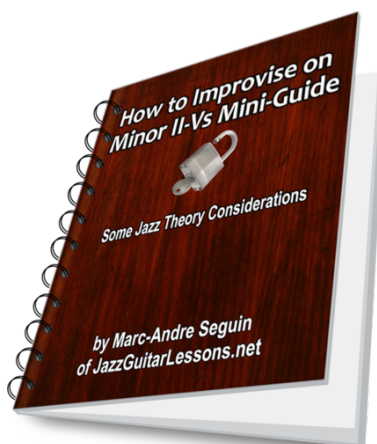


How to Improvise on Minor II-V's Mini-Guide

Some Jazz Theory Considerations

by Marc-Andre Seguin



Foreword

The minor II-V's and II-V-I progressions are troublesome for most players. I found out that even fairly experienced musicians have some difficulties coping with this basic cadence in the midst of improvisation.

This article is aimed towards the typical intermediate jazz improviser (and perhaps the beginning improviser that wants to understand more of the theory behind minor II-V's). I want you to discover a few ways to finally play as easily on the minor II-V as on a good old Dm7 to G7.

In the beginning steps, I will propose a simple and somewhat *wrong* solution for approaching the minor II-V-I progression. It's like a little shortcut. After, we'll dissect some of the most used chords and scales possibilities for each individual chord within this cadence. The three chords in the cadence (namely IIm7(b5), V7(alt) and I minor) have multiple opportunities for exploring chords and scales. Some are better or easier than others, of course.

Lastly, from all material covered in the article, we will select exactly one scale for each chord in the minor II-V- I and from there I will propose the *best solution* for improvisation on this progression. If you can cope with most minor cadences with this last solution, you will always be playing the right notes in the right place and have continuity in your melodic ideas.

If you know my writing a little bit (and if you've been reading once or twice on JazzGuitarLessons.net), you're already familiar with my thoroughness. You obviously don't **need** all of which I'm presenting here. I simply find it's a good idea to be aware, or at least have some sort of reference for this kind of information. All this material can be applied in virtually an infinity of beautiful lines. As always, it's all yours to discover. I'm barely presenting the theory here, you deal with making music! (-:

If you want to skip to the playing right away, go straight to the last page, where I created a cheat sheet for you to print out and use in the practice room. Enjoy!

M-A Seguin
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The Basics

Some Spelling

First of, you should be able to spell the chord progression in all keys. There's no way around it really. Recite the **names of the chords** in 12 keys through the cycle of fourth like this...

In C : Dm7(b5) – G7(b9) – Cm(maj7)

In F : Gm7(b5) – C7(b9) – Fm(maj7)

In Bb : Cm7(b5) – F7(b9) - Bbm(maj7)

etc.

[for now the I chord is a minor triad with an added major 7th. Hence : “C minor major seven”. It's like a C major 7th except the third is flat like this : 1-b3-5-7.]

In spoken words it will sound like this : “D minor seven flat five, G seven flat 9, C minor major seven. Next key. G minor seven flat five, C seven flat 9, F minor major 7, etc.” Of course, you should learn to spell the enharmonic keys as well... For instance Db = C#, Gb = F# and so on.

In fact you will have 15 practical keys to remember :

C – F – Bb – Eb – Ab – Db – C# - Gb – F# - Cb – B – E – A – D - G

The key of “C flat”, really ?? Oh yes sir, indeed. It can come in handy on some occasions. In my very own (personal) perception, I like to think of a minor II-V in Cb rather than in B. All I have to do is deal with the familiar Dm7(b5) G7(b9) Cm(maj7) and think a half-step (one fret) down... instead of the more cumbersome C#m7(b5) F#7(b9) Bm(maj7). Yup. Jazzmen don't like sharp keys!

This first spelling procedure is very important. You must know what chords you are dealing with! If you can get this out of the way in the beginning steps, your life will be much simpler when dealing with minor II-V's in the future, especially when someone puts you on the spot.

More Spelling

The second basic “outlining” step you have to work through is spelling out actual chord tones (arpeggios notes) for the II chord, the V chord and the I chord in the minor II-V-I. We'll have the m7(b5) spelled as 1-b3-b5-b7, the dom7(b9) as 1-3-5-b7-b9 and the minor (tonic, with a major 7th) as 1-b3-5-7. So basically, the V chord is the only one where we add the 9th, and it's going to be flat.

It is, in fact, the same process as above except this time, we are specifying **note names within each chord**. The idea is to know the basic 4 or 5 notes contained “inside” of each. Spelling every key out loud can be a bit of tongue twister. For example :

In C minor : “D minor seven flat five is D, F, A flat, C. G seven flat nine is G, B, D, F, A flat. C minor major seven is C, E flat, G, B”

Or, a bit simpler : “D, F, A flat, C then G, B, D, F, A flat then C, E flat, G, B”

... I find this a bit exhausting. (-:

If you decide not to do this kind of spelling vocally (out loud), you could simply spend a bit of time with you instrument and kind of “figure them out”... Know the note names and where they are on the instrument. Do that for your keys (or 15 keys, wink wink!) and you'll be all set. Other people might like to go through this step by writing it on staff paper. It's really up to you.

Always remember though : all of this spelling stuff has to become **second nature** to you. It should be like reciting the alphabet. Remember grade school? ... only this time, it's about harmony and music. The less you have to think about it, to more beautiful and masterful music will come out of it in improvisation. This is not learning just for the sake of it, there's tremendous (infinite?) potential here.

The First Solution to Minor II-V's : Harmonic Minor

This approach constitutes an actual *shortcut* to playing on the minor II-V.

Simply put :

When playing over “Dm7(b5) – G7(b9) – Cm(major7)” use only the C harmonic minor scale.

The scale will have a few “rough spots” in different places inside those three chords, so you have to be very careful and listen well. It's not a perfect solution for all minor II-V situations. The three chords can originate from the harmonic minor, yes ... but only on the 4-note chords level. It gets messy otherwise, especially on that IIm7(b5) chord.

Please understand that is it not the same as staying on C major for a Dm7-G7-Cmaj7 progression, it doesn't work like that in minor! (No. It won't work in natural minor or in melodic minor either, sorry.)

In fact, this shortcut is the little brother of “Harmonic Minor of Destination” found below. Since the V is the most important (and the one for which we get to choose from a lot of options), we often find ourselves thinking of the whole minor II-V-I as to what **dominant** sound we'll use and figure the rest from there. What's nice about our first solution here is that the V7(b9, b13) sound is created as a happy bi-product of playing on the harmonic minor.

The only case I find this approach really valuable is when playing on short minor II-V's (2 beats each) at fast tempos. Here [are a few lines \(on JazzGuitarLessons.net\)](http://JazzGuitarLessons.net) to get you started with this approach. After trying out this “shortcut method” and hearing how it sounds like, I highly recommend checking out all the options that follow in this article for aiming chord-by-chord for the minor II-V-I's.

So, let's jump into an overview of what scales to select over each individual chords of the minor II-V-I. That's the bulk of the article really. Here we go!

Chord-by-chord Analysis for Minor II-V-I's

Approaching the Two Chord

Encountered as IIm7(b5) or even sometimes IIm9(b5) (the latter has a natural ninth.)

AKA : half-diminished because it's built of a diminished triad with a b7 on top (or seen as 2 minor thirds stacked then a major third on top). Sometimes AKA: "split" or "half" because it's often seen on chart as a diagonally dashed circle. So "D minor seven flat five", "D half-diminished", "D half" or "D split" are all part of its slangy nomenclature.

So, you've probably heard of Locrian ...

The IIm7(b5) is often taught as Locrian mode. When you learn to build all the chords within the major scale, this is found on the seventh degree... so Bingo! In the key of C minor, we would use Eb major scale over the Dm7(b5). Or bluntly think of the C **natural** minor scale. Yuk. I don't particularly like this option. What bugs me is the sound of the b2 (or b9), in this case the Eb note. Yes, I understand that Eb major is the relative to C minor but I just can't get my ears around it!

Locrian Formula : 1 b2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7

Locrian Natural 9

Now for the second option : by changing only one note (the b9 I'm having some trouble with), we get an entire new scale. It's called Locrian Natural 9 (or natural 2). I've seen it written in books or chart as Locrian #9 also. It basically means that we have a Locrian scale with the 2nd degree up a half-step.

