

Lesson Two

How to Learn and Memorize Minor Scales

© Pianoscales.org

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form
or by any means without permission from the publisher.

Part 1: The method

The relative scale (short intro to the Minor Scale and relative keys)

The Minor Scale can sometimes confuse people because it is in a way identical to the Major Scale. The A Minor Scale, for example, include exactly the same notes as the C Major Scale which makes them *relative keys*.

Relative keys have the same notes and they can be found for all major and minor scales. Here are all relative keys listed:

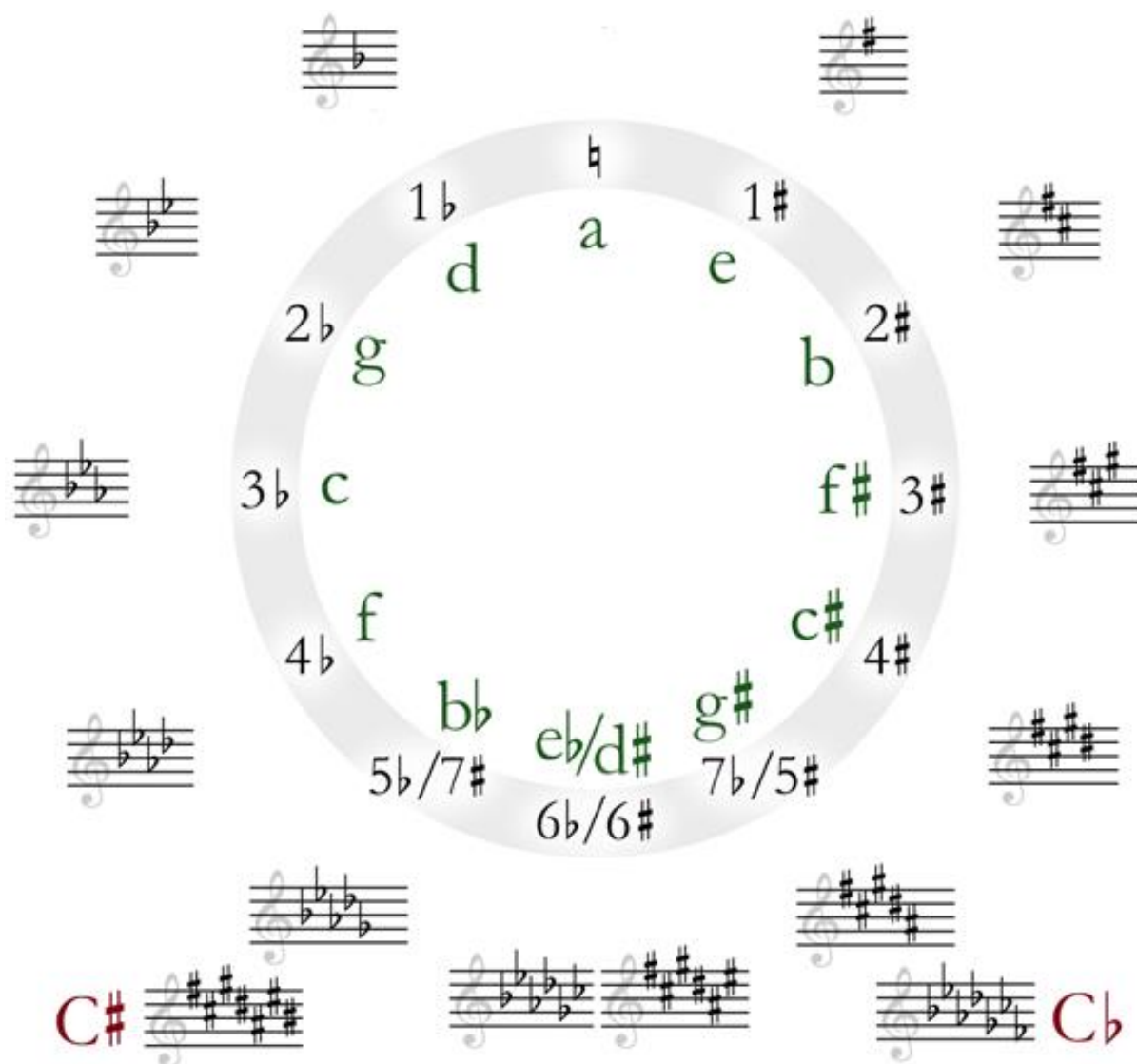
- Cb - Abm
- Gb - Ebm
- Db - Bbm
- Ab - Fm
- Eb - Cm
- Bb - Gm
- F - Dm
- C - Am
- G - Em
- D - Bm
- A - F#m
- E - C#m
- B - G#m
- F# - D#m
- C# - A#m

