

Rob's Piano Room - Module 9 - PDF

Main points

It is now time to start improvising in minor. Let's first review some of the theory behind minor keys

Minor keys are often thought of as having a darker, more introspective sound. (Some say sadder, although many disagree with this characterization) The main characteristic that causes this is the third of the scale, which is a semitone lower than it is in the major scale.

The basic minor scale is based on playing the major scale from the sixth note to the sixth note (A to A with all white notes for example) Because of this, C major and A minor (for example) have the same key signature and are said to be 'related'. For other examples, F major and D minor are related, as are G major and E minor, as we see in the example below.



We will use the method of thinking of the related major and minor as being 3 semitones apart, the major being higher and the minor being lower, which is a bit simpler than finding the 6th note. So, if you have a major and want to find the related minor, go down 3 semitones. If you have a minor and want to find the relative major, go up 3 semitones. Again think of the major as visually higher than the minor, with 3 semitones in between. Remember that 'relative' means having the same key signature



This basic version of the scale is called the NATURAL MINOR, which we rarely use, although we need to be able to find it as our more useful scales are based on it. The ascending natural minor scale ends with a full tone, rather than a semitone, giving it less of a pull to the top note. Over time, this was remedied by raising the 7th note, giving us our semitone finish. This version of the scale, with a raised 7th note compared to natural minor, is called the HARMONIC MINOR scale



In solving the problem of the semitone, a new problem, of a large interval between the 6th and 7th note, was created (The interval is called, in this context, an augmented second) so in order to remedy this BOTH the 6th and 7th were raised. This sounds fine on the way up, but on the way down it sounds a little to 'major-ish' at the top of the scale,. This is mostly because of the nice 'minor-ish' sound of the 6 going down to 5 in natural minor being taken away. So it became the custom to lower the 6 and 7 back down on the way DOWN the scale. So we end up with a scale with a raised 6 and 7 going up, but lowered back to as they were in the natural minor scale on the way back down. This is the MELODIC MINOR scale.



One way to think of it is, that when we are choosing notes for our chords , or harmonies, we choose from the harmonic minor scale. When we want to make melodies, and avoid the gap between 6 and 7, we use the melodic minor scale. Harmonies-harmonic; melodies, melodic. However, it's also good to know that you may end up liking the 'exotic' sound of the gap in the scale, in which case you might not want to smooth it out and you can make melodies with the harmonic minor.

It's important to know all the above, to know what the relative keys are, etc. But there is a shortcut method you can use.

To find the harmonic minor from the major starting the same note, simply lower the third and the sixth notes.



To find the melodic minor, you only need to flatten the third on the way up, but you will need to flatten 3,6, and 7 on the way down



Now let's start using these scales in our improvisations. The first thing we will need to do is find the I, IV, and V (or V7) chords, for which we will use the harmonic minor scale. We will find that the I and IV chords are minor, but the V is major thanks to the raised 7th of the scale. The dominant 7th is also the same as it is in major

minor dim aug minor major major dim (minor)

Once we find and familiarize ourselves with these chords, it is simple to make chord tone melodies on I, IV and V as we did in major.

Things get a bit complicated once we add our passing and neighbour tones (We will stick to showing only these, as the other devices use the same rules)

IMPORTANT - the following 'rules' for passing and neighbours may seem a bit convoluted and daunting, but your ear will help you!! Just go through these a few times to get the sounds in your ear, and it's likely you will not need to be going back to them for reference

Here are the tendencies for passing and neighbour tones on the I chord.

p p p p n n n n n n

Here are the 'double passing' tone possibilities between 5 and the high 1

Here are the tendencies for passing and neighbour tones on the V chord

p p p p p p n n n n n n

Here is the 'double passing' tone between 5 and the high 1

Here are the tendencies for passing and neighbour tones on the IV chord



Here is the 'double passing' tone between 5 and the high 1



Exercises

Ex.1 Find a number of minor scales in several keys. Get used to using the 'proper' method first, from the relative major, first finding the natural minor and then finding harmonic and melodic scales from there. Then you can experiment with the 'shortcut' method

Ex.2 In the key of C minor, find the I IV and V chords in the left hand. Once this is comfortable start using your right hand to make melodies using just chord tones.

Ex.3 Start adding passing and neighbour tones, Spend a lot of time on each chord in free time, just getting used to the sounds. Go back to the one chord occasionally so your ear can remember what key we are in.

Ex 4. Once this is starting to feel comfortable , go back to our chord progressions in modules 2 and 3, and try these in minor now

Ex 5. Once this is all feeling good, start new minor keys. Remember, be patient. This is a long term project!