A neat way to perceive it is : on Dm7(b5) play Eb major scale with an E natural. (Wah?)

A even neater way of perceiving it is : on Dm7(b5), play F **melodic minor**. (-:

When I play on Dm7(b5) I'm often thinking "Ok, F minor 6th with the 6th in the bass". It works, try it. The m7(b5) is therefore heard as the **sixth mode of melodic minor**. This is a really important one... and has been in use since the 50's in jazz harmony, I guess. In that era, the fact that m7(b5) chords could be sustained for a longer time and because it wasn't always functional (ie not necessarily used in a II-V context), I believe our ears required a smoother sound. We got the smoothness from the natural 9.

Locrian (nat 9) Formula : 1 2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7

The nicest thing about this approach is that I tend to hear the modes of melodic minor fairly well. Especially since this 7-note scale host 3 dominant chord sounds... If you're not familiar with the melodic minor scale and its modes yet, I urge you to study it. Not only will you get access to this sixth mode mel. minor, but you'll also improve your technique and your hearing. (Plus you'll understand what the heck I'm talking about in the section about the approaching the V chord, wink wink!)

The oddball : Locrian Natural 6

This is the product of using the second mode of harmonic minor on the II chord. (The shortcut used in our first solution to the minor II-V.) Not recommended. **Locrian (nat 6) formula : 1 b2 b3 4 b5 6 b7.**

Approaching the Five Chord

V7(altered) or V7(b9) or V7(#9) or V7 [something].

The V chord leading to a minor chord is usually altered in some way. There are a few standards that we'll discuss in the next paragraphs. As mentioned earlier, experienced improvisers will often think of the dominant chord first when attempting to outline a minor II-V-I.

Harmonic Minor of Destination or H.M.D.

Simply put : the fifth mode of harmonic minor... which implies exactly our first solution to the minor II-V-I above. "On a II-V-I in C minor, use C harmonic minor scale." You should try to apply this to the V chord only this time though! This is [further explained in this article](#).

This is actually G7(b13, b9). If you tried our little shortcut above, you already have that down. Why G7(b13,b9) might you ask? Well, this G7 is exactly like or Mixolydian (coming from C major) except for two notes : Eb and Ab, the two lowered degrees in order to get C harmonic minor scale.

The Eb is the b13 of G7 and the Ab is the b9 of G7. Therefore, G7(b13, b9). It's often oddly written on charts as G7(#5), but rest assured, there's no D# in the key of C minor ;-)

HMD Formula : 1 b2 3 4 5 b6 b7

Melodic Minor of Destination or V7(b13)

Same process as HMD... we use the fifth mode of **melodic** minor this time. Here we wind up with only **ONE** note different from the major scale. Still in the key of C, the melodic minor scale has Eb instead of E natural. Thus we get a V chord like this : G7(b13). This is [further explained in this article](#).

I really like this sound as it can be used on certain secondary dominants when resolving to minor chords. For instance, if I'm playing the blues in Bb and I want to outline a VI7 chord in bar 8, in this case G7, I will often improvise over G7(b13), the fifth mode of melodic minor. Sounds awkward? Think about this ... What are the notes in Bb major ? Bb C D Eb F G A

Ok, then what are the notes in G7(b13)? G A **B** C D Eb F G ----> this is in fact C melodic minor.

There's only one note difference between the two scales, isn't that nice? (-: If I had used plain old G7 (Mixolydian) there would have been **two** outside notes in relation to Bb major. Play it, hear it!

MMD Formula : 1 2 3 4 5 b6 b7

Lydian Dominant

Now it's getting juicy. This scale is built on the fourth degree of the melodic minor scale. We are still in a II-V-I in C minor, we want to have that G7 with the "Lydian Dominant" color ... so we have to use D melodic minor scale. Starting from G root, the D melodic minor scale : G A B C# D E F. This is [further explained in this article](#).

Simply put : this is G7(#11) or G7(#4). It has that Thelonious Monk-ish sound. Sometimes you can see