

## So, why practise scales? By Ruth Bonetti ©

*The pitch:* “Look at a page of that Concerto you want to learn – in this case, Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto:

It’s a mix of scales here, arpeggios there, a dominant 7th chord, a touch of chromatic and a trill to add attitude. If you’ve practised relevant scales and arpeggios before turning to the concerto you can let your musicianship flow and just enjoy playing.”

The image shows three staves of musical notation for a clarinet part. The first staff (measures 259-262) features a series of ascending and descending eighth-note scales with slurs. The second staff (measures 263-265) includes a dynamic marking of *f* (forte) followed by a *p* (piano) section with slurs. The third staff (measures 266-268) begins with a trill marked *tr*, followed by a section marked *Solo* and *dolce* (softly), with various slurs and articulation marks.

### How NOT to practise scales!

While a university student, I was rather miffed when a listener overheard my erratic practice of scales and commented that I “made so many mistakes!” Looking back, she was right. I was playing mindlessly, probably learning more mistakes than correct notes. Why waste time and energy treading the mistakes deeper into the bog? The problem is that I really did not know then how to get the wretched things better.

My major reason was that scales make little sense on a clarinet, unlike the piano, where you can see the notes and the scale patterns there in front of you. A keyboard player routinely produces new intervals of varied width by moving just one finger. The clarinetist may move three, or even all 10, but with illogical results; move one thumb and leap an interval of 12 notes, yet a half-tone’s difference can be produced by moving three fingers.

At least woodwind players lift or drop their fingers according to whether the pitch ascends or descends. Mostly. Pity the trumpeters – there is no such logic in their finger movements. String players follow patterns, while relying largely on their ear. Players of all other instruments except piano are largely without visible structures to guide them. They continually have to think what comes next, note by note, and rely on knowledge of key signatures.

### Ensure fluent scales in exams

*The pitch:* “If your brain has been correctly programmed you need not fear a few moments’ panic in an exam. You can just go into auto-drive and your fingers

move automatically until the fog in your mind clears. Now there's confidence!"

*The hard sell:* "Start regular daily practice of the technical requirements *today*. The month or the week before an exam will be too late and resulting tension and panic will turn your fingers rigid like barb-wire. If you cram them all into your head at the last minute you will play them riddled with mistakes. They will sound like a frenetic pinball game – kerplunk ... zonk ... pow. It is far easier – and doable – to comfortably and thoroughly learn one scale a week, with all their related minors, arpeggios and other chords."

Ruth Bonetti writes a complimentary weekly E-Zine, *Performance Power*, the monthly E-Zine for teachers: *Music Educators' Energiser* and the weekly *MusoMotivator* (nominal charge). Those interested to receive this can sign up at <http://ruthbonetti.com> or by emailing [ruth@ruthbonetti.com](mailto:ruth@ruthbonetti.com)

Her books *Confident Music Performance; Fix the fear of facing an audience* and *Practice is a Dirty Word; How to clean up your act* (Words and Music) are available at [www.RuthBonetti.com](http://www.RuthBonetti.com)

She compiled the method *Enjoy Playing the Clarinet* (Oxford University Press) (<http://www.oup.co.uk/isbn/0-19-322108-X>) and was Editorial Consultant for the AMEB Clarinet Grade Books.

Ruth's music and speaking career, helping musicians and speakers to perform with confidence, has taken her around Australia, Europe (speaking German, French and Swedish) and the United States, where her seminars were repeated by popular demand.

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