You don't need to memorize all relative keys, if you want to know the relative minor just go to the sixth degree in the Major scale.

Although the notes are the same, there is a difference between two relative keys: the tonic (first tone in the scale) is different and this leads to different sounds. If you play in the A Minor you will get a gloomier sound compared to C Major.

Minor scales are also synonymously with minor keys. If you hear someone mention that a piano piece is played in C# Minor, it means that it depends on the C# minor scale. One famous example is Beethoven's "Sonata in C# minor", better known as the "Moonlight Sonata".

The Circle of fifths



A common way to present a visualization of the relationship between notes and keys is the *circle of fifths*. It is called so because each note, turning clockwise, is a perfect fifth interval away from the next. Turning counterclockwise will instead result in fourth intervals (which is the reason for it being called the *circle of fourths* as well).

As seen in the image above, the sharps (\sharp) increase for each clockwise step. And vice versa, the flats (\flat) increase for every counterclockwise step. This can be fundamental for memorizing the minor scales and often when scales are listed they are ordered this way.

We can comprise this into a list of all keys with accidentals:

Am — no flats or sharps

Em — one sharp

Bm — two sharps

F#m — three sharps

C#m — four sharps

G#m — five sharps

D#m — six sharps

Dm — one flat

Gm — two flats

Cm — three flats

Fm — four flats

Bbm — five flats

Ebm — six flats.

The list includes only 13 keys out of the total 17 keys. The A#m key includes seven sharps and is often represented by the enharmonic equivalent Bbm. The others – Gb, Db and Ab — are also represented by their enharmonic equivalents because of the double sharps (×) these contains make them problematic in sheet music situations.

You don't have to memorize the circle of fifth directly. You can instead start by playing the A Minor Scale and locate the fifth scale step, which will tell you what the next step in the circle of fifth is.

A, B, C, D, **E**, F, G (the A Minor Scale with the 5th step in bold).

You can do the same thing by playing the E Minor scale to find the third step in the circle of fifth.

E, F#, G, A, **B**, C, D (the E Minor Scale with the 5th step in bold).

This time, it was the B Minor Scale. You can continue by this method to find the other steps in the circle of fifth in clockwise order.

If going counterclockwise from A, now it is the fourth step that shows the next step in the circle.

A, B, C, **D**, E, F, G (the A Minor Scale with the 4th step in bold).

The rest of the steps counterclockwise in the circle can be found by the same method.

Patterns to recognize

When we are shifting from A Minor to E Minor, we can notice that the second note in the scale get raised one semi-step.

E, **F#**, G, A, B, C, D (the E Minor Scale with the 2nd step in bold).

When we once again move on to the next scale by turning clockwise in the circle of fifths, to B Minor, it is once again the second note in the scale that are raised one step in relation to the previous one (E Minor).

B, **C#**, E, F#, G, A (the B Minor Scale with the 2nd step in bold).

The same pattern applies for the rest of the scales every time another extra sharp is added.

If we instead turn counterclockwise, from A Minor to D Minor, we can notice that the fourth note in the scale get lowered one semi-step (compared to the notes in the previous A Minor scale).

