

## LESSON 22

# MINOR SCALES AND KEYS

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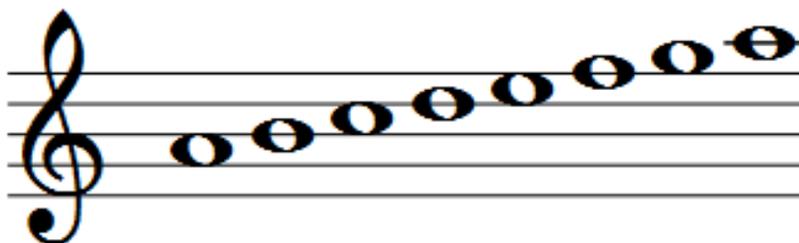
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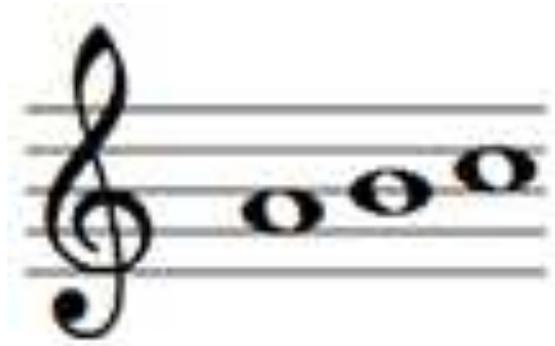
**Definition:** a **minor scale** is a scale that starts with a whole tone followed by a half tone.

In the last lesson we learned that the 'A mode' evolved into our minor scale:



'A mode', which evolved into our minor scale.

Play the first 3 notes of the minor scale, and find out what the intervals are:



You should have found yourself doing this pattern:

- Start 1 ½

Now play the first 3 notes of the A major scale, and observe the intervals:



You should have found yourself doing this pattern:

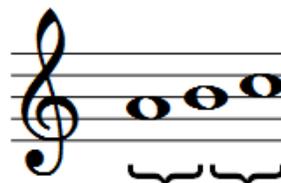
- Start 1 1

Here they are side by side for comparison:



1 1

first 3 notes  
of the A major scale



1 ½

first 3 notes  
of the A minor scale

It turns out that this is the essential difference between a major scale and a minor scale:

- A major scale starts with the intervals 1 1.
- A minor scale starts with the intervals 1 ½.

This may not look like much of a difference. Well, in a moment we're going to do an experiment to find out what effect is created when we play in a minor scale instead of a major scale.

## Minor keys

**Reminder:** a **key** is the collection of notes in a particular scale.

We applied that definition when dealing with major keys. A tune based on the scale of D major is in the key of D major.

The same applies for minor scales. If a tune is based on the scale of A minor, we say that tune is in *the key of A minor*.

By the way, A minor is not the only minor key. We'll meet more minor keys in the next few lessons.

## Key signature of A minor

Since the natural scale of A minor has only white notes, no sharps or flats, the key signature of A minor has no sharps or flats. That is the same key signature as C major.



Key signature of C major and A minor (no sharps or flats).

Here is the key signature of C major and A minor on the grand staff:



Key signature of C major and A minor on the grand staff.

This may look like there is 'no key signature', but actually an experienced musician sees it as a key signature indicating C major or A minor.

You may be wondering, 'If the same key signature indicates C major and A minor, how do we know whether the tune is in C major or A minor?' Good question. We'll take that up shortly.

## The effect created by a minor key

I said we're going to do an experiment to find the different effect created by a minor key compared with a major key. Here is the experiment.

We're going to look at a couple of tunes that both begin with the notes A C D E. But one of them has the C as a C sharp and the other has it as a white-note C. Which one do you think is major and which is minor? Review the beginning of this lesson if you need to, to answer that question.

Here's the first tune, in A major. Play this:



Beginning of a tune in A major.

And here's the other one, in A minor. Play this:



Beginning of a tune in A minor.

How would you describe the difference in effect created by the two tunes? Play them again, back and forth, and listen to the effect each one creates.

Here's a bit more of each of the tunes. Play both of these, back and forth, and notice what effect they create on you.



Tune in A major.



