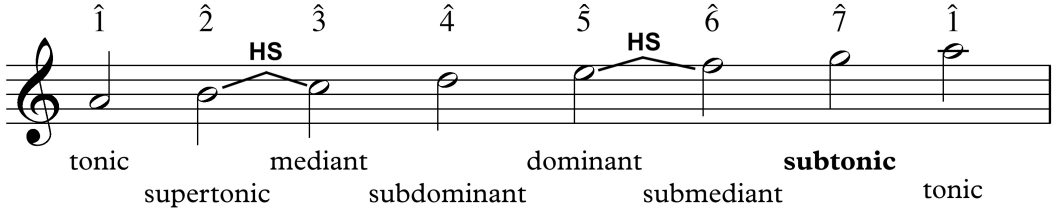
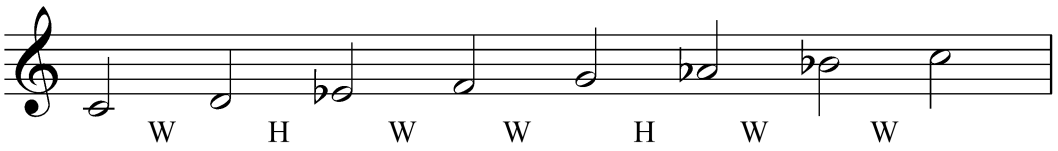
MU 1310 (Feurzeig) Minor Scales

Natural minor. A **natural minor scale** is an ordered series of eight pitches with successive letter names and with half steps between scale degrees $\hat{2}$ – $\hat{3}$ and $\hat{5}$ – $\hat{6}$. 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 $\hat{7}$**.
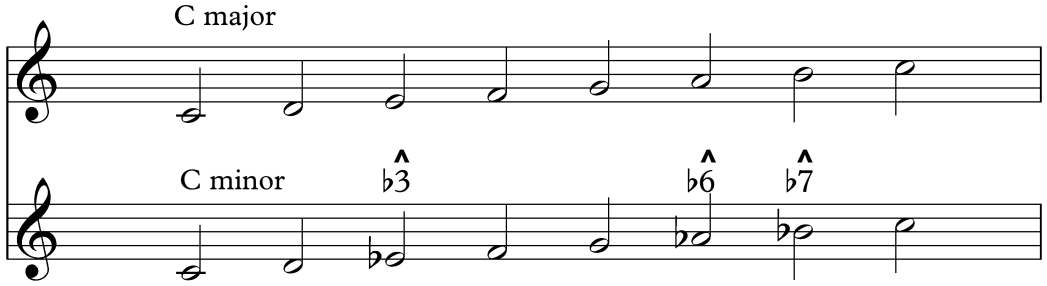


You can write a minor scale beginning on any note by observing the pattern of whole and half steps. Here is the natural minor scale on C:
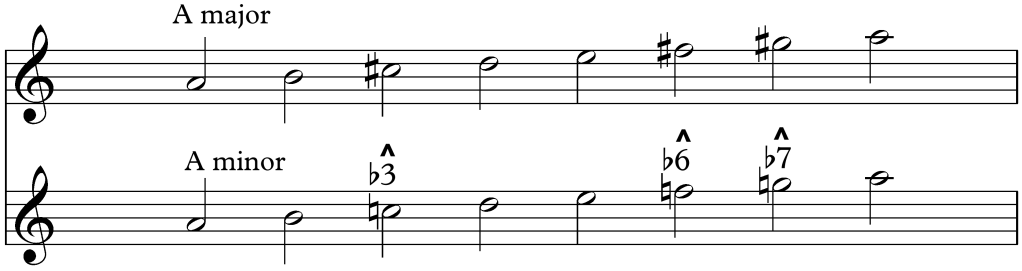


You can also conceptualize minor scales by comparing them to major scales. There are two ways to think about this: the **parallel** and the **relative** minor/major correspondences.

