

Tunings and Scales

If you are unfamiliar with different scales, notes and tunings read on from here.

Pentatonic scales: Many cultures from the far past right up to the present day have used pentatonic tunings: Balinese on their rich and complex instruments, North and South American natives on simple flutes, Hebridean Islanders, and African tribesmen have all used, and many still today use pentatonic scales. The gift of the Hebridean pentatonic is that it is without dissonance or discord. The semitones that so easily sound painful in the other tunings are not present. The black notes on the piano if played without the white notes, form a Hebridean pentatonic scale. More popularly the series d,e,g,a,b, is used. The Balinese pentatonic, by contrast includes semitones. b,c,e,f,g, shows these intervals. Some prefer this more complex scale with its hint of mystery and sadness. The Japanese place their semitone one step later using b,c,e,f#,g, quite a different feel. Many Sounding Bowls are supplied in the Hebridean pentatonic tuning so that anybody can enjoy playing without fear of discordant sounds. Experience soon builds in this easy scale to allow lilting music like Gaelic airs and laments or bouncy tunes like Hungarian folk songs to be played.

Diatonic scales use black and white notes. The classical scales, like keys A to G are all diatonic. They are commonly referred to as 'doh ra me' scales, or the Major-minor system. The pattern of semitones does not alter from one key to the next. They are still today the most common musical scale. Any Sounding Bowl with eight or more strings can be supplied in a diatonic scale.

Modal scales were the Elizabethan approach to diatonic tunings. Each mode has a different pattern of semitones. Sounding Bowls in modal tunings each have a particular mood. The gentle, harmonious mood of the Aeolian mode is popular on the 15 string Sounding Bowl. A 12 string bowl I made in the Phrygian mode has a very open, limitless, almost lonely mood to it.

Bilateral tunings refer to the any Sounding Bowl in which the strings are radiating out. Lyre Bowls and Bridging Bowls are two such examples. These are tuned with the highest notes on the outer, shorter strings and the deeper notes progressing in from there. Normally this is alternating from side to side like an African thumb piano. It is also possible to tune radiant strings in pairs. For example a ten string fan style sounding bowl could be tuned with the outer strings at D, the next pair in at C, the next pair in at A, the next pair in at G, and the central pair at F, giving pentatonic bilateral pair-tuning. A further possibility is to pitch each string in the pair slightly 'apart' one note about 20% above the other. This enriches each note and creates beats, like on the Balinese Gamelan. Add to this the semitones of the Balinese scale and you have a sound that is rich and strange, awakening a feel of cultural experiences outside of the western social paradigm.

Musical notation can show how high or low a note is, as well as which note is called. Capital letters are used to show notes from middle C downwards and small letters notes above. Once outside the central two octaves an apostrophe is added. Thus d' is eight notes above middle C, and G' is eleven notes below. Octaves further out gain an extra apostrophe each.

Pitch defines exactly how high or low the whole tuning is kept. Two instruments tuned to the same scale at different locations need to agree, if they are to be played together. Tuning forks and electronic tuning aids that assist this are available at different pitches. Modern concert pitch is A=440hz. Baroque pitch is A=432. By contrast most CD recordings are at A=444. There is mounting evidence that baroque pitch is actually in tune with organic processes and greatly aids in the healing that music can offer. Most sounding bowls are supplied tuned to baroque pitch. The tuners I supply are adjustable to maintain that.

All Sounding Bowls come with a list or chart of possible and recommended tunings.