

Learning to love scales

Niall O’Riordan *on musical ways to master technique*

Scales and arpeggios are the foundation of a solid technique. I believe the way people practise scales is part of the reason why some dislike them. They are often practised in an unmusical and mechanical way with little expression or character, and without any sense of virtuosity. I have recently been wondering where this apathy originates. I’ve experienced both extremes of the spectrum, moving from disliking them, simply because I couldn’t play them well to really beginning to love practising scales because of the very audible benefits I began to experience. Now I can easily spend one to two hours practising scales and actually enjoy it more than practising a problem area in a piece of music. When you start to sound good as you play your scales it becomes exciting - and sometimes even a bit of an obsession. Learning new music takes far less time because you already have the technique before you begin. Trevor Wye correctly points out that when you practise scales and arpeggios you are also learning the basis of the majority of flute repertoire, so it is time very well spent.

Some ideas about scale practice

It is not simply about playing the right notes

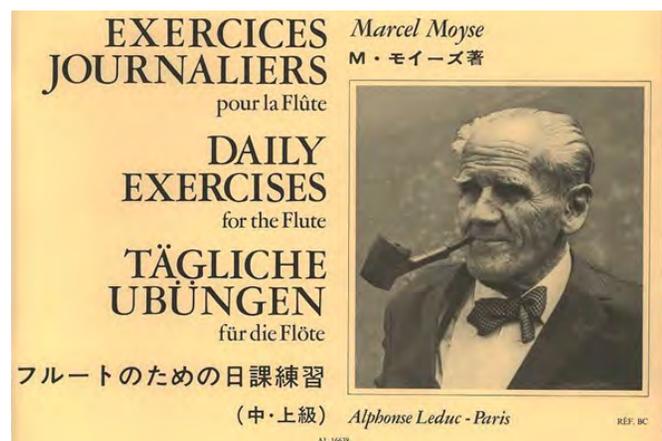
In the early years of learning our scales we are rewarded for playing all the right notes. Too often, this is where we end up getting stuck. The first step in practising scales is, of course, to play all the right notes; but this is not why we practise them — it is just the beginning. Get out of that mindset, then the real work can begin: developing a nice touch on the keys, developing an even sound over the range of the instrument, playing quickly and virtuosically, playing slowly and sensitively with a good legato, developing your articulation, tone colour and dynamic control, playing with different characters and moods. These are among the many aspects we can explore within our scale practice. Scales should always sound like music.

Inspire by example

There are many stories in our musical community where players describe the moment they first heard famous teachers practising scales and the inspiration they gleaned from it. I have heard such stories of Gaubert, Moysé, and Geoffrey Gilbert, and have experienced it myself with Sir James Galway. Until I heard how scales could really be played, I had little motivation to work on them myself. I credit my much of my understanding of this whole topic to the teaching of Sir James Galway. We often hear virtuosity in performances by fine players but rarely

get to hear the detail of the methods they used to get there, yet this inspiration can be vitally important.

Not one person that I teach is apathetic towards scales. I always demonstrate the scales on which my students are working to give them an idea of the possibilities, character and musicality that can be cultivated. None of this can be seen on the written page of a scale book and, therefore, I feel it is an essential part of the process. Recently I started playing games with some of my students: we made a deal that I could not ask them any scale I couldn’t play myself over the range either three or four times in one breath. They got to hear me improve, and they also got to hear that I, too am working on just the same things that they are, only at a different level. They also hear me succeed and fail; it is good not to pretend we are perfect to our students.



Stick to a scale method and a system

My favourite scale book is Moysé’s *Daily Exercises*. Trevor Wye’s *Daily Exercises* are also a really good choice (my only reservation with this book is that the print is rather small), and so is the Altès method, which was favoured by Rampal and Marion. Scales need to have a rhythmic symmetry that makes them feel like a piece of music and not something abstract. In the early stages, a problem with practising a one octave scale is that it doesn’t feel rhythmically anchored in a musical way; I think there are better ways of playing them, which I have given in figure 1. These alternatives provide more scope for musicality

and character. Some other scale methods extend the scales over the whole range of the instrument, and this can also give an unresolved feeling because of the way the extra notes fit into the sequence. It is for this reason that I prefer practising according to the Altès method of organising scales in thirds in 3/8; this can create a more musical result.

Should we extend them up beyond B^{'''} and C^{'''}?

