



Minor Scales De-mystified

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Like me, I am sure many of you have been confused by all the minor scales you hear about.

There is a view that if you know the so-called Harmonic Minor then this will get you by most of the time. It certainly fits the bill on many standards and jazz tunes written around it - Autumn Leaves, Night In Tunisia, Nardis etc. However, there are several other often-used minor scales, and I've attempted below to explain what they are, and how to get something from them. By the way, when I talk about natural 6th, flattened 7th, etc., I mean relative to the same interval in the major scale. Natural means the note is the same as in the major scale, flattened means it is a semitone lower.

The Harmonic minor has a flattened 6th and a natural 7th, giving an interval of 3 semitones between 6th and 7th. This is its key 'flavour ingredient'. It is a 'Moorish' sound, and an obvious choice for 'Night In Tunisia'.

The other minor scales, can be thought of as variants with alternative flavour ingredients - a bit like Pot Noodles, really. The basic ingredient is a major scale with the 3rd flattened - that's what makes it a minor scale in the first place. Flattening the 2nd, 5th, 6th and 7th, or not, as the case may be, provides an alternative flavour to the scale, just like chords can be altered. The minor scale Pot Noodle product range, comes out like this, therefore :-

Melodic Minor

This is the 'vanilla' version, free of all additives. Everything is natural except the 3rd. Sometimes called the Natural Minor for obvious reasons. Also the Jazz Minor - it is used a lot. Classical music theory talks about Melodic Minor ascending and descending. They do something different with it on the way down, but we don't bother with that in jazz.

Harmonic Minor

Flatten the 6th, and you get the Harmonic Minor flavour. Yummy on old standards as mentioned above, and also for evoking the smell of camel dung.

Relative or Aeolian Minor

Flatten the 7th as well as the 6th and you have the Aeolian minor. Everyone knows that something written in C minor is written in the key signature of Eb, and Cm is known as the relative minor key of Eb. This scale has the same notes as the major scale 3 semitones up, and starting on its 6th note, but try working that one out in the middle of a fast complex tune. It's much easier to think of it as being like the Harmonic minor, but with the additional ingredient of a flattened 7th.

Dorian Minor

Hmmm...liked that flattened 7th, but not so sure about the flattened 6th. Obviously a modal modernist, because the flavour with the natural 6th and flattened 7th is the Dorian minor. Millions of tunes following Miles Davis' 'So What' use this scale. Even rockers use it - they think of it as playing the major scale a tone below the minor's root, as this has the same notes. This is OK, but to get the real flavour of, say, Cm Dorian, you must think of a Bb scale **starting from C**. Hitting the C(root), Eb(m3rd) and A(nat. 6th) more often than not when improvising using the Dorian minor will bring out the full Dorian tonality (music-speak for 'flavour').

Phrygian Minor

This is the Spanish flavour. Take one Aeolian C minor and add a flattened 2nd - instant Flamenco ! Try it over a Cm to Dbmaj7 progression. Also against the Ab chord in endings which replace 2 bars of C, say, with |Cmaj7 Abmaj7|C6 |. Record, or have a friend play, a few bars of |Cm7 Bbm7/C|. The Cm Phrygian sounds good over this I think you'll find. The Phrygian minor has the same notes as the major scale 4 semitones down, and starting on its 3rd note, but there are more pleasurable ways of getting a headache.

Locrian Minor

Being true jazzers you will be unable to resist flattening the 5th at every opportunity. Well, start with the Phrygian minor and you can do just that to get the Locrian minor. This scale sounds truly wonderful against a m7b5 chord with same root.

Altered or Superlocrian Scale

This little corker looks both ways - it has both a major **and** a minor 3rd, being otherwise the same as the Locrian minor. Even though it has both major and minor 3rd proclivities, its contextual preference, just to be awkward, is neither major or minor chords. What it really loves are altered dominants e.g. C7#5#9. It has the same notes as the Melodic minor a semitone above. For once, this is an easier way to think of it.

Here's a summary of all the scales I've talked about.

Name of Scale	Interval				
	2nd	3rd	5th	6th	7th
Melodic/Natural/Jazz Minor	Natural	Flattened	Natural	Natural	Natural
Harmonic Minor	Natural	Flattened	Natural	Flattened	Natural
Relative/Aeolian Minor	Natural	Flattened	Natural	Flattened	Flattened
Dorian Minor	Natural	Flattened	Natural	Natural	Flattened
Phrygian Minor	Flattened	Flattened	Natural	Flattened	Flattened
Locrian Minor	Flattened	Flattened	Flattened	Flattened	Flattened
Altered Scale/Superlocrian	Flattened	Flattened and Natural	Flattened	Flattened	Flattened

The mathematically minded will have spotted that I haven't covered every possible permutation. That's because we're talking music here, not maths, and the remaining possibilities are crappy sounding, and not much used in jazz (yet!).

Final note. When I say play this scale over this chord, I don't mean play all the notes of it one after another, although this is the best thing to do until you are familiar with the sound of each scale. As Charlie Parker once said, just play the 'pretty notes'. In the context of these scales, the pretty notes are the ones which provide the unique 'flavour' of each scale e.g. the natural 6th of the Dorian, or the flattened 2nd of the Phrygian. It's just like picking out the meaty bits from the Pot Noodle !

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