. It is our duty to our students to build a strong foundation for them at every level and to impress upon them the necessity of including scales and arpeggios in their daily routine for the rest of their playing lives.

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