

# **Pentascle Magic**

## About the Book

Pentascles are important for several reasons.

As a finger exercise, the practicing of pentascles can help students focus on curved fingers, a rounded arch of the hand, and relaxed wrists, arms and shoulders. Anytime a student is having physical issues at the piano, it's always nice to go back to simple five-finger patterns played slowly and with concentrated focus.

As an introduction to theory, pentascles contain the root notes of the primary chords I, IV and V, as well as the notes necessary for building triads. When students are struggling to remember the notes of a particular triad, they simply need to be reminded to play the appropriate pentascale they are able to find the chord in root position right away.

As a tool for keyboard fluency, pentascles give students the confidence to play all major and minor keys, not just the keys they most frequently encounter in their method books. Once they understand how to play five-finger patterns, it's an easy extension to add the lower leading note, and then the upper two notes to complete the scale.

When I was growing up, I played a lot by ear and improvised in – you guessed it – C, F, G, and D major. I still have a mental block about improvising in “difficult” keys. But what are the “difficult” keys, really? It's just a label I've assigned in my mind, reinforced by the fact that I never encountered pieces in those keys until I was playing more advanced music. What a wonderful gift it would be to give students the open-mindedness to embrace all keys right from the very beginning!

## The Pentascale Song

This song was written as an entry in the “Teaching Pieces” category of the Alberta Piano Teacher's Association annual Creative Writing Competition. I wanted a song with lyrics which would reinforce the pattern of whole steps and half steps as well as the solfège syllable names. I also wanted a piece which would force students to establish a strong beat right at the start. “Do, do, ready, go” seemed the perfect way to get students to think first before playing.

When I teach pentascles, I begin by discussing whole steps and half steps. We use five identical items and place them on the floor a whole step apart (room for one in between), or a half step apart (touching), then in the whole step, whole step, half step, whole step combination. We walk the pentascale pattern found on page 27 in the book. We locate whole steps and half steps on the piano keyboard. We talk about “The Sound of Music” and the terms “*do, re, mi, fa, so.*” We sing the words to “The Pentascale Song” out loud while I play.

The Pentascale Song is intended to be a progressive piece. Students should play the RH alone first. The teacher can play the LH steady beat. Then they can swap places. Finally, have the student play the RH while you gently hold the second finger of his LH and help him play both hands together. It probably won't go smoothly the first time, but that's okay. The important thing is that the student feels the beat. Each time he plays the song in a different key, his coordination will improve.

Always sing out loud together. Don't worry about matching pitch. At this level, it is more important to gain the confidence (and the ability) to sing aloud while playing.

The Pentascale Song is easily memorized, however the piece is written twelve times so that students can visually see the notes required for each pentascale and have the chance to color in the appropriate keys on the top of each page. Plus there's the added benefit of getting twelve congratulatory stickers!

The decision not to write in C<sup>b</sup>, G<sup>b</sup>, and C<sup>#</sup> major was deliberate. Beginning students see seven white keys and five black keys, so twelve written versions seemed the most appropriate. If a student asks why the piece on page 4 is called D<sup>b</sup> and not C<sup>#</sup>, you can tell him the both would have worked and I had to make a choice. The truth is, I wanted to avoid writing an E<sup>#</sup>, but for the average student is usually happy with a simple explanation. If you have a particularly inquisitive student, you may need to explain how every alphabet letter is used when writing scale steps, which may lead to discussing the fact that D<sup>#</sup> major cannot exist because then *mi* would be an F double sharp and so on!

A final word about the left hand. Please do not change the quarter note rhythm to accommodate the text, that is, play two eighth notes when singing "B flat" or the word "ready." As mentioned earlier, the LH is designed to be the underlying steady beat. And if the student has trouble playing both hands together in measures 7 and 8, leave out the LH or change it to whole notes. I won't be offended. Really.

An added benefit of The Pentascale Song is that it naturally lends itself to teaching wrist rotation and the drop-lift technique of two note slurs. When the time comes for a student to be consciously aware of how to physically play a passage of music, you can remind him that he was "turning a doorknob" and doing drops and lifts back in the days he played The Pentascale Song. Have him sing and play the melody of The Pentascale Song in the right hand, watching every motion. Then have him play the melody in his left hand. It's always nice to have lots of tools in your toolbox!

### The Major Minor Song

After a student has mastered major pentascales, have him play the entire series of pentascales ending with a triad. Have him play triads in each hand. Play the minor pentascale followed by a minor triad. Talk about the difference in sound. Try to come up with words other than "happy" and "sad." If major was a crayon, what color would it be? If minor was a feeling, what mood would it be?

Go to the floor and place your objects in a whole step, half step, whole step, whole step pattern. Walk the minor pattern on page 28. Show your student how easy it is to switch between major and minor on the piano by lowering the third finger a half step. If you subscribe to the do-based system of teaching minor scales, you can refer to the third note as *me*. If you prefer the la-based system, you may want to postpone using *solfège* syllables at this stage. I deliberately chose not to use any *solfège* lyrics in this song so as not to confuse students whose teachers may prefer one system over the other.

(More about the two systems of teaching minor scales is found in my book "Primary Chords" available at [www.primarychords.com](http://www.primarychords.com))

The Major Minor Song can be played with or without the triad accompaniment, or with both hands in unison in the final two measures, depending on the ability of the student.

As before, I had to make a deliberate choice about naming each version of The Major Minor Song. On page 16, I referred to the major pentascale as D<sup>b</sup>, but the minor as C<sup>#</sup> and used both note names in the title. I made a similar decision on page 23, in each case to avoid writing an accidental on a white key. Not that I don't want beginners to recognize that a B can also be called a C<sup>b</sup>, or an E as an F<sup>b</sup>, but I thought it would be better to err on the side of simplicity.

I have found that the easiest explanation for piano keys having two different names is to relate to the student's family. "You know how your mom calls your dad Steve, but you call him Dad, and other people call him Mr. Smith? He's the same person – he just has different names depending on who is speaking to him. It's the same with music notes."

### Moving Forward

After a student has played all the major and minor pentascales beginning on any key, black or white, encourage him to make up his own composition using the five notes of his favorite pentascale. If he needs help, recite a short phrase with a catchy rhythm first, and have him make up the notes to go with the lyrics. Then recite a second phrase and have him come up with the concluding notes to his piece. Keep the entire composition very short and have him write it down in whatever form of notation you deem acceptable. Personally, I allow lots of freedom at this stage. We can always clean it up later. The important thing is to get the idea down on paper!

Now comes the magic of transposition. Using what he has learned about pentascales, ask him to get his hand into a different pentascale position. Using the same fingering, the same rhythm and the same lyrics, have him play his song in a new key. And maybe another. And another.

Your student will be grinning from ear to ear at the end of his lesson.

And that, my friends, is the real magic.

Joan Blench  
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