

"Once you know which notes you're suppose to play, and which notes you aren't suppose to play, then you can go crazy. There's no limit to what you can do." —Yngwie Malmsteen

The Minor Scale

The scale lets you know which notes you can play. It's literally the palette of notes you can choose from. Once you know what key a song is in, you then choose which corresponding scale you will use. After that, your only limit is your imagination (and technique).

Every note has a corresponding major scale and minor scale. In fact, the major and minor scales are related to each other. Each minor scale shares its notes with one major scale. For instance, the notes in the A minor scale are exactly those in the C Major scale. The A minor scale simply starts on a different note—specifically, the sixth scale degree. This is why we say for instance, that the A minor scale is the "relative minor" to C major.

The key of C major & A minor share the same notes.

So then, if C major and A minor share the same notes, how are they different? First of all, because the starting note is different, the pattern of whole and half steps is also different. Whereas the half steps in a major scale are between scale steps 3 & 4 and 7 & 8, **the half steps in a minor scale are between scales steps 2 & 3, and 5 & 6.**

A Minor Scale

Because the pattern is different, the quality of the sound is different, just as the quality of a minor chord is different from that of a major. Furthermore, because the notes have a different position in the scale, they have a different hierarchy. For instance, in the A minor scale, A is the tonic, (1st note of the scale), and as such, it is the most important note of the scale. Therefore, the chord built on this scale degree (Am), is the most important chord. The Am chord was much less significant residing on the 6th scale degree in the C major scale.

Natural and Harmonic Minor Scales

We already know that the dominant 7th chord (the chord built on the 5th scale degree) has a function—it causes us to anticipate the tonic chord. But in a minor scale, the chord built on the 5th scale degree is always a minor chord. If we could make this chord major, the pull to the I chord would be greater. Therefore, it is very common to raise the 7th scale degree of the minor scale so that dominant chord will be major. Since the raising of the 7th scale degree changes the harmony of the dominant chord (or simply, the "Five chord"), we call this version of the minor scale "harmonic minor." (see below)

V chord now has G# as its 3rd, making it an E7 instead of Em7.

Lastly, raising the 7th scale degree gives this scale a very exotic sound, particularly when playing the 6th, 7th, and 8th scale degrees.

Minor Scale Patterns

To the right are two patterns for the natural and harmonic minor scales. One pattern starts on the 6th string and the other starts on the 5th string. These patterns can be moved anywhere on the fretboard to match the key that you're playing in.

	Tonic on the 6th String	Tonic on the 5th String
Natural Minor		
Harmonic Minor		

So, which scale should you use? You would use the harmonic minor scale when the V chord in the progression you're soloing over is major. If the V is minor, use the natural minor scale.