

The Lowdown on the Octatonic Scale

By Frank Horvat

Within the last year, RCM Examinations has revised its Theory Syllabus. A number of new topics have been added to the course of study. In Grade One Rudiments, scale types such as the octatonic scale are now expected to be part of a student's knowledge base.

An octatonic scale includes eight pitches per octave arranged in a pattern of alternating semitones and whole tones (for example: c c# d# e f# g a a# c). Octatonic scales can start on any pitch and do not require a key signature.

Although the concept of the octatonic scale might be foreign to some, one does not have to look too far for musical examples. One of the first composers to use this scale was Rimsky-Korsakov who looked to "exotic" non-Western scales as a basis for some of his melodic ideas. It was Rimsky-Korsakov who would introduce it to the next generation of Russian composers including Skryabin & Stravinsky who used it in a variety of their compositions in the early 1900s. Bartok also used the octatonic scale in a number of his works including pieces within the *Mikrokosmos*. Look to Nos. 101 & 109 for clear examples of usage. Later in the 20th century, Messiaen would use it in works as a basis for his tone rows, as part of his philosophy of integral serialism.

In order to help your students grasp this scale, here are a few activities that you can try in your studio:

- Draw the scale on manuscript paper assigning a variety of starting notes
- Have them sing or play it so they can hear the uniqueness of the set of pitches
- Sight read pieces from excerpts of Bartok's *Mikrokosmos*
- Suggest that they compose or improvise a short piece based on a melody constructed from the notes of an octatonic scale.

Other than just being something that students have to know for their exam, alternatives to the major and minor scale system open up a wealth of musical curiosity for our students, which is always worth taking time to pursue.

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