

A Japanese Scale for Improvisation

Pentatonic, or 5-note scales, are common in Japanese music. The version of the pentatonic scale, encountered in Western folk tunes contains no semitones but these are extremely important in the Japanese pentatonic scale. Here is the scale used in “A Bird Sang In The Tree Above:

D Eb G A Bb D

Practise the scale several times, until you can play it from memory. Play it at different dynamics and with crescendos / diminuendos. In Japanese melodies, phrases tend to start with long notes and have lots of faster notes towards the end of the phrase, so it might be useful to practise it with changes of speed.

As with our own major scale, this scale divides up into two identical patterns of intervals. Here, though, each section comprises a semitone and a major 3rd. In order to become familiar with these intervals, first improvise phrases on each group of three notes in turn.

The islands which make up Japan are very mountainous and space for building is scarce. Consequently, the lowlands which skirt the mountains have become an almost continuous ribbon of urban development. Land on which to garden is very precious. This may, perhaps, be the reason the arts in Japan so often feature nature themes.

Try improvising, as you imagine a natural scene. If you can't think of anything, you might try one of these titles:

Gardens in the Moonlight
At the Sea's Edge
Grasses Dancing in the Breeze
Sunrise/ Sunset

Japanese folk music makes much use of vibrato, so you may also like to incorporate this technique in your improvisation.

(These notes are taken from a class project, “Japanese Folk Music At Key Stages 3-4”, available from The Full Pitcher Music Resources)