

SHREDDED METAL

HARMONIC MINOR MADNESS: PART ONE

For the next two issues I'd like to take a look at the Harmonic minor scale. This scale is frequently heard in many different genres of metal (power, prog, black, thrash, death, etc.) You can also hear it in jazz, latin, 'classical', flamenco, and many other styles. For rock guitar and metal, it was popularised by Swedish virtuoso Yngwie Malmsteen in the early 1980's.

EXERCISE 1

Here we have E Natural minor and E Harmonic minor played up the neck on one string. As you can see, the only difference is that the seventh note is raised – from D to D#. So the easiest way to think of it is as Natural minor with a raised (major) seventh. Due to this sharp seven, you get a tone-and-a-half gap between the sixth and seventh notes. It is this interval that gives Harmonic minor its mysterious and 'classical'-type sound. The formula for Harmonic minor is: 1-2-b3-4-5-b6-7.

The image shows two musical staves for guitar. The top staff is a treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff is labeled 'E Natural minor' and shows a scale starting on the open string (0) and moving up to the 12th fret. The notes are E, F, G, A, B, C, D. The second staff is labeled 'E Harmonic minor' and shows a scale starting on the open string (0) and moving up to the 12th fret. The notes are E, F, G, A, B, C, D#. Below the staves is a tablature section with two staves labeled 'TAB'. The first staff has fret numbers 0, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 12. The second staff has fret numbers 0, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 12.

EXERCISE 2

One of your main goals as a guitarist should be to play scales fluently across the fretboard without being limited to just one or two positions. As I've mentioned in previous columns, three note-per-string groupings are a great way of doing this. Arranging Harmonic minor in this way yields seven different shapes/patterns (for each of the seven notes of the scale). Exercise 2 shows these seven fingerings in the key of E Harmonic minor. It's important to note that although only the first fingering starts on the root note, all the other patterns will still be in E minor as long as you keep E as the root note. If each consecutive starting note was considered the root, you would be playing the modes of Harmonic minor (of which the fifth – Phrygian dominant – is the most common). Due to the minor third (three fret) interval in the scale, there can be some awkward stretches in these patterns, so don't neglect your fourth finger. There is a lot of work that can be done with Exercise 2. Practice all the patterns ascending and descending, build up the speed with a metronome, and try it in other metal-friendly keys (such as F#m, Am, Dm, etc). Ultimately, you want to be able to play them up and down the neck in all twelve keys.

E Harmonic minor

1. 2.

3. 4.

5. 6.

7.

EXERCISE 3

This is an example of how you could combine these three note-per-string fingerings into a fast, 'shred'-style Harmonic minor lick. It starts by ascending/descending using pattern 5, and then bar two uses patterns 6 and 7. At the end of this bar it skips to fingering 2 as it continues into bar three by ascending in six-note groupings. The lick finishes by resolving to the fifth degree (B) using pattern 3.

T
A
B

□ V □ *sim.*

Even if you're already familiar with Harmonic minor, I hope this column has still been useful by showing you some different ways of playing it. Next issue I'll discuss some other ways of playing this cool-sounding scale.