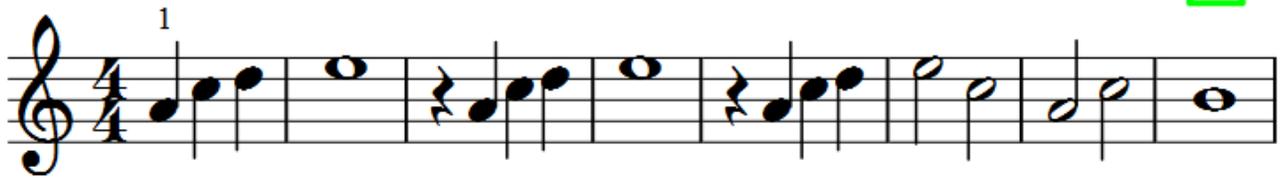
Tune in A minor.

**There is broad agreement in the western world that music in a major key tends to sound happy, while music in a minor key tends to sound sad.**

I'm not saying *you* should feel that. I'm just noting that that is what people generally feel.

Just for fun, let's reverse those two tunes. We'll change the first tune from A major to A minor, and change the second tune from A minor to A major.

In this one, make sure you play the Cs as white-note C, since there is no longer a key signature with sharps.



Tune converted from A major to A minor.

In this one, make sure you play the Cs and Gs as sharps, in accordance with the key signature.



Tune converted from A minor to A major.

How did the 2 tunes change by reversing major and minor? What was the difference in the effect they created?

To illustrate that happy songs tend to be in major keys, here are some examples:

- 'She Loves You' (Beatles)
- 'Love me Tender' (Elvis)
- 'God Save the Queen' (in America, 'My Country, 'Tis of Thee')
- 'Happy Birthday to You'
- 'The Sound of Music [The Hills are Alive]' (Rodgers and Hammerstein)

And to illustrate that sad songs tend to be in minor keys, here are some examples:

- 'Greensleeves' (composed by King Henry VIII ?)
- 'Yesterday' (Beatles)
- 'House of the Rising Sun' (traditional)
- 'Paint it Black' (Rolling Stones)
- 'Go Down, Moses' (spiritual)

Now, that rule is not always true. There are happy songs in a minor key (such as the Israeli 'Hava Nagila') and sad songs in a major key ('She's Leaving Home' by the Beatles). But those tend to be exceptions.

And why, you may ask, do people generally perceive major keys as happy and minor keys as sad? Good question.

I will give you my answer in a later lesson.

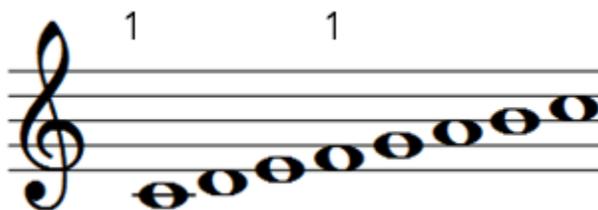
By the way, one popular tune in a major key actually has the word 'Happy' in its title. Did you know that 'Happy Birthday to You' is the most recognised song in the English language? That's according to the Guinness Book of Records. And did you know that there is a copyright claim on that song? It was going to be sung in the Klingon language in an episode of Star Trek, but instead they chose 'For He's a Jolly Good Fellow' to avoid copyright complications.

## Flavours of the minor scale

Let's take a look at the C major and A minor scales.

Have you ever found that happy people tend to be simpler, and sad people tend to be more complicated?

The C major scale (the one usually thought of as the happy one) is simple. C D E F G A B C. And that's that. Simple. Play it now:

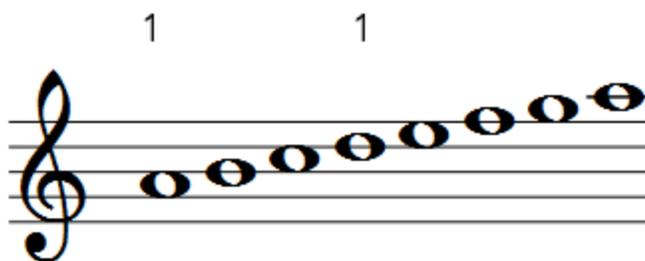


The A minor scale (the one usually thought of as sad) is more complicated. It started out life just as simple, but composers created variations of it according to their needs in the piece of music they were writing.

So we have ended up with three types of A minor scale.

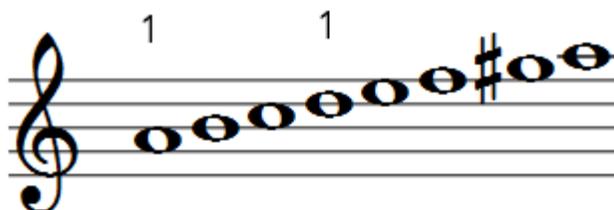
The first one, the simplest of the three, is the one we've already seen. It is based on the ancient 'A mode', and it is called the 'natural A minor scale'.

