Part 1 – The Theory of Scales

Scale Basics

What are Scales?

A scale is basically an ordered line of musical steps between a specific note and its octave. If we take the note C as an example and play one iteration of each separate alphabetic note between the C and its repetition we get the following sequence of notes: C,D,E,F,G,A,B,C as shown below:

This gives us seven different individual notes: C, D, E, F, G, A, B. This is called a Heptatonic scale and is the most common form of scale in modern use. These seven notes can be used as a musical palette from which we can compose, improvise and generate musical material.

This idea of a musical palette gives rise to the concept of Key. If we use a C Major scale as our palette then the piece is said to be in the Key of C Major. If we use a G Major scale, then the Key is in G Major. If we use one of the various C Minor scales then the Key is in C Minor.

As you will discover in this book, scales are not restricted to this seven note limitation. Scales can be made up of any number of notes but seven is the most common number due to the seven letter system in modern practice. Pentatonic scales contain five different notes, Hexatonic Scales contain six different notes, Octatonic scales contain eight different notes and there is even the twelve note Chromatic scale that contains every white and black note of the piano.

There are many different scales used around the world and every scale has a particular sound or flavour. These flavours are exploited by composers and musicians in creating various moods or emotions. An obvious example is the melancholy feel of the various Minor scales. There are thousands of popular songs that use a Minor Key to convey the emotion of heartbreak or sadness. Other scales might be used to create a more exotic sound and these can be heard in the music of other countries and cultures. Many of these scales are featured in this book.

Scale Construction & the Major Scale

Every scale has a unique formula of tones and semitones. The Major scale uses the formula of Tone-Tone-Semitone, Tone-Tone-Tone-Semitone. If we build this sequence of tone’s and semitones from the note C we arrive at the following set of notes: