

# Spirituals and the Pentatonic Scale

**Lesson Type:** Humanities, Music

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**This lesson plan is geared towards a fifth grade level, but may be adapted for use by any age group. It meets the following National Standards for Arts Education for grades 5-8:**

**Content Standard: Singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music**

- Sing music representing diverse genres and cultures, with expression appropriate for the work being performed

**Content Standard: Performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music**

- Perform music representing diverse genres and cultures, with expression appropriate to the work being performed

**Content Standard: Improvising melodies, variations, and accompaniments**

- Improvise short melodies, unaccompanied and over given rhythmic accompaniments, each in a consistent tonality

**Content Standard: Listening to, analyzing, and describing music**

- Describe specific music events in a given aural example, using appropriate terminology
- Analyze the uses of elements of music in aural examples representing diverse genres and cultures

**Content Standard: Evaluating music and music performances**

- Develop criteria for evaluating the quality and effectiveness of music performances and compositions and apply the criteria in their personal listening and performing

**Content Standard: Understanding relationships between music, the other arts, and disciplines outside the arts**

- Describe ways in which the principles and subject matters of other disciplines taught in school are interrelated with those of music

**Content Standard: Understanding music in relation to history and culture**

- Describe distinguishing characteristics of representative music genres and styles from a variety of cultures
- Compare, in several cultures of the world, functions music serves, roles of musicians, and conditions under which music is typically performed

Standards taken from: *National Standards for Arts Education*. What every young American should know and be able to do in the arts. ISBN 1-56545-036-1; MENC stock #1605.

## **Goals:**

Students will gain an awareness and understanding of the pentatonic scale as a “building block” of the African-American spiritual.

## **Objectives:**

1. Explore this “black key” scale by working on keyboards and singing two well-known spirituals.
2. Discover the two pentatonic “orientations” that create the very different “moods” of the spirituals.

**Resources Needed:** A piano or electronic keyboard, small round adhesive stickers (optional).

**Approx. Time Required:** 1-2 class periods

## **Skills Learned:**

- aural sensitivity
- basic keyboard skills
- singing

## Lesson:

(sing a verse of “Oh Suzannah” by Stephen Foster with the class)

“Can you tell me how many *different* notes, or pitches, you just sang in that song?

(take some guesses)

“The answer is *five*. ‘Oh Suzannah’ is based on a five note scale, called *the pentatonic scale*. Stephen Foster, who lived and wrote songs when slavery still existed in this country, was very influenced by the music of African-Americans. He heard their plantation songs from the southern United States, and also their songs of worship and hope called **spirituals**. These songs often had melodies that were built from the notes of the *pentatonic scale*.

“More than half a century later, **Marian Anderson** sang spirituals in her concerts, in both piano and orchestral settings. Spirituals were an important part of her **repertoire** (the pieces that an artist has ready for performance). Whether in the United States, or before an audience that knew little or no English, she captivated everyone who heard her sing these “sorrow songs,” these simple melodies filled with the longing for freedom, the great artistic legacy of the slaves.

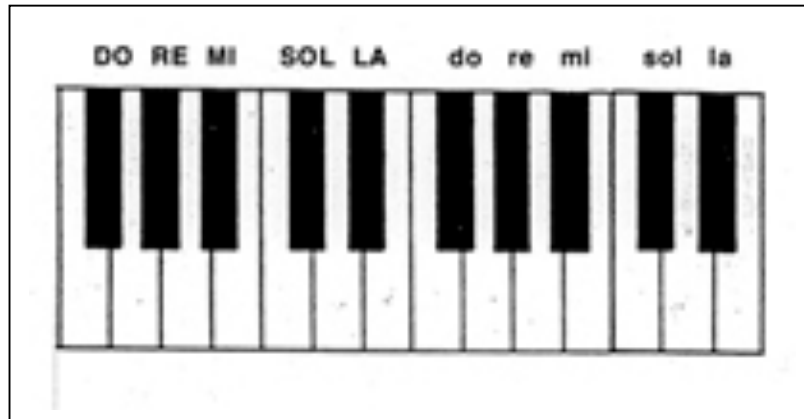
It has been documented that when she sang “Deep River” in Russia, the audience was so moved by the sheer beauty of this spiritual that they rushed the stage and demanded an encore! Marian Anderson knew over 100 of these songs and cherished them as a body of work.

“Even though the spirituals were often arranged by masterful composers such as W.T. Burleigh and R. Nathaniel Dett (see **lesson on African-American musicians**) the haunting **melodies** (the notes that Marian Anderson sang) remained very much the same as in the slaves’ original songs.

**Making a pentatonic scale:** By understanding this five note scale, and two starting places on the scale, we can unlock an important aspect of the melody of the spiritual songs. We can explore this music on a piano or electronic keyboard.

If you take the traditional seven note scale (“**do re mi fa sol la ti**”) the one made famous by “The Sound of Music” and left out “**fa**” and “**ti**”, you would have five distinct pitches left: “**do re mi sol and la**”. The resulting scale has no “**half steps**” (two notes on the keyboard adjacent to one another). **Have your students sing the traditional seven notes on the solfege syllables but be silent for “fa” and “ti**”. You can hear that you’ve left gaps of **1 ½ steps** between “**mi**” and “**sol**”; also between “**la**” and the “**do**” of your next octave. The remaining pitches are **1 whole step** (two ½ steps) from one another.

