

Guitar Secrets – Harmonic Minor Revealed

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Foreword

Learning how to play and use scales has always been a large part of every guitar player's practice schedule. Players have spent countless hours practicing scales up and down all over the guitar, sometimes with great success and sometimes with frustration as the end result.

Those of you that know me from my books and videos, or years at the Guitar Institute of Technology (GIT), know I've been involved in guitar education for a long time. I've seen hundreds of students struggle with the same problems that I faced when going through the process of learning how to play and use scales. After many years of experience, both playing and teaching, I've become a big believer in cutting through the B.S. in learning, and getting to the point of it all, which is playing music.

The presentation and ideas in this book are definitely from a "player's" perspective. We're not going to get too in-depth into the history and "classical theory" of the harmonic minor scale. We'll focus more on its uses in contemporary styles like rock, jazz and fusion. Don't get me wrong; there will be no shortcuts here when it comes to modern music theory. As far as I'm concerned, all guitar players must have a good working knowledge of harmony and theory and the ability to read music, even if it's only simple chord charts.

Three Steps to Success

Learning to improvise can be thought of as a three step process. The first step is typically the learning of scales. Using either the "key center" approach or the "modal" approach, students should learn at least a few useful fingerings of the major scale and be able to play them in all keys. Also, in this first step, players need to learn about harmony and theory to help them understand which scale fits over which chord. Armed with some theory knowledge, students can immediately begin playing over even difficult chord changes by simply switching to the "correct" scale or key center for the given chord.

Most players, after a period of time, will begin to find this first step limiting. They may say that they can't seem to make their solos sound like the chords, that they sound too "scaler." Moving on to step two, we introduce arpeggios as a tool to create chord sounds. Mixing arpeggios with our scales starts making our solos more harmonically intelligent.

Step three is the "final frontier" of improvising, as we now start really learning music. So far, we've been using scales and arpeggios, but may not have been able to make our solos sound melodic. Now it's time to learn melodies. Most of us need to learn a repertoire of melodic lines to use when we improvise. Almost every one of our favorite players have, at one time or another, learned lines by copying recordings or transcriptions. I've met many student who tell me they don't want to sound like anyone else and feel they shouldn't copy other players. They soon realize that the road to "originality" goes through the land of copying licks, phrasing and concepts used by favorite players. Eventually, these "influences" merge together into your own original style.

One last thing. A common misconception about improvising is the phrase: "Playing what you hear." Many players say they do this, leading students to think that they simply make music up on the spot. What they are really saying they are doing is "playing what they know."

Improvising is the spontaneous performance of ideas that come to you in the midst of soloing. You may not know ahead of time what you are going to play, but armed with scales, arpeggios, melodic ideas and theoretical concepts, you can play a creative and spontaneous improvised solo.

Unit 2: Fingerings of the Harmonic Minor Scale

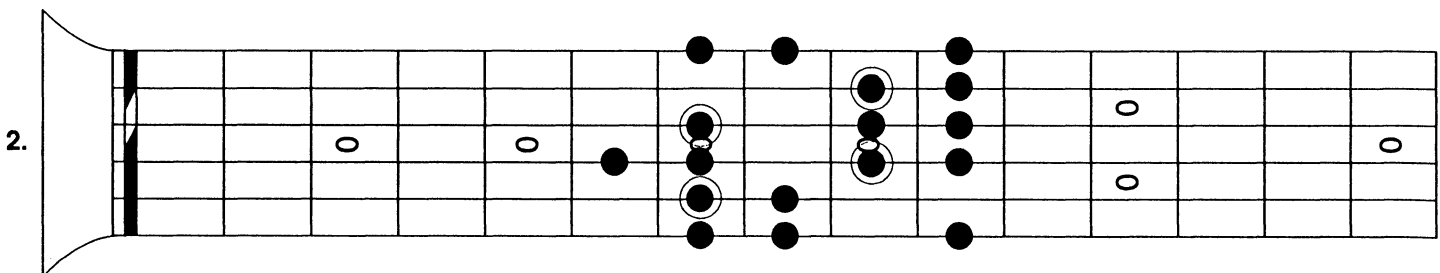
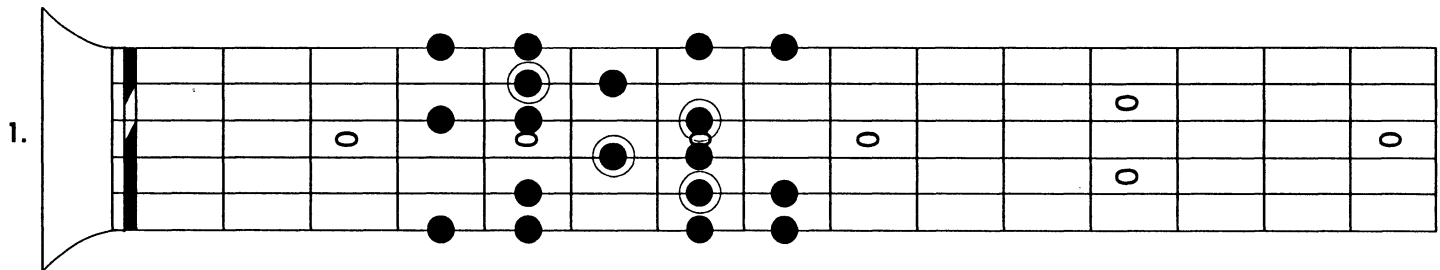
It's time to grab our guitar and learn to play this thing. Following are five common fingerboard positions for an A harmonic scale. If this scale is completely new to you, just start out by learning a few fingerings like #2 and #5. The reason for having five fingerings is simply to cover the complete fingerboard. These are the traditional "four-finger-per-fret" patterns in about two octaves. Later on, we'll get into some three-note-per-string and across the fingerboard horizontal fingerings. If you already know some harmonic minor fingerings, stick with them or feel free to modify any of the fingerings here to suit your technique and style. The ultimate goal to strive for is to be able to play harmonic minor scales anywhere on the guitar in any key.

