

# Minor League

Making the most of Minor Keys

By Ted Eschliman



## Minor scale variations. Esoteric?

If you studied music theory or ever had to audition for an instrumental high school honor group or college program on a band or orchestra instrument, you may very well have already been introduced to three different forms of the **Minor scale**. It's quite a bit more complicated than the one form of the **Major scale**. Yes, you lower the **3<sup>rd</sup> scale degree** for that characteristic "minor-ness," but there's some elaborate funny business that goes on in the **6<sup>th</sup>** and **7<sup>th</sup>** scale degree. It's almost unsettling until you understand why the *harmonic* implications of these scale degrees add the rich complication.

## Three scales.

The simplest form of **Minor Scale** is the **Natural Minor**. It deviates from a **Major scale** in that the **6<sup>th</sup>** and **7<sup>th</sup>** scale degrees are lowered a half step, or **m6<sup>th</sup>** and **m7<sup>th</sup>**. An **A Major** would include an **F#** and **G#**. In the **A Natural Minor** you'd have **F natural** and **G Natural**.

Here's the problem. Harmonically, the **G natural** does not pack the gravity of the magic half step drive. When you're spelling out the dominant **V7** chord in the key (**E G# B D**), unless you raise that **G** to a **G#**, you have an awkward clash between the **G** and **G#**. The solution is always to raise the **7<sup>th</sup>** scale degree, and if nothing else is changed, you have the **Harmonic Minor Scale**.

If you play it through, you'll notice (and finger) an awkward 3 half-step gap (3 fret) between the **6<sup>th</sup>** and **7<sup>th</sup>** scale degree. Playing through it melodically can give it a characteristic ethnic sound (Klezmer, for example), but in some music it doesn't flow as well as when you raise the **6<sup>th</sup>** scale degree.

That's your solution (raising the **6<sup>th</sup>**), but there's a problem when you have the **F Major Chord** based on the **6<sup>th</sup> scale degree** (**F, A, C, E**). Again, you'd have a half-step clash with the **F natural** and **F#**. The compromise: raise them going in one direction (**F#, G#**), lower them going in the other (**F, G**).

The image shows three musical staves for the A minor scale in treble clef, 4/4 time. The first staff is labeled 'A Natural Minor' and shows the notes A, B, C, D, E, F, G, A with a flat sign under the F. The second staff is labeled 'A Harmonic Minor (flat 6th, raised 7th)' and shows the notes A, B, C, D, E, F, G#, A with a flat sign under the F and a sharp sign under the G. The third staff is labeled 'A Melodic Minor (ascending: raised 6th, raised 7th, descending: flat 7th, flat 7th)' and shows the notes A, B, C, D, E, F#, G#, A for the ascending scale and A, G, F, E, D, C, B, A for the descending scale. Each staff includes a guitar fretboard diagram below it with fingerings indicated by numbers 1-4.

The thing is, this is all pretty cerebral. There's no rule in real life you always raise going up, and always lower going down, because real music jumps around, skips, and turns. What do you do then?

We have to remember that scales are exercises, mere snippets of music and an incarnation of theory, not always *application*. You can drill these three forms all you want, but we'd argue you can waste valuable practice time mastering these. You would probably be better off spending time with yet another form of minor, the modal scale known as **Dorian**.

In the key of A, **Dorian** would be **A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A**.

**Minor 3<sup>rd</sup>**  
**Major 6<sup>th</sup>**  
**Minor 7<sup>th</sup>**

The image shows the A Dorian scale in treble clef, 4/4 time. The notes are A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A. The word 'HOME' is written above the first note. The scale is shown in two measures, with the second measure starting on the G note. A guitar fretboard diagram is shown below the staff with fingerings indicated by numbers 1-4.

### So where's the leading tone?

Running through just scales, you won't see the **G#** as much, but when you think vertically, and particularly when the music is on the **Dominant 7** (E7) chord, it needs to be there. It would be more effective to spend your scale time on the **Dorian** patterns, and work the **G#** into supplementary arpeggio exercises.

Here's an excerpt of a chord approach to understanding the **Dorian/Minor** world. Chords are based on 7<sup>th</sup> chords based on the 1<sup>st</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 5<sup>th</sup> scales degrees.

Too much theory? Forget about it. Just play it and listen to it. Get it in your fingers:

**Around the clock...**

In the **October 2009** installment of "Spelling out the Chords. Melodically," we looked at running the circle of keys. It's worth revisiting: <http://www.mandolinsessions.com/?p=370>

**Minor Arpeggios**

'im7 ViMaj7 ii7b5 V7'

[www.JazzMando.com](http://www.JazzMando.com)

Repeat signs are not arbitrary. Repeat the selections within these bars as often as you need to make them comfortable.

Mandolin

Mdn.

Mdn.

Mdn.

Mdn.

Mdn.

With the above chord tones (i7 ViMaj7 ii7b5 V7) think music theory. Engage your brain in analyzing the scale degrees, so when you apply these patterns to improvisation, you're able to consciously define the scale degrees.

2 *Enharmonic D#m=Ebm* **Minor Arpeggios**

Mdn. 25 *IM7 (Eb7)* *VIMM7 (CbMaj7)* *II7b5 (Fm7b5)* *V7 (Bb7)*

Mdn. 29 *IM7 (G#m7)* *VIMM7 (EMaj7)* *II7b5 (A#m7b5)* *V7 (D#7)*

Mdn. 33 *IM7 (C#m7)* *VIMM7 (AMaj7)* *II7b5 (D#m7b5)* *V7 (G#7)*

Mdn. 37 *IM7 (F#m7)* *VIMM7 (DMaj7)* *II7b5 (G#m7b5)* *V7 (C#7)*

Mdn. 41 *IMM7 (Bm7)* *VIMM7 (GMaj7)* *II7b5 (C#m7b5)* *V7 (F#7)*

Mdn. 45 *IMM7 (Em7)* *VIMM7 (CMaj7)* *II7b5 (F#m7b5)* *V7 (B7)*

We also have the opportunity to include and combine the arpeggios with **3rds** and **4ths** in our **Dorian/Minor FFCp** exercises. These are on the **JazzMando** website for your enjoyment:

<http://jazzmando.com/print/DorianMinorFFcP.pdf>

We're not telling you to throw out scales studies that include the three different forms, **Natural**, **Harmonic**, and **Melodic**, but pursuing jazz (let alone folk), you're arguably better served investing the time in **Dorian** drills.

It's a minor thing...

By the way, if you ever want a title summary of all the **JazzMandology** topics (over three dozen, now!) here's a page that lists them: [http://jazzmando.com/mandolin\\_sessions.shtml](http://jazzmando.com/mandolin_sessions.shtml). There's a lot to uncover there, and **Mel Bay Publishing** has brought these all to you for free. Share them with your **Facebook** and **Twitter** friends. In case you are completely new to the aforementioned **FFcP** concept referred to in previous **Jazz Mandology** articles, here's a good primer on the JazzMando site:

[http://jazzmando.com/ffcp\\_studies.shtml](http://jazzmando.com/ffcp_studies.shtml)

Take a few moments to check out the wealth of inexpensive resources you can buy at **Mel Bay Express**, many resources now available (immediately!) in an e-format. If you enjoyed this article, do us a favor and click on the fifth star.



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