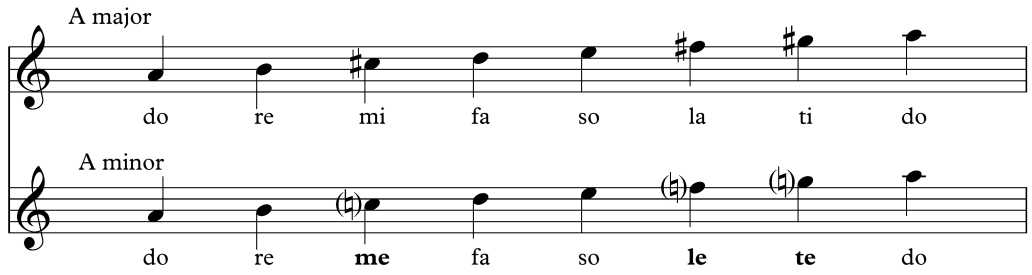
Parallel major/minor scales. Parallel major/minor scales share the same tonic. Compared to its parallel major, the minor scale degrees $\hat{3}$, $\hat{6}$, and $\hat{7}$ are chromatically lowered.



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

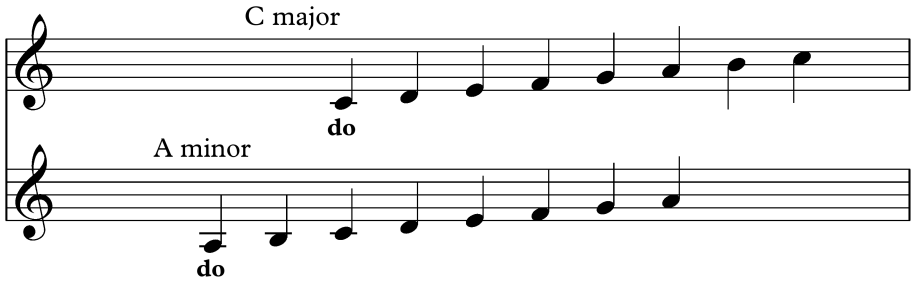


Solfège. For the minor scale degrees ♭$\hat{3}$, ♭$\hat{6}$, and ♭$\hat{7}$, we use the altered solfège syllables ***me***, ***le***, and ***te*** (pronounced may, lay, tay):

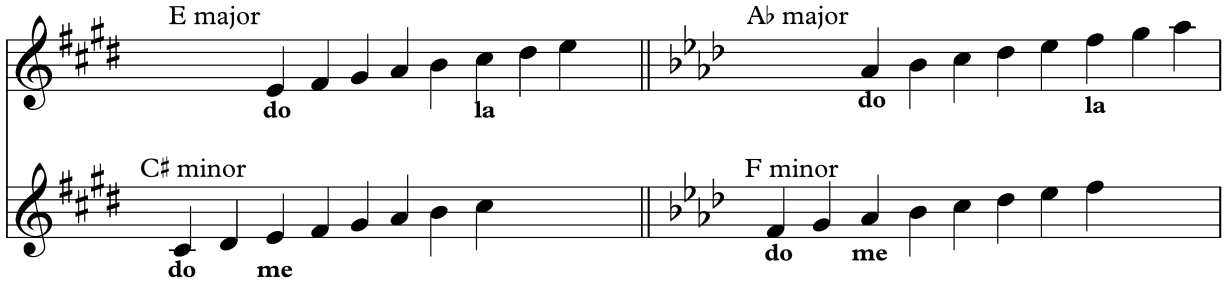


Remember, the 7th scale degree in minor, which is a **whole step** below the tonic, has a different **name** as well—**subtonic**—from the 7th degree in major, the **leading tone**, which is a **half step** below the tonic: **ti** = leading tone, **te** = subtonic.

Relative major/minor scales. Major and minor scales that share the same **pitches** (rather than the same tonic) are said to be **relative**. For example, the A minor scale can be played on the white notes only, the same seven notes used by the C major scale, so A minor is the **relative minor** of C major.



