The three minors: natural, harmonic & melodic

Minor isn't one scale — it's a **family of three**. All share the lowered 3rd that makes them minor; they differ in one thing: **how they climb back home**. Colors: **coral = lowered**, **cyan = raised back**.

1 · NATURAL MINOR — THE PLAIN FORM



The natural minor scale: the **3rd, 6th and 7th lowered**. Beautiful and dusky — but listen to the top: B♭ is a **whole step** below C, so the climb home has no real pull. Natural minor drifts rather than arrives.

2 · HARMONIC MINOR — FIX THE PULL



Raise the 7th back to B♮ and the leading tone returns — 7 leans hungrily into 8 again. This B♮ is exactly why **V stays major in minor keys**: the dominant borrows it. The price: a wide, exotic step-and-a-half from A♭ up to B♮ — an augmented 2nd that gives harmonic minor its dramatic flavor.

3 · MELODIC MINOR — SMOOTH THE CLIMB



Melodies often want the pull **without** the exotic gap — so going up, **raise the 6th too** (A♮ and B♮) and the climb turns smooth. Coming down there's nothing to pull toward, so **everything relaxes back** to natural minor: B♭, A♭. One scale, two directions.

Try it Play all three slowly and listen to the top of each climb: natural minor **drifts**, harmonic minor **pulls** (with that deliciously dramatic A♭–B♮ corner), melodic minor **glides**. All three share the same home and the same lowered 3rd — they're one family, three ways up the hill. Composers mix them freely, even inside a single melody. Hear melodic minor in a real piece: the Minuet in G minor climbs it in bar 29 (Handout 381). Is the 7th a whole step below home (the **subtonic**) or a half step (the leading tone)? Practice: Exercise 59.
The chords each form gives: Handout 394.

LISTEN
Scan to hear every example
tissimo.co/worksheets/three-minors

© 2026 Tissimo. All rights reserved.