D, E, F, G, A, **Bb**, C (the D Minor Scale with the 6th step in bold).

By moving again in the same direction to G Minor, the pattern is repeating: once again the sixth note in the scale get lowered one step compared to the previous scale (D Minor).

G, A, Bb, C, D, **Eb**, F (G Minor Scale with the 6th step in bold).

We have learned that the circle of fifths can be used to see how sharps (turning clockwise) or flats (turning counterclockwise) increase for every step.

Summary

To summarize, to learn and memorize all minor scales by this method you

- 1) begin with A Minor (exclusively white keys) and count five steps from the start note, which turns out to be the E note and means that the next scale in the cycle order is E Minor.
- 2) The Em scale starts from E (of course) and include the same notes as the previous scale (Am) except that the second note is raised one step.

- 3) Going counterclockwise, start again with A Minor and locate the sixth note, which is the start note for the next scale.
- 4) That scale includes the same note as A Minor except the sixth note, which is lowered one step.

By playing through all minor scales by this method you will also learn the circle of fifth, which will be beneficial in other aspects, such as chord theory. This method gives you a device to better learn and memorize the minor scales.

Image source:

[Commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

Part 2: Piano pieces

Piano pieces by transposition

A fun way to learn the minor scales is to play piano pieces in different keys and take notice about which notes are involved. Any music piece can be transposed (moving the notes up or down by a constant interval to make it match a different key).

In the last part of this lesson, you will have the chance to play the “Moonlight Sonata” (in a shortened version) by Ludwig van Beethoven in three different keys which correspond to C# minor, F# minor and C minor, respectively.

Moonlight Sonata (Piano Sonata Op. 27 No. 2)

L.v. Beethoven

The first system of the Moonlight Sonata. The treble clef staff contains a continuous eighth-note arpeggiated pattern in the right hand. The bass clef staff contains a simple harmonic accompaniment in the left hand, starting with a whole note chord and followed by half notes.

The second system of the Moonlight Sonata. The treble clef staff continues the eighth-note arpeggiated pattern. The bass clef staff continues the harmonic accompaniment, with some notes in the right hand appearing in the bass clef staff.

The third system of the Moonlight Sonata. The treble clef staff continues the eighth-note arpeggiated pattern. The bass clef staff continues the harmonic accompaniment.

The fourth system of the Moonlight Sonata. The treble clef staff continues the eighth-note arpeggiated pattern. The bass clef staff continues the harmonic accompaniment, ending with a double bar line.

Moonlight Sonata (Piano Sonata Op. 27 No. 2)

L.v. Beethoven

The first system of the Moonlight Sonata. The treble clef staff contains a continuous eighth-note arpeggiated pattern in A major. The bass clef staff contains a simple harmonic accompaniment with whole notes and half notes.

The second system of the Moonlight Sonata. The treble clef staff continues the arpeggiated pattern. The bass clef staff introduces a more active accompaniment with eighth-note chords.

The third system of the Moonlight Sonata, starting with a measure number '5' above the treble clef. The treble clef staff continues the arpeggiated pattern. The bass clef staff features a simple harmonic accompaniment with whole notes.

Moonlight Sonata (Piano Sonata Op. 27 No. 2)

L.v. Beethoven

The first system of the Moonlight Sonata, measures 1-3. The treble clef staff features a continuous eighth-note arpeggiated pattern in the right hand. The bass clef staff contains a single half note in the first measure, followed by two measures of rests.

The second system of the Moonlight Sonata, measures 4-6. The treble clef staff continues the eighth-note arpeggiated pattern. The bass clef staff has a half note in the first measure, a quarter note in the second measure, and a half note in the third measure.

The third system of the Moonlight Sonata, measures 7-9. The treble clef staff continues the eighth-note arpeggiated pattern. The bass clef staff has a half note in the first measure, a quarter note in the second measure, and a half note in the third measure. A fermata is placed over the final half note in the treble clef staff.