

Why we use different scales

Many pieces of music are based on scales. A scale is an arrangement of notes in ascending or descending order of pitch. The distances between the notes are called semitones and tones. When we use a particular scale, we say that the music is in that key. For example, if music is written using notes from the scale of D major, then we say it is in the key of D major. Read through the following information and answer the questions below.

Mood The mood of the music is greatly affected by the type of scale that is being used. It is possible to write music using any type of scale for any mood or emotion, so the following statements are generalisations, but are a useful starting point:

- Major scale – bright, happy, majestic, victorious music
- Minor scale – mournful, dramatic, sad, spooky music
- Whole tone scale – mysterious, ghostly, magical music
- Pentatonic scale – Scottish, Chinese, Irish folk music
- Chromatic scale – strange, weird, comedy, creeping, shock, humorous music.

The type of scale chosen for any style of music is often the starting point in creating the mood, although it is only one element that will help. Because a great deal of music is based in singing, it makes a difference where the music is pitched. Try to sing a simple tune, for example Happy Birthday, starting on the note G. This will put the music in the key of C major. You may find that this is too high or too low for your voice. If you start the tune on the note C, you will be in the key of F major. This may make the tune much easier to sing, depending on the pitch range of your voice. Different instruments play more easily using different scales, so composers sometimes write music that is suited to the scales which sound best on the instrument they are writing for.

Having said all this, it is also more interesting to use different scales. If every piece of music was written using the scale of C, (major, minor, or another pattern) then music would soon get rather boring.