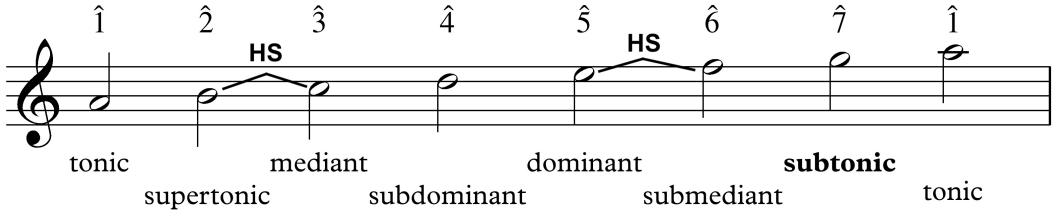
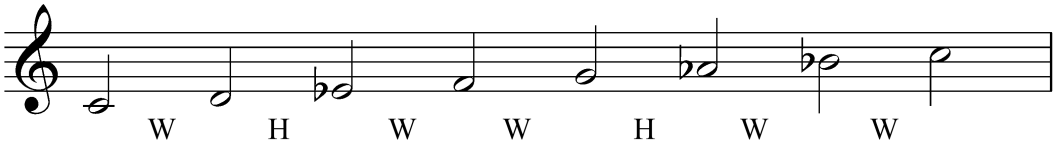
MU 1310 (Feurzeig) Minor Scales

Natural minor. A **natural minor scale** is a series of eight adjacent pitches using successive letter names, with half steps between scale degrees $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{3}$ and between $\hat{5}$ and $\hat{6}$. All the other steps are whole steps. Here is the A natural minor scale. The scale degrees are named as they are in major scales **except for scale degree $\hat{7}$**.

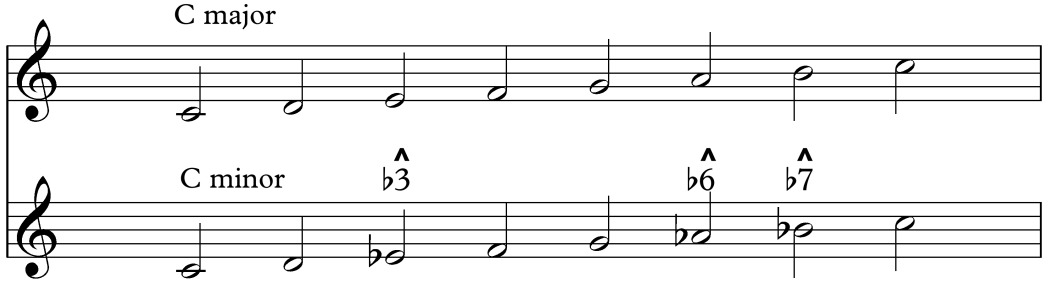


You can write a minor scale beginning on any note by observing the pattern of whole and half steps. Here is the natural minor scale on C:

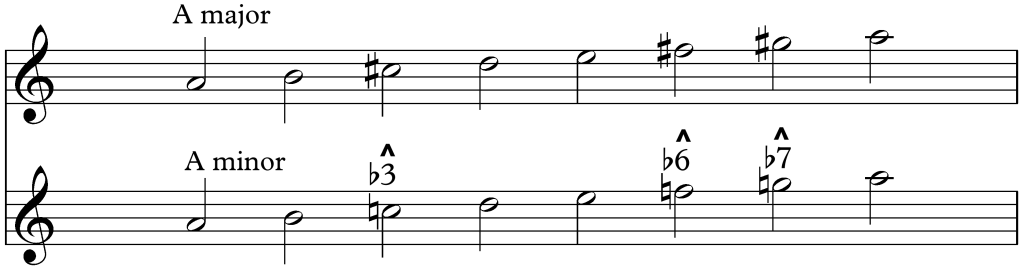


There are two ways to think of minor scales in comparison to major scales. They are called the **parallel** and the **relative** relationship.

