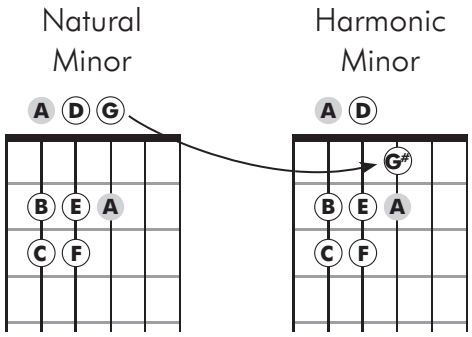
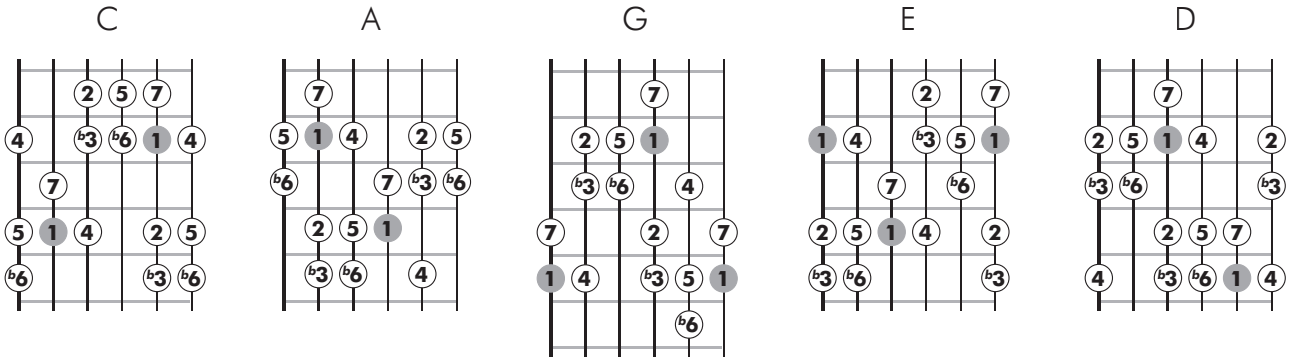
Intro to the Harmonic Minor Scale

One way to think of the harmonic minor scale is as a natural minor scale with a raised 7th degree. In the diagrams to the right you see one octave of an A *natural* minor scale contrasted with the *harmonic* minor. The G natural of the former is raised to G# in the latter.

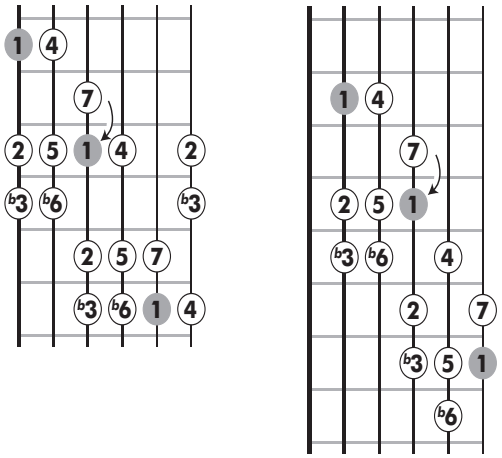


The most striking feature of the harmonic minor scale is found in its second half. Because it includes both the *b*6 and *major* 7th (F and G# in the example to the right), you have a step and a half interval sandwiched between two half steps, which creates a great deal of contrast.

Despite some clumsy fingerings, it's worth learning the scale in relation to the 5 basic CAGED shapes. Although you may not want to use them in their entirety, each of these scale forms has useful and comfortable sections. See them below.

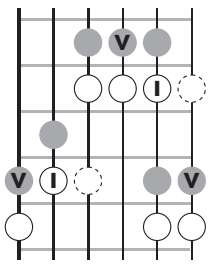


To the right you see two horizontal scale forms that you may find more comfortable for longer lines. The arrow indicates a handy place to slide into the new position on the fretboard. These slides should be executed on your first finger. When you learn these, be sure to relate them to the root configurations of the CAGED shapes you are passing through (E and D for the first; A and G for the second).



One of the situations in which the harmonic minor scale is most useful is over the V7 chord in a minor key because the raised 7th of the scale is the 3rd of the V7 chord. For example, suppose you are playing in the key of Am, so your V7 chord is E7. The 3rd of this chord is G#, which is also the 7th degree of the A harmonic minor scale. The other chord tones of V7 are also included in the scale, but the 3rd is the note that would be left out of any minor scale with a flatted 7th, so its inclusion is particularly noteworthy.

Since you will be using the harmonic minor scale so often over the V7 chord, it is worth looking at them together. As it happens, it is very easy to visualize the relationship. Let's assume we are still in A minor, so our harmonic minor scale is spelled: A B C D E F G# A. The V chord, E, is spelled E–G#–B. Look at these three notes in the context of the A harmonic minor scale and you will see that each is followed by the note a *half step* up (E is followed by F, G# by A, and B by C). The *b*7 of the V chord (D) is also in the scale. So, seen from the perspective of the V7 chord, the harmonic minor scale consists of the chord tones (1, 3, 5 and b7) *plus each of the notes one half step above the root, 3rd and 5th.*



For a little practice at visualizing this on the fretboard, take a close look at the diagram to the right. The dark circles outline a G shape V chord in the midst of a harmonic minor scale, the tonic of which is indicated with the numeral I (C shape root configuration). This could be anywhere on the fingerboard. Notice that *each dark dot is followed by a note a half step up*. The dotted circle is the b7th of the V chord, the only note of that chord that is *not* followed in this way.