Play it now:



The natural A minor scale.

Next is a version that replaces the G with G sharp. This is called the 'harmonic A minor scale'. Play it now:



The harmonic A minor scale.

A curiosity of the harmonic minor scale is that it has an interval that is bigger than a whole tone. Play the interval from white-note F to G sharp. How big is it? It is 3 half tones, or in other words 1½ tones. This is the only interval in any of the modern scales that is bigger than a whole tone.

Finally we have one that is such a complicated character that the ascending and descending scales are different. This is called the 'melodic A minor scale'. Play this now:



The melodic A minor scale.

Going up, you play F sharp and G sharp. Coming down you play white-note G and F.

Rather pretty, isn't it?

I'm not expecting you to remember these. I just want you to be aware of them. Depending on what you go on to do in music, you may become very familiar with these three types of minor scale, or they may not be important for you at all.

I could summarize the three flavours of minor scale like this: **in the scale of A minor, the F and G are sometimes played as white notes and sometimes played as sharps.**

Does that ring a bell for you?

Here's the tune you played way back in Lesson 1.

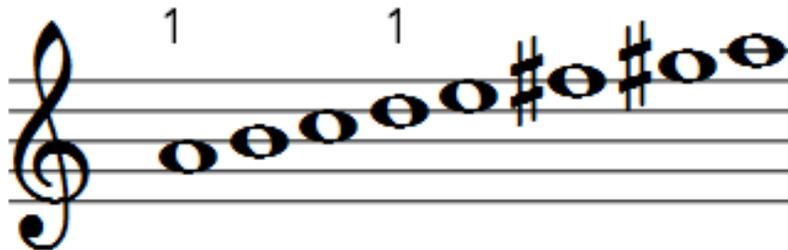


Sure enough, the Fs and Gs are sometimes white notes and sometimes sharps.

This tune is in the key of A minor.

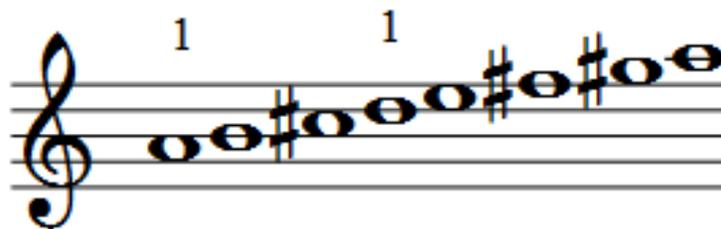
## The essence of the minor scale

Here again is the ascending part of the melodic A minor scale. Play it now:



Melodic A minor scale, ascending.

Here, for comparison, is the A major scale. Play it now:



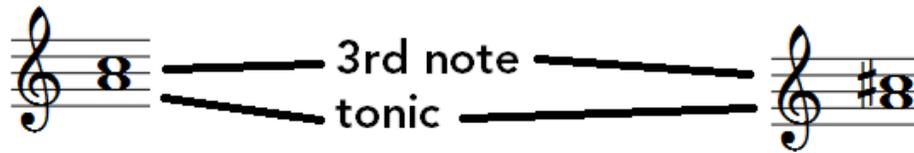
A major scale.

Interesting! The only difference between these 2 scales is in the 3rd note of the scale:

- A major: the 3rd note of the scale is C sharp, which is 2 whole tones above the tonic, A
- A minor: the 3rd note of the scale is white-note C, which is 1½ tones above the tonic, A

**This difference in the 3rd note of the scale is the essential difference between the major scale and the minor scale.**

Play these chords now:



A minor:

3rd note is 1 1/2 tones above tonic

A major:

3rd note is 2 tones above tonic

Play those two chords back and forth, and listen to the difference in their characters.

The essence of the minor scale is the interval of 1½ tones between the tonic and the 3rd note of the scale. We'll explore this further in a later lesson.

## Practical

### Build Your Skill

These exercises are actually the first few measures of some well known tunes. They are all in the key of A minor.

### Exercise 1: - Go Down Moses

1. Play this.



2. Repeat until you can play it easily.

### Exercise 2: - We Three Kings

This is in the bass clef, so play it with your left hand.

1. Play this.





2. Repeat until you can play it easily.

# Practical

## Build Your Skill

### Tune 1: - Your next tune in the key of A minor

You played a tune in A minor in Lesson 1, Greensleeves. Here's your next tune in A minor.

You already played the first few measures of this tune in one of the exercises.

#### *The Wayfaring Stranger*





Wayfaring Stranger