This is your choice; here are my observations. I currently only practice up as far as B, in line with Moyses's *Daily Exercises* in which all the scales extend to either Bb or B. Trevor Wye provides the extensions in brackets, which is useful. There are of course benefits to extending them further, but it could be that just extending to B is challenge enough. Why not push on further once you have mastered this, instead of setting yourself up for early disappointment?

From memory?

It's good to have your scales committed to memory, but first memorise the patterns of the system you are currently working from. In the beginning, learn to read them: the Royal Academy of Music has recognised the benefits of doing this, insofar as it can greatly help sight-reading. At the Academy, students are permitted to use the book in their technical exams.

Character

Take a piece of music and play all your scales adopting its character and mood, for example, choosing the opening scale in Mozart's D major concerto or the famous solo in *Daphnis et Chloé* by Ravel. Use pieces of music to inspire how you approach your scales. You will discover that different keys provide different challenges for you to overcome.

Prelude and improvise

Making up little preludes and improvising is also an important aspect of the scale journey. Use the scales to explore your emotions and the instrument. Use them as tools to express yourself. Make them your own.

Where to begin?

Begin where you are. No matter what level you are at, I always think it's a good idea to have the idea of playing the scales over the full range of flute in mind. It is never too early to begin this approach, and I have outlined some ideas for you in the examples that follow. The examples are intended to show a method of approaching Moyses's *Daily Exercises*, but can be applied to any method. The first example shows F major scale over the full of the range of flute up to Bb^{'''}. This is followed by various learning strategies which will eventually help you master this scale. In 2a-c, I begin on G^{''}, thus gradually extending the scale upwards. By following this approach, we soon cover the full range.

Not enough time?

Take your time with this, exploring each of the five steps. Don't try to play all the scales in one go; detailed practice is the

key to improvement. It is better to pick just a few scales a day and to really practise them, rather than skimming over a large quantity. For this reason I find it very useful to set my alarm for 20 min and then begin working through the cycle of fifths. I practice the scales I'm working on in great detail and at the end of the 20 min, I take note of which scales I have practised so that later I can take up where I left off. Depending on your own schedule, you can decide how long you want to spend each day practising your scales, but I recommend 20 minute time blocks, marked out with an alarm.

Embouchure

Playing scales with a good tone quality is vital. If you start a scale passage with an out of focus tone, it will just spread through that passage. Start with a good tone and instead spread this through the passage. 'Some people start and end with a good tone, they wiggle their fingers and forget about what's in between' Sir James pointed out to me in a lesson, continuing, 'they hope it will miraculously get better, but you have to make it better.'

You will note in my examples that I add a little stress on the beginning of each group. Use this note to set your embouchure and find your good tone at the beginning of each group. In *Further Scale Ideas*, you will see some suggestions on how to explore this F major scale in a more detailed way. Beginning the scale in different registers or starting by descending both provide challenges for the embouchure. Once you have mastered this, you can also begin practising the F major scale beginning on other notes of the scale. There are similar examples in Taffanel and Gaubert method (take a look at EJ 3).

Working on your scales in this systematic way is really an investment in your playing, so don't procrastinate - start today and reap the benefits.

More from Niall at www.niallflute.com and @Niall_ORiordan
Special thanks to Tom Miller for his help in notating the examples overleaf.

OTHER RESOURCES

Other useful scales resources based on Moyses can be found at www.jennifercluff.blogspot.co.uk/2011/09/james-galway-morning-scale-class.html

This site provides downloadable pdfs of sections of *Exercices Journaliers* simplified for novice and intermediate players, as well as a less taxing revision of Moyses's proposed practice schedule.

A simple method for scale practice as suggested by Sir James Galway is published at <http://www.larrykrantz.com/5notes.htm>

The technique books referred to in this article are:
Marcel Moyses, *Exercices Journaliers* (Leduc)
Trevor Wye, *Complete Daily Exercises* (Novello)
Taffanel and Gaubert, *17 Daily Exercises* (Leduc)

Niall O’Riordan’s ‘Love Your Scales’ suggestions

Further Scale Ideas

F major scales over the range ascending and descending



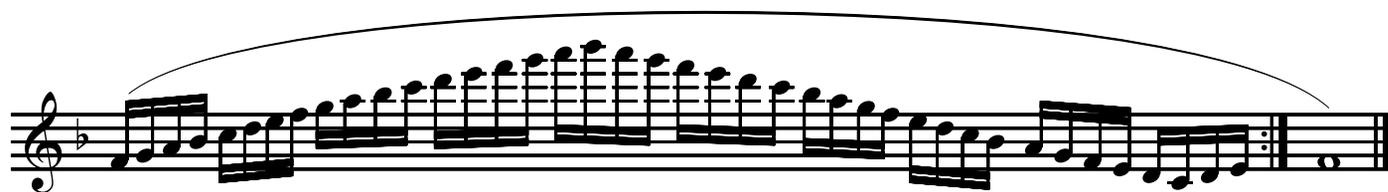
Four staves of musical notation, each showing an F major scale (one flat) over the range ascending and descending. The scales are written in treble clef and include repeat signs at the beginning and end of each line.

Fig. 1



Three staves of musical notation, each showing an alternative scale pattern in F major (one flat) over the range ascending and descending. The patterns are labeled 'Why?', 'Why Not', and 'or'.

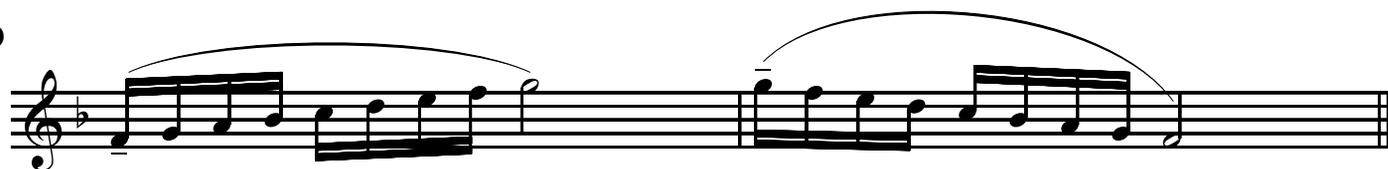
Approaching Moyse Daily Exercises



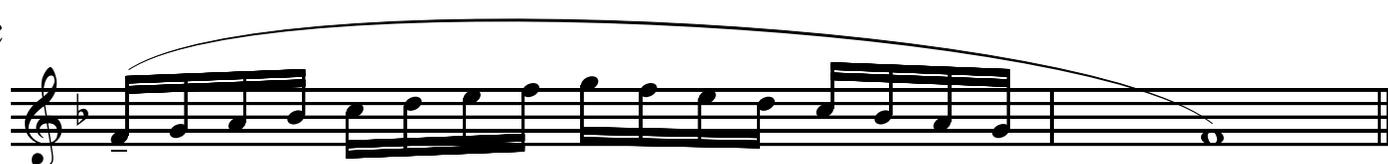
1a



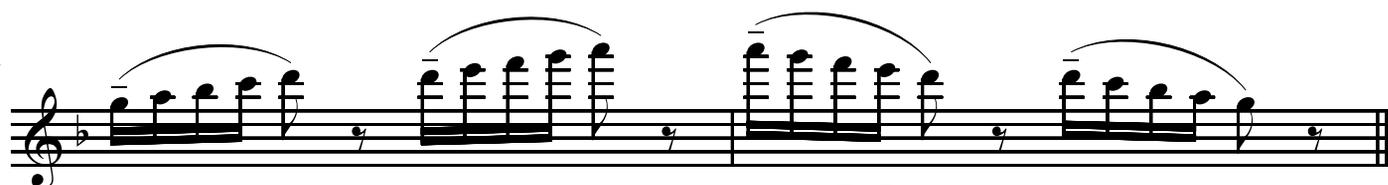
1b



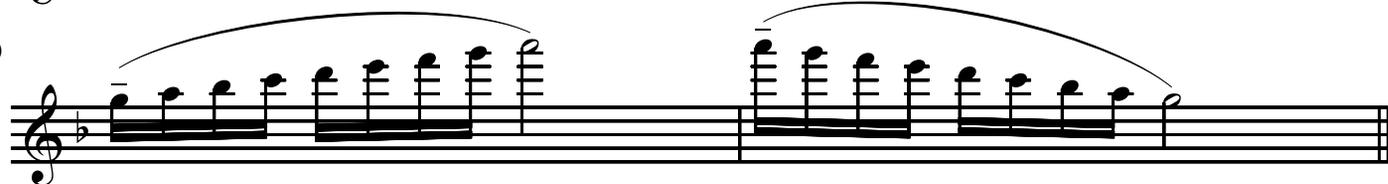
1c



2a



2b



2c



1. Add steps 1 and 2 together (i.e., playing from F^I to A^{III}), working through the rhythms that correspond to letters a, b, and c.
2. Apply the same working principles to the scale over the range of the flute, as given at the top of the page.
3. Gradually increase the speed, eventually working towards repeating the whole scale two to four times in one breath.