

and affective implications. Many musicians of every stripe find the multiplicity of minor scales to be confusing to both the mind and the ear. There is a strong tendency to bail out of full mastery of the minor system. And why not, we might logically assume? The minor scales aren't that important anyway—that's why they're called "minor!"

Pervasiveness of minor

Of course as it turns out, the minor modes are no less basic or fundamental to Western music culture than major. Minor modes are in no sense "minor" in the implication of "unimportant," "ignorable," or "inconsequential." **Minor, in the musical sense, is major, in the generic, common sense.** First of all, there is a vast accumulation of minor key compositions in almost every musical style. It may be that from a statistical point of view the number of minor key compositions in, say, the classic jazz repertoire is smaller than the number of major key compositions, but the size, range, and stature of the body of minor key compositions in that repertoire is substantial and cannot be ignored. We cannot imagine the jazz repertoire stripped of standards like "Alone Together," "Beautiful Love," and "Autumn Leaves," or with jazz compositions like "Mr. P. C.," "Round Midnight," "Whisper Not," and "A Night in Tunisia" deleted. These minor key compositions are part of the foundation of the music. Furthermore, there are a great many important songs whose key center is completely ambiguous between minor and relative major. Songs like "My Funny Valentine," "In a Sentimental Mood," "I Hear a Rhapsody," and "Blue Skies" (and its jazz contrafact, "In Walked Bud") all start off in a minor key even though they finish in the relative major.

But beyond the explicitly and ambiguously minor key compositions, there are innumerable modulations to minor keys within compositions that are regarded as being in major keys. Take, for example, a standard tune that many jazz musicians like to play, "It Could Happen to You" (Example I.1 below has the chords for the first 16 bars). I have not included all the alternate chord changes and reharmonizations that have become popular with this song—just something close to the original harmony.

Example I.1

Chord changes for the first 16 bars of "It Could Happen to You":

- Bar 1: $E^b_{MA}7$
- Bar 2: $G_{MI}7^{(b5)}$
- Bar 3: $C7^{(b9)}$
- Bar 4: $F_{MI}7$
- Bar 5: $A_{MI}7^{(b5)}$
- Bar 6: $D7$
- Bar 7: $E^b_{MA}7$
- Bar 8: $A^b_{MA}7$
- Bar 9: $G_{MI}7^{(b5)}$
- Bar 10: $C7^{(b9)}$
- Bar 11: $F_{MI}7$
- Bar 12: $A^b_{MI}7$
- Bar 13: D^b7
- Bar 14: $1. E^b7$
- Bar 15: $D_{MI}7^{(b5)}$
- Bar 16: $G7^{(b9)}$

Chord changes for the final four bars (13-16):

- Bar 13: $C_{MI}7$
- Bar 14: $F7$
- Bar 15: $F_{MI}7$
- Bar 16: B^b7

In my functional analysis of the harmony to this song below (and all other harmonic analysis in this book), I shall use the traditional classical system of naming chords. In this system capital Roman numerals indicate chords with major thirds and small Roman numerals indicate chords with minor thirds. So a chord with the name “ii7” is a minor chord with a seventh whose root is the second degree of the scale (in the key of Eb major, it would be an F minor seventh chord), while a chord with the name “II7” is a major chord with a seventh whose root is the second degree of the scale (in Eb major, it would be an F seventh, a dominant chord).

We say that this song is in the key of Eb Major, since that is where it starts and ultimately that’s where it ends up. But when we look at the song’s harmonic movement, we discover that it spends much of its time outside the key of Eb Major. The second bar contains the iii7(b5)-VI7(b9) chords, which constitute a sequence characteristic of ii minor, and this sequence resolves to ii minor in the third bar. The fourth bar contains a sequence parallel to the one in the second bar, a whole step higher, and characteristic of iii minor. The next two bars are solidly in Eb Major, but then the three that follow are like bars 2 and 3, but with a slower harmonic rhythm. And then we move from ii minor to iv minor before returning to I Major. But that’s only one bar of major, and then immediately we have a sequence that takes us into vi minor.

The point here is that while this is a song in a major key, the harmonic movement of the song involves approaches to, or modulations into, the minor keys based on the second, third, fourth, and sixth degrees of that major scale. And over the course of sixteen bars the song spends as much time in those minor keys as it does in the major key indicated by its key signature. From the point of view of the jazz improviser, there’s no way to play this song without being able to move gracefully into F minor, G minor, Ab minor, and C minor.

“It Could Happen to You” may not be completely typical, but the harmonic phenomenon it embodies—extensive modulation to minor keys inside songs that are apparently in major keys—is an extremely common one. While there may not be that many major key tunes that actually spend *most* of their time modulating to minor keys, most tunes do so *somewhere*. Because of this one would be hard pressed to improvise for any length of time without dealing extensively with minor key chord progressions. So minor most certainly isn’t minor, even when the basic context is major. We cannot ignore a basic building block even if we occasionally find a structure that doesn’t make use of it. As an improviser, you must be *just as fluent* in the minor keys as the major keys in order to be able to deal with virtually any “standard” jazz repertoire.

Advocating minor

Since minor is major, and, moreover, since it is more complicated than major and also probably less thoroughly practiced than major by many musicians, here is a book that is devoted to investigating minor key harmony and its implications for improvisers. **This book is an attempt to advocate minor key harmony.** It assumes that its readers know, or can easily find elsewhere, the basics of major key harmony (the intervals and modes of the major scale, and the mechanics of the ii7-V7- IΔ7 progression), and it is devoted entirely to the theory and improvisational practice of minor key harmony.