

Lesson 30: Triads in minor keys

In this lesson you will learn about triad names, Roman numerals, triad qualities in minor keys, and the effect of raising the leading tone.

As with the major, it is possible to build a triad on each degree of a minor scale. (We will use the key of A minor as our example, but all of the relationships can be transposed to other minor keys.) The name of each triad is the name of its root: tonic, supertonic, mediant, subdominant, dominant, submediant, and subtonic. Roman numerals also are used to name triads.

Triad names

i Tonic ii° Supertonic III Mediant iv Subdominant v Dominant VI Submediant VII Subtonic

In using the dominant and subtonic triads, composers routinely raise the seventh degree of the minor scale to create a leading tone (as discussed in Chapter 3). This gives these harmonies a greater impetus to move toward i (tonic). The common alteration in minor keys of scale-degrees $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$ has the potential to affect other chords also, but use of a raised $\hat{7}$ to make V and vii° triads is by far the most common. As a result, the V and vii° chords are the same in major and minor keys.

Alternative forms of V and VII

v altered to V VII altered to vii° (subtonic) (leading tone)

In the rest of this book, as in most music, we will assume that the dominant triad will be a major chord (V) and the leading-tone triad will be a diminished chord (vii°), both using the raised form of scale-degree $\hat{7}$. Of the seven triads in a minor scale, then, typically three are major (III, V, and VI), two are minor (i and iv), and two are diminished (ii° and vii°).

Triad qualities

i m ii° d III M iv m V M VI M vii° d

In identifying chords, Roman numerals are combined with figured bass numbers. As in major keys, the figured bass numbers are usually omitted when the triad is in $\frac{5}{3}$ position and abbreviated to 6 when the triad is in $\frac{6}{3}$ position. Also as in major, $\frac{6}{4}$ chords occur relatively rarely and under special conditions to be discussed later. They are thus omitted here.

Triads in minor

Am B° C Dm E F G#°
i ii° III iv V VI vii°

Am/C B°/D C/E Dm/F E/G# F/A G#°/B
i⁶ ii⁶ III⁶ iv⁶ V⁶ VI⁶ vii⁶