**Using the black keys:** It is convenient that the natural “geography” of the piano keyboard supplies the relationships found in the pentatonic scale. When we assign **G flat** as “**do**” and continue up the series of black keys, we discover that the gaps between **B flat** and **D flat**, “**mi**” and “**sol**”, and then the **E flat** and the upper **G flat**, “**la**” and “**do**”, give us the two **1 ½ interval** gaps needed for this scale.



We can now explore two spiritual melodies from Marian Anderson's repertoire, using the black keys, **G flat pentatonic**, as our scale material. It takes two octaves for our songs, and so we capitalize the lower five notes to distinguish them from the upper five, for which we will use lower case letters. **(note: using the black keys is a dramatic and graphic way of presenting the pentatonic scale. The teacher can demonstrate on them and then allow the students to try making the melodies on the black keys. However, the teacher can also use the scores of the two spirituals provided in G "natural" pentatonic as demonstration material.)**

**Different starting points, different moods:** We discover that most spirituals have one of two distinct "home bases", a note that seems to be the most important of the melody, the one that the tune "comes home" to. In the case of spirituals that are most "hopeful" sounding, this "home" note tends to be **"do"** (**G flat** on our black key scale).

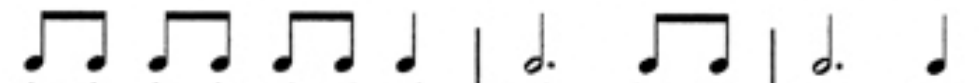
The other, more sorrowful sounding home base note is **"la"**. This is perhaps because of the **"minor 3<sup>rd</sup>"** interval between it and its nearest neighbor, the upper **"do"**.

**Using the diagram as a key:** If you choose to use the **G flat pentatonic** for yourself or your students, you can even **mark the black keys by writing the solfege syllables on small round adhesive labels** in the two center octaves of the keyboard, in a "singable" range. **Now try playing/singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot"** for your students. Notice how "coming home" to **"do"** has a hopeful sound. If possible, let your students try at the keyboard, using the labels as a reference. Getting the sound "under their fingers" can reinforce the listening experience. Does it "feel good" to come back home to **"do"**?

# "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot": "do" pentatonic

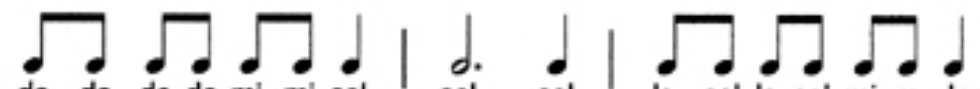
*Hopefully*

|| **C**          ||  
mi                      do                      mi                      do                      do                      LA                      SOL  
Swing                      low                      sweet                      cha - ri - ot \_\_\_\_\_

||          ||  
do do do do mi mi sol                      sol                      la sol                      mi                      sol  
co-min' for to car-ry me                      home                      Swing \_                      low                      sweet

||          ||  
do do LA SOL                      do do do do mi mi re                      do                      mi  
cha - ri - ot \_                      co-min' for to car-ry me                      home                      I

||          ||  
sol do LA do do LA                      do do do do LA SOL  
looked o - ver Jor - dan and                      what did I see \_\_\_\_\_

||          ||  
do do do do mi mi sol                      sol                      sol                      la sol la sol mi re do  
co-min' for to car-ry me                      home                      A                      band \_ of \_ an \_gels

||          ||  
do do do do LA SOL                      do do do do mi mi re                      do  
com - in' af - ter me \_                      co-min' for to car-ry me                      home

Using the same approach, try “**Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child**”. Do your students hear the more sorrowful mood of this spiritual? Sing this tune with them and, if possible, let them try to play the spiritual on the keyboard. If there is time, **let them improvise (make up their own patterns) on the keyboard, having them start and return to the “home bases”**. Let them know when you hear the moods they create with the pentatonic scale.

## "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child": ""la" pentatonic

*Sorrowfully*

|| C

LA do LA do do re mi re do  
Some - times I feel like a mo - ther - less

||

LA do re do re do re mi re do  
child some - times I feel like a mo - ther - less

||

LA LA do LA do do re mi re do  
child some - times I feel like a mo - ther - less

||

LA LA do LA MI SOL LA \_\_\_\_\_  
child a long way from home

### **Extensions of the Activity:**

As a contrast, play a sad, but distinctly *nonpentatonic* song, such as “Where is Love” from “Oliver”. Not only do “**fa**”s and “**ti**”s exist (subdominants and leading tones) but there are accidentals and “secondary dominants” and the trappings of a modern “sophisticated” song.

- Can the students tell the difference in sound and mood from the spirituals? Perform other examples as well. Let the students discuss their impressions.

### **Closure / Reflection:**

“The pentatonic scale has been around for a long time. The ancient Chinese instrument Qin, from the time of Confucius, was tuned to the pentatonic scale. Much of the world still uses this five note scale, even though much of our music uses the larger seven note system. But when we hear a spiritual, particularly when sung by a great artist like Marian Anderson, these five notes have incredible variety and power, and there’s little doubt that they have a completely American sound.

### **Assessment and Follow-up:**

**Listen to the master.** Find the RCA reissue of Marian Anderson’s album *He’s Got the Whole World in his Hands* (BMG) or any other album of her classic spiritual performances.

- Which songs use the “**do**” “home base”? Are they more “upbeat” and “positive” sounding? Have students listen and make a list of thoughts and impressions.
- Which songs have “**la**” as the note of the pentatonic scale that they return to? Are these more “mournful” in mood? Have the students write.