

MOVING ON UP

Understanding Different Types of Scales

■ Everyone learns to play scales when first starting out on an instrument. Hopefully, you're still diligent about using them in your warm-up routine. But do you really understand the theory behind what you're playing?

A scale can start on any note, and then follows a specific pattern of whole-steps (major seconds) and half-steps (minor seconds), depending on the type of scale. The most commonly used scales are major and minor.

Major

A major scale consists of seven different notes plus an eighth pitch, which is the same as the first, but played an octave higher. We can refer to the notes as scale degrees one through eight. In a major scale, the interval, or distance, between scale degrees two and three is a half-step and the interval between scale degrees seven and eight is a half-step. All of the other intervals are whole-steps. So, the pattern of intervals is whole-whole-half-whole-whole-whole-half. The scale follows the key signature of the note that it starts and ends on, allowing that interval pattern to fall into place.

D major:



For a fun tool that's always "at hand," check out the Chromatic Watches at chromaticwatch.com. The clock numbers are replaced with all 12 music note names by half-step, so that you can easily figure out any scale pattern at any time!

Minor

Minor scales are a little trickier because there are three different types. For two of them, you actually have to stray from the key signature and use accidentals. However, the simplest minor scale, the natural minor, stays within its key signature. Its interval pattern is whole-half-whole-whole-half-whole-whole.

D minor (natural):



The harmonic minor scale is identical to the natural minor except that the seventh scale degree is raised by a half-step with an accidental. This means that the interval between scale degrees six and seven becomes even larger than a whole step; the interval is an "augmented second," or the equivalent of three half-steps. If you play through the scale, you'll hear that the augmented second gives it an Arabic flavor.

D minor (harmonic):



The melodic minor is the most common type of minor scale. In the melodic minor, scale degrees six and seven are each raised by a half-step on the way up the scale, and then return to their natural positions on the way down.

D minor (melodic):

