

The Harmonic Minor Scale in Jazz

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The harmonic and melodic (ascending version only) minor scales are the forms of the minor scale that are most frequently used by jazz improvisers. The harmonic minor scale is particularly useful from the perspective of voice leading. The masters of the Bebop language employed harmonic minor to create slightly more complicated melodic phrases than had been used previously in jazz. What follows is an illustration of some of the common uses of harmonic minor in jazz.

Construction

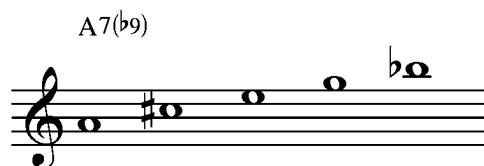
The harmonic minor scale can be distinguished from other major and minor scales by the presence of an augmented second interval between scale degree six and seven. In addition, the scale is comprised of a minor triad (shown below in open note heads) and a diminished seventh chord (closed note heads).



Try playing the following exercises to feel and hear how simply alternating the minor triad and diminished seventh chords sounds (this exercise has nearly limitless shapes and permutations, so experiment!). This sounds great over a D minor chord that lasts at least a few bars, when the music is definitely in the key of D minor (as opposed to D minor functioning as a ii chord in a different prevailing key). This is also simply an effective theory and ear training exercise!



In traditional music theory, the vii^{07} chord in a minor key can substitute as a chord of dominant function and resolve directly to i . The exact same principle is true in jazz music. The diminished seventh chord within the harmonic minor scale is the important piece of the puzzle in terms of good jazz line construction. Furthermore, we can best use this scale over the dominant seventh chord of the key (in the case of this handout, an $\text{A}^{7(\flat 9)}$ chord resolving to D minor). This is the case because the diminished seventh chord within the harmonic minor scale is the same chord that begins on the third of the $\text{A}^{7(\flat 9)}$ chord, as seen below.

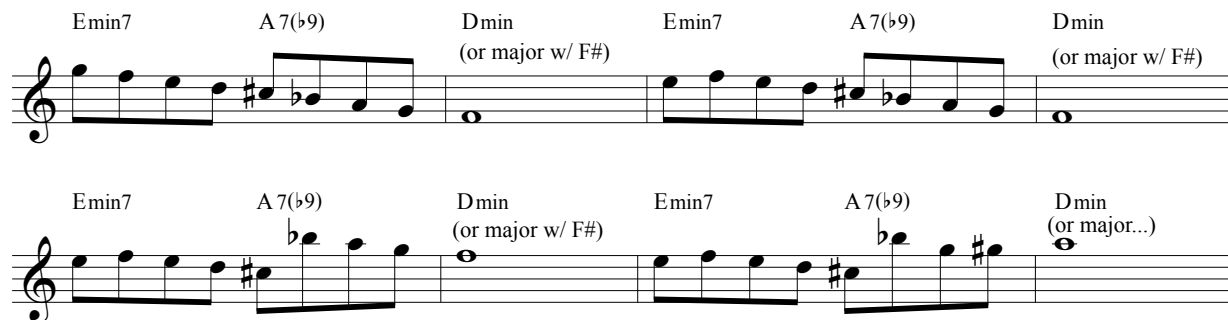


It is imperative to construct lines over the $\text{A}^{7(\flat 9)}$ that begin on chord tones of that chord. These are two common “resolution devices” that work well in this situation:



Notice that both fragments begin on the third of the A^7 chord. It is imperative to place the third of this chord in the most prominent position as possible. In both examples, notice the smooth voice leading into D minor that both lines create.

The preceding material demonstrates the basic use of the harmonic minor scale in jazz. Below are a number of lines that utilize this concept and might be useful to practice and ingrain in your playing. (Note: the $\text{E}^{\text{min}7}$ chords often are $\text{E}^{\text{min}7(\flat 5)}$ chords.)





In his book *Elements of the Jazz Language for the Developing Improviser*, Jerry Coker dedicates Chapter 4 to this concept, which he refers to the “3-^b9” concept. He supplements his discussion with excerpts from classic jazz tunes and significant solos. It is a very good follow-up to my basic introduction to this idea.

Here is perhaps the best way to summarize the concept:

You are playing the harmonic minor scale **of the key you are going to**
 over the dominant chord that precedes it!
 (making certain to put the dominant chord’s chord tones on the downbeats)