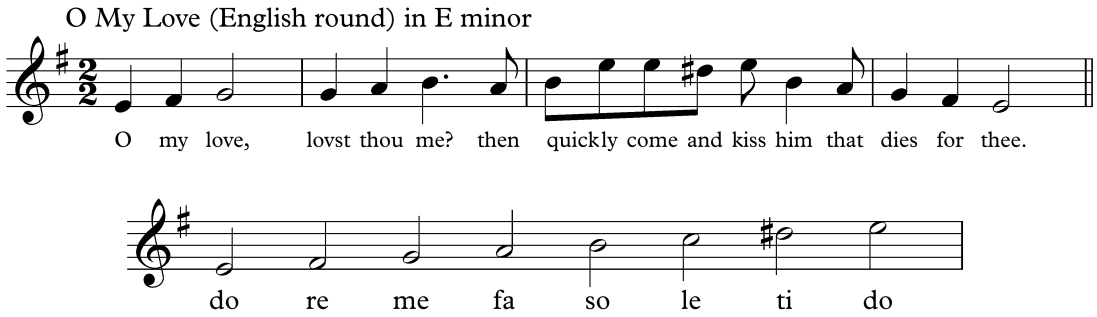
Every minor scale has a relative major scale using the same seven pitches, but with a different pitch as tonic. The relative minor begins on scale degree $\hat{6}$ (**la**) of its relative major, recontextualized as scale degree $\hat{1}$ (**do**). Conversely, the relative major starts on scale degree $\hat{3}$ (**me**) of its relative minor. So minor scales use the same set of key signatures as major scales, but for different keys.



You can formulate 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 (think: **do** – **re** – **me**: up a whole step, then up a half step) to find the relative major. Then write the key signature for that major scale.

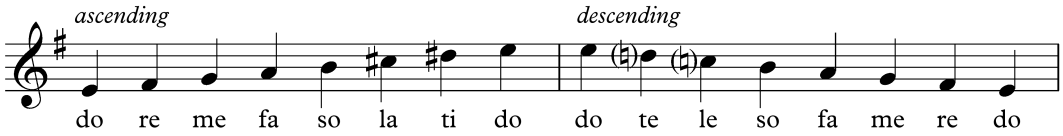
The <u>harmonic</u> minor scale. When the notes of the minor scale use exactly and only the pitches indicated by the key signature, the scale is said to be in the **natural minor** form. But many minor-key pieces (such as the round "Oh My Love") use the raised form of the seventh scale degree, i.e. the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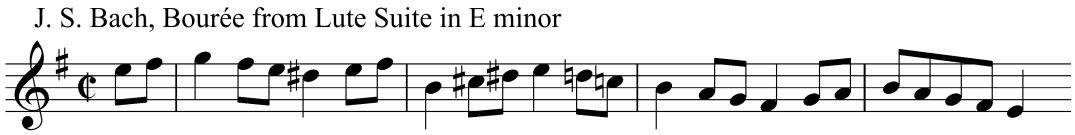


Music that employs the harmonic form of the minor scale uses the **same key signature** as the natural minor scale, using individual accidentals to raise scale degree $\hat{7}$ as needed. The raised degree $\hat{7}$ of the harmonic minor is identical to $\hat{7}$ of the parallel major. It is therefore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

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 <u>melodic</u> 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, 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 (i.e. the 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; the only difference is the lowered degree $\hat{3}$.) 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 (as in natural minor) when the melody descends:



As with the harmonic minor scale, the key signature is unchanged from the natural minor. Accidentals are used for degrees $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$ as needed, either to raise those degrees a half step, or to cancel out such rises to return the notes to their natural-minor form.

You need to be able to write and recognize the three distinct 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 need not stay strictly in one form of the minor scale. The contrasting minor scale forms are useful mostly as compositional concepts.