



Don't Buy The Big Myth About The C Major Scale

article by Michael Smolens ©2021

All too often beginning piano students are asked to work on the C major scale. Why? Likely, because *their* teacher insisted that they do that as a beginner. This is a huge mistake! There is a whole body of practices that need to be done first, *before scales*, that will help a student eliminate significant problems in the future, such as: twisting, collapsing, or over-straightening wrists, key bedding, blurring, thrusting, recoiling, hovering, or collapsing their last finger joints.

The preparation to get a great sound and handle these issues are best done in fixed 5-note groups (hands separately and two octaves apart, which mirrors our body frame) that gradually become more and more physically challenging — C major is easiest for both hands, while Bb major (right hand) and B minor (left hand) are the most difficult. After that, playing 6-note groups with the same intention and THEN “scale fragments” — basically 4 or 5-note excerpts of scales that focus on 2 or 3 notes right before and after a thumb “under and over” move. Again, hands separately because beginners invariably have different tendencies and issues with each hand. After that has been done, then full scales in one-octave (and then two-octaves) can be taken on slowly, and again, hands separately. I have seen many beginning students of all ages (some who have had some previous training) arrive at their first lesson, and volunteer to play two-octave scales in C major in both hands because *they thought that that was expected of them*. They are never comfortable doing this, the playing is not very coherent, and it's a great source of stress for them. Rightfully so! (This is also the first thing that a non-piano music major at a university or conservatory is expected to do).

Beginners who try to play complete scales (like C major) have been sold a Big Lie. They haven't been told the truth about how the body actually builds a new skill — very incrementally and with lots of supervision. From a theory standpoint, the C major scale is quite handy for getting a good view of different scales and chord progressions, as well as a general lay of the land. That's all well and fine, but for a beginner to play? I don't think so. In reality, the C major scale is one of the hardest major scales to learn because there are no black notes to pivot on when doing thumb under-and-over moves. It is far more encouraging (and humane) to work on major scales that feel balanced in the hand, namely, A major and Eb major. Those two scales each have 3 black notes that allow thumb under-and-over moves to feel prepared and balanced.

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The myth that C is the most appropriate major scale for a beginner can be seen with other scales, too. Take for example, the minor blues scale (1-b3-4-#4-5-b7). It, along with the Dorian scale (one of our four traditional minor scales, which uses 1-2-b3-4-5-6-b7), is the most popular scale that teachers use to introduce improvisation. Typically, that blues scale is usually first taught in C. Why? If you try to play the minor blues scale (in closed position 5-note groups) on every white note, you would quickly discover that starting on C is the most challenging key — it's the most cramped key with its 3 black notes. Yes, the key of F uses 3 black notes, but they are more spread out, and the other keys use 2 black notes (G) or only 1 black note (A, E, D, and B). Nearly half of my adult male students have difficulty with C because of the lack of space in the black note area. It is far better to start with A, E, or D for the minor blues scale because they use only one accidental.

So again, why are some scales assumed to be easiest starting on C? Maybe because teachers are trying to address a new playing challenge AND theory at the same time. I do think it's important to separate the theoretical utility of that key with its inherent physical difficulty for beginning (and intermediate) students. Thankfully, the chords in that key are mercifully simple . . .