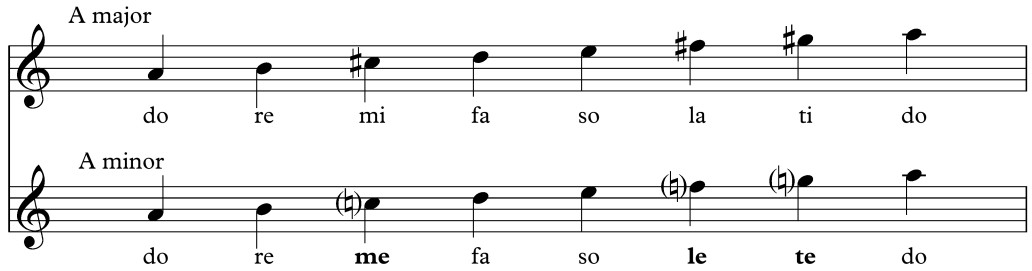
Parallel major/minor scales. A major scale's parallel minor scale has the same tonic and mostly the same notes, but the minor scale has lowered versions of scale degrees $\hat{3}$, $\hat{6}$, and $\hat{7}$.



Because of this, the minor-scale versions of these scale degrees are often labeled $\flat\hat{3}$, $\flat\hat{6}$, and $\flat\hat{7}$. In writing or speaking they are often referred to as the **minor**, or **lowered** or **flat** 3rd, 6th, and 7th degrees. This nomenclature is often used **even when the notes in question are not flats, but naturals**:

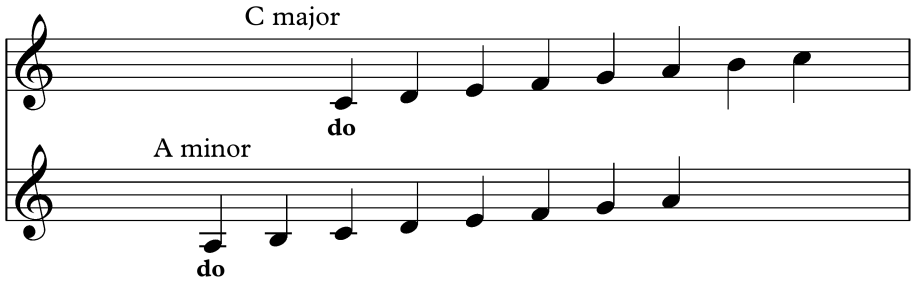


Solfége. In keeping with the lowered forms of scale degrees $\hat{3}$, $\hat{6}$, and $\hat{7}$, we use altered forms of the scale **solfège syllables** for these degrees: **me**, **le**, and **te** (pronounced may, lay, tay):

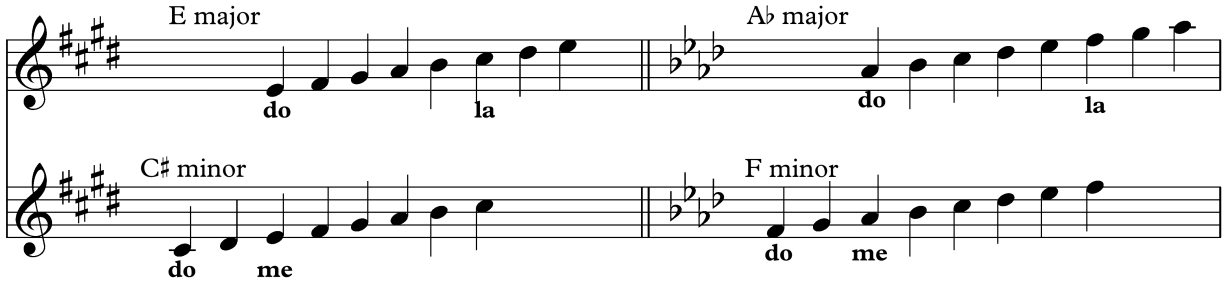


Remember, the 7th scale degree in minor, a **whole** step below the tonic, also has a different name—the **subtonic**—from the 7th degree in major (a **half** step below the tonic), the **leading tone**.

Relative major/minor scales. Major and minor scales that share the same pitches are said to be **relative**. For example, the A minor scale can be played on the white notes only, the same notes that are in C major. So A minor is the **relative minor** of C major.