I don't want to insult your intelligence by showing the same patterns in every key. I'll assume you understand the "moveability" of chords and scales on the fingerboard, where if you know something in one key, you can simply slide it up or down to any other key. Also, I really want to get you to think of scales as having no beginning and no end. You are only limited by the lowest and highest notes on the guitar. Don't be too concerned with the bottom or top notes of each individual pattern. You'll find that each has a different starting and ending note limited only to those notes within your reach, in that position. Remember, scales are simply a row of notes and you should learn to control the scale by being able to start and end on any note of it. Eventually, over the years, individual scale fingerings will begin to blend together into one large pattern—the whole fingerboard. Then when you think of C harmonic minor, for example, you will see the whole fingerboard as one continuous C harmonic pattern from top to bottom.

③ Example 4

A Harmonic Minor Scale

(Learn as E7 (#5, b9))



Unit 6: Arpeggios From Harmonic Minor

SUPERIMPOSE refers to the art of "superimposing" different arpeggios over a given chord, producing a variety of extended and altered chord sounds. Believe me, this is the only way to go when it comes to learning and using arpeggios. By using this concept you will find it unnecessary to learn hundreds of possible arpeggios. By superimposing different basic arpeggios over any given chord you can create just about any chord sound with just a few arpeggio patterns.

Before we talk about how to use arpeggios for harmonic minor, let's learn some common fingerings. The goal here is to learn at least a few arpeggio fingering patterns for all the resulting chords from the harmonized harmonic minor scale. We will be dealing generally with four-note 7th chord versions, but you should also know the triad shapes, too. If you do not know arpeggios for a minor 7th, major 7th, dominant 7th and minor 7(b5), start by learning these first. The reason is these four arpeggios are also found in the diatonic major scale and are extremely useful if not absolutely necessary for good improvising.

When we look at the harmonized harmonic minor we see these same four chords, but in different locations. The II is a min7(b5), the IV is a min7, the V is a dom7 and the VI is a maj7. The three remaining chords are the I, min(maj7); III, maj7(#5) and VII, dim7. So, if you already can play the first four diatonic arpeggios, you only have to learn three more.

Harmonic Minor Arpeggios in Two Master Positions

This next series of diagrams show the harmonic minor arpeggios gathered together in two useful positions. This is how I see and use the arpeggios. They are superimposed over what I call the two "master" dominant 7th chord positions. When I think of A7 at the fifth fret, for example, I not only have the D harmonic minor scale pattern under my fingers but all seven arpeggios to draw from.

Position 1: A Harmonic Minor (E7)

10 Example 9A

I Am(maj7)

The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The scale is written as a sequence of notes: A, B, C, D, E, F#, G, A. Below the staff, a guitar fretboard is shown with a capo at the fifth fret. The notes of the scale are placed on the strings: A (5th fret, 1st string), B (6th fret, 2nd string), C (7th fret, 3rd string), D (7th fret, 4th string), E (8th fret, 5th string), F# (9th fret, 6th string), G (9th fret, 1st string), and A (10th fret, 2nd string). Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-4 below the notes. The fretboard diagram shows solid black dots for fretted notes and open circles for open strings.