

Harmonic and Melodic Minor

There are not three minor scales. There is one minor scale and two repairs, and each repair fixes a specific problem you can hear.

Part one ended at the seam. The five chord of A minor comes out Em7, a minor seventh chord has no leading tone and no tritone, and it will not resolve. Raising G to G sharp turns it into E7 and the key gets gravity. That raised seventh degree is the first repair, and the scale it produces is called harmonic minor. The name is literal. It was raised for the sake of the harmony.

The repair creates a second problem. Between the sixth degree and the new seventh degree there is now a step and a half, F up to G sharp. Sung or played as a line it sounds like a gap in the middle of the scale. So you raise the sixth degree too, F to F sharp, and the line walks smoothly up to the tonic. That is the second repair, and the scale it produces is called melodic minor. That name is also literal.

The same scale, twice repaired

A natural minor

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	A
1	2	$\flat 3$	4	5	$\flat 6$	$\flat 7$	8

A harmonic minor

A	B	C	D	E	F	G$\sharp$	A
1	2	$\flat 3$	4	5	$\flat 6$	7	8

step and a half

A melodic minor

A	B	C	D	E	F$\sharp$	G$\sharp$	A
1	2	$\flat 3$	4	5	6	7	8

Two switches, not three scales.

Switch one raises the seventh and it is about function. It is the only thing that makes the five chord a dominant. Switch two raises the sixth and it is about melody and color. Everything on the next three pages follows from which switches are up.

All three, harmonized

Stack sevenths on every degree of each scale and this is what falls out. Read down a column to learn a sound. Read across a row to see what the switches cost you.

DEG	NATURAL MINOR	HARMONIC MINOR	MELODIC MINOR
1	i- Am7	i-^Δ Am(maj7)	i-^Δ Am(maj7)
2	ii^Ø Bm7 ^b 5	ii^Ø Bm7 ^b 5	ii- Bm7
3	^bIII^Δ Cmaj7	^bIII^{Δ#5} Cmaj7 ^{#5}	^bIII^{Δ#5} Cmaj7 ^{#5}
4	iv- Dm7	iv- Dm7	IV⁷ D7
5	v- Em7	V⁷ E7	V⁷ E7
6	^bVI^Δ Fmaj7	^bVI^Δ Fmaj7	vi^Ø F [#] m7 ^b 5
7	^bVII⁷ G7	vii^{Ø7} G [#] dim7	vii^Ø G [#] m7 ^b 5

Anything tinted is a chord the repair changed. Harmonic minor touches three chords, not one. Melodic minor touches five. That is the honest cost of each switch, and it is why nobody plays a whole piece out of one of these scales.

Notice what the fifth degree does. It is the one chord that both repairs fix and neither repair argues about. Natural minor gives you Em7 and no resolution. The moment either switch goes up you have E7 and the key works. Every other row is a matter of taste. Row five is a matter of function.

Five new chords

These are the chords the two repairs hand you. Each one is worth teaching on its own, independent of any scale it came from.

G#dim7 G# B D F

Harmonic minor

A stack of three minor thirds, perfectly symmetrical, which means it has no root the way ordinary chords do. Play E7 and take the E away and this is exactly what is left, plus an F on top. It is a rootless E7 flat nine. Every inversion sounds the same, so one shape covers four keys. Point that out and watch them do the math.

Am(maj7) A C E G#

Harmonic and melodic

The tonic of both repairs. That G sharp grinding a half step under the A is the entire sound of a spy film. Most students have already heard it a hundred times without knowing what it was.

Cmaj7#5 C E G# B

Harmonic and melodic

The relative major with the fifth pushed up. Rare as a destination, common as a passing sound, and almost always a byproduct of a line moving rather than a chord somebody chose.

D7 D F# A C

Melodic only

Raising the sixth degree turns the four chord major, and the flat seven sitting on top makes it a dominant. This is the fingerprint of Dorian. If a minor vamp ever sounded bright and Latin to you rather than dark, this chord is usually why.

Bm7 B D F# A

Melodic only

Raising the sixth also repairs the two chord. You get an ordinary minor seventh instead of a half diminished, which means a two five one in minor that borrows the front half from major: Bm7, E7, Am.

If you only ever teach two of these.

G sharp diminished seven and A minor major seven. The first is what a dominant sounds like with its root taken away, which is the door into every rootless voicing they will ever learn. The second is a sound they have already heard a hundred times in film music and have never had a name for. Put those two in their hands and the other three show up on their own.

How it actually gets used

No piece is written in harmonic minor. Natural minor is the home key and the two switches get thrown when a chord or a line needs them.

The textbook presentation makes these look like three separate scales you choose between. That is not how music behaves. A composer sits in natural minor, raises the seventh when the dominant needs to pull, raises the sixth when a line has to walk up through it, and drops both the moment the reason is gone. One key, two switches, thrown as needed.

There is also a direction convention worth knowing. In classical practice melodic minor raises the sixth and seventh going up and returns to natural minor coming down, because on the way down there is no tonic above you to lean into and the flat sixth falls nicely to the fifth. Jazz keeps the raised form in both directions and calls it jazz minor. Same seven notes, different housekeeping.

Four things to put under their hands

1 One chord, three scales

Loop Am7. Play A natural minor. Play A harmonic minor. Play A melodic minor. Do not explain anything first. Ask what changed.

2 Switch the scale when the chord switches

Am7 | Dm7 | E7 | Am7. Play A natural minor everywhere except the third bar, and play A harmonic minor over the E7. This is the single most useful habit on the page.

3 The line cliché

Am | Am(maj7) | Am7 | Am6. The chords barely move. The top voice walks A, G sharp, G, F sharp. Four bars that contain harmonic minor, natural minor and melodic minor in order.

4 The Dorian vamp

Am7 | D7, two bars each, forever. Play A melodic minor or just think A Dorian. The F sharp is the whole point and it is the fastest way to make a student hear the raised sixth as a color instead of a rule.

How to tell where you are.

Look at the five chord and look at the sixth degree. If the five chord is minor you are in natural minor. If the five chord is dominant and the sixth is flat you are in harmonic minor. If the five chord is dominant and the sixth is raised you are in melodic minor. Two questions, every time.