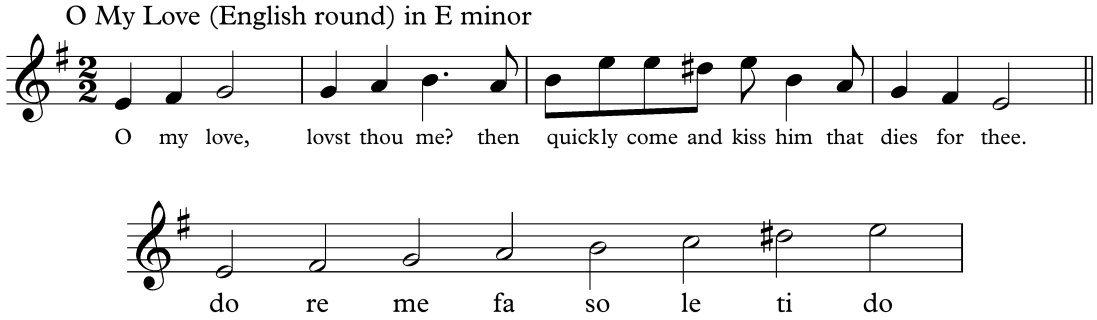
Every minor scale corresponds to a major scale that uses the same seven pitches, but with a different pitch as tonic. The relative minor is the scale starting on scale degree $\hat{6}$ (**la**) of its relative major scale, recontextualized as **do**. Because of this relationship, minor scales use the same key signatures as major scales, but for different keys.



You can use simple rules to determine what minor scale any key signature indicates. For sharp keys, the minor scale tonic is a whole step **below** the final sharp in the key signature. For flat keys, the minor scale tonic is a major third above the final flat, or if you prefer, a minor third below the next-to-last flat.

To find the key signature for any minor scale, go up a minor third (or think: **do – re – me**, or up a whole step, then a half step) to find the relative major. Then write the key signature for that major scale.

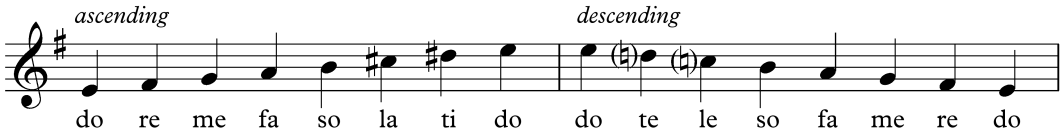
The harmonic minor scale. When the notes of the minor scale use exactly and only the pitches indicated by the key signature, the scale is said to be in the **natural minor** form. Many minor-key pieces (such as the round "Oh My Love") use the raised form of the seventh scale degree, i.e. the leading tone, a half-step below the tonic, just as in major keys. When the leading tone replaces the subtonic as scale degree $\hat{7}$, the resulting scale is called the **harmonic minor** scale.



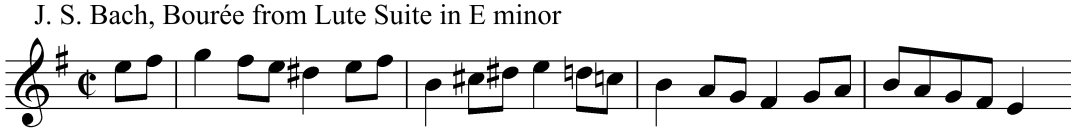
Music that employs the harmonic form of the minor scale uses the **same key signature** as the natural minor scale, with individual accidentals to raise the 7th scale degree as needed. The raised scale degree $\hat{7}$ of the harmonic minor is identical to $\hat{7}$ in the parallel major key. It is therefore called the leading tone, and sung with the scale degree **ti** just as in major.

The harmonic minor scale is so called because the most common qualities for the **primary triads** (tonic, subdominant, and dominant) in minor keys are the minor tonic, minor subdominant, and **major** dominant. These chords can all be formed from the notes of the harmonic minor scale.

The melodic minor scale. Raising the seventh scale degree in minor creates an especially large step between scale degrees $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$: an augmented second, spanning 3 half steps. This may be felt as an awkward jump in melodic lines, so to smooth out the gap, composers often raised scale degree $\hat{6}$ as well when approaching the raised $\hat{7}$ from below. However, when a minor-key melody moves **down** from the tonic by steps, it more often uses the natural (lower) form of degrees $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$. Putting all this together results in the **melodic minor scale**, which has an ascending and a descending form.



The descending form of the melodic minor is identical to the natural minor. The ascending form is almost the same as the parallel **major** scale, but with a lowered third scale degree. The Bourée from Bach's Lute Suite in E minor illustrates typical usage, with scale degrees $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$ raised when the melody ascends towards the tonic, and lowered (natural minor) when the melody descends:



As with the harmonic minor scale, the key signature is unchanged from the natural minor, and accidentals are used for degrees $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$ as needed.

You need to be able to write and recognize the different forms of the minor scale. Musicians practice them as well. But in actual usage (composing and improvising) musicians often move from one scale form to another; a piece of music is not obliged to stay strictly in (for example) harmonic minor from start to finish. The contrasting minor scale forms are useful mostly as compositional and improvisational concepts, and as analytic categories.