

The Sixth Harmonic Environment

The sixth harmonic environment is also called the natural minor or “relative minor” scale. Almost every song you’ve ever heard in a minor key is based in the 6th harmonic environment.

6 · 7 | 1 · 2 · 3 4 · 5 · | 6

An integrated view of major and minor keys

Most music students are taught that music is based in either a major key or a minor key. If the music is in a minor key, that means that all of its notes are derived from a minor scale. The most common minor scale is what we call the “natural minor” scale:

1 · 2 b3 · 4 · 5 b6 · b7 · | 1

Now this is certainly a fair analysis. If we consider the tonal center to be note 1, then we would indeed find all of the remaining sounds in exactly the locations shown above. We have to alter notes 3, 6 and 7 of the major scale, which results in this new construction called a minor scale. But the advantage of this point of view is that we can continue calling our tonal center note 1, exactly as we do in major keys.

But what I want to show you is that this “natural minor scale” is in fact nothing more than the sixth harmonic environment of the major scale:

6 · 7 | 1 · 2 · 3 4 · 5 · | 6
1 · 2 b3 · 4 · 5 b6 · b7 · | 1

In other words, even these minor sounds actually come directly from the major scale. It's just that now note 6 is acting as the tonal center. So in fact, the change from a major key to its relative minor key is not a key change at all. The song is still using the exact same seven notes as before. It's just that now we're feeling note 6 as the tonal center instead of note 1.

Practice tips

Almost every song you've ever heard is based in either the first or the sixth harmonic environments. If a song sounds like it's in a major key to your ear, then the tonal center is probably note 1. If it sounds like it's in a minor key to your ear, then the tonal center is probably note 6.

For this reason, the sixth harmonic environment is the most important set of sounds in all Western music after the first harmonic environment. Just mastering these two sets of sounds would enable you to understand and play almost every song you've ever heard.

Because the sixth harmonic environment is so important in our music, knowing these sounds very deeply will give you a huge advantage in learning to understand music by ear. For this reason, it makes sense to give special importance to the sixth harmonic environment in your singing practice.

Dedicate a few minutes each day to singing the tonal numbers in the sixth harmonic environment. You can use your instrument in the beginning to help you clarify the sounds. But soon you will become so familiar with these sounds that you'll be able to continue hearing them in your mind throughout the day. This is our ultimate goal, because at that point the sounds truly become yours, and they will become part of your own personal musical vocabulary.

Using the jam tracks

In the accompanying mp3 jam tracks, the filename tells you where to locate note 6 on your instrument. (Remember to transpose this note for your instrument if you play a transposing instrument.)

For example, the jam track in the key of A indicates that note 6 = F# for this track. So you just need to go to the note F# on your instrument and imagine this to be your note 6. Then use the tonal map drawing above to construct the rest of the scale.

The jam tracks in this collection let you experience the sounds of each harmonic environment in three very different ways:

Meditative. This is the best place to start. The meditative tracks give you lots of space for deep contemplation of the sounds. These tracks are ideal for learning the musical lessons contained in each harmonic environment. Play slowly and listen deeply to each note you play. Think of this activity as your opportunity to get to know the raw materials of your art. Later in the other tracks you can focus on creating music with these sounds. But first you should take the time to really get to know each sound, and the meditative tracks are perfect for that.

Modern. The modern tracks allow you to hear each harmonic environment in a style that will be more familiar to you. These tracks will help you discover the beautiful melodic possibilities that each harmonic environment offers you. Use these tracks to practice creating your own music, and embrace the creative challenge of finding your own musical voice within these diverse styles.

Jazz. The jazz tracks give you an opportunity to really stretch out and follow your imagination. These tracks provide the ideal supporting environment for more intellectual or abstract modal playing. Use these tracks to push the limits of your playing, both creatively and physically.

Note about transposing for wind instruments

Remember that not all instruments use the same names for the notes. In the tracks, the key listed for each jam track always refers to the concert key. If you play an instrument that is not in concert key, remember to transpose this key name to the corresponding key on your instrument. (If you're not sure how to do this for your instrument, a quick Google search will lead you to many clear explanations.)