

Plectrum Banjo Technical Studies: Major Scales in Chromatic Order

Here is a scale exercise that blows my mind somewhat (and proves several points). At first glance, I'm sure you will just about faint, quickly close this PDF, and pretend you never opened it in the first place; scroll down and take a quick look now, then *please* come back to the text!

“You want me to do what?”

Trust me, that's how I would have reacted not too long ago! But I didn't *read* it to learn it; I figured it out logically, *then* wrote it down (and realized just how daunting it *looks*). This is a *simple* scale exercise that all wind and keyboard instruments use as a way to learn the scales in all keys (in rapid-fire order); on those instruments, each scale has its own unique—and often quite challenging—fingering pattern.

On the plectrum banjo, every scale shown is fingered *exactly the same way* (as clearly shown in the TAB; think TAB is a “crutch?” Would you have even *tried* this without it?); just move up one fret at a time and play the same 3-2-3 scale pattern in every key—C, Db, D, Eb, E, F, F#, G, Ab, A, Bb, B, C. Learn it *once* (in the safe key of C), then play it in *all* keys! This should beg the question, “*Why play every one of them if they are all the same?*” Ah, but they're *not!* Let me count the ways they are “different”:

- When learning to play “by ear,” you must play in all keys to learn to *hear* them! Ab *sounds different* than C!
- They each have their own key signature and set of seven notes; if you have any desire to learn to read music, this is quite important. Learning the simple *physical* pattern is a great back-door approach to learning the complex *theory* behind it.
- If you are a “position player” (using the position markers for *visual* reference), you will have to abandon that limiting habit to play these. Education experts call this “pattern breaking.”
- When's the last time you played *anything* in F#? Playing this simple exercise, you will play notes you have never played before! You will be able to honestly say, “*Of course I know how to play in F#; don't you?*” Besides being a tangible confidence-booster, this of course proves that—on the plectrum banjo at least—“key” does not really matter.

This last point is more important than you may think. . . I can't count the number of banjo players who have told me “*oh, I don't get into any of that theory stuff; I just want to have fun.*” What this tells *me* is that the person has no confidence in their abilities, or thinks that because it's “music theory,” it's automatically *beyond them* and not worth their time! “*I don't do it*” = “*I don't understand*” = “*I'm too dumb to learn this.*” You would be amazed at how “fun” it is to *play well* and *understand* what you're doing!

If nothing else, this exercise will prove to you that there really is *no mystery* to playing in other keys—just move to another area of the fretboard. And if you can *play* there, I bet you can *learn about it* too!

I didn't include a tempo for this, but you should play it with a metronome to improve your sense of time. I recommend 80 BPM to start with (once you have memorized the pattern), then work up your speed (and accuracy!) from there.

MAJOR SCALES IN CHROMATIC ORDER

C **Db**

1 2 4 1 3 1 3 4 2 4 1 ... same fingering throughout

D B G C 5 7 9 6 8 7 9 10 8 9 5 6 8 10 7 9 8 10 11 9 10 6

D **Eb**

7 9 11 8 10 9 11 12 10 11 7 8 10 12 9 11 10 12 13 11 12 8

E **F**

9 11 13 10 12 11 13 14 12 13 9 10 12 14 11 13 12 14 15 13 14 10

F# **G**

11 13 15 12 14 13 15 16 14 15 11 12 14 16 13 15 14 16 17 15 16 12

Ab **A**

13 15 17 14 16 15 17 18 16 17 13 14 16 18 15 17 16 18 19 17 18 14

Bb **B**

15 17 19 16 18 17 19 20 18 19 15 16 18 20 17 19 18 20 21 19 20 16

C

17 19 21 18 20 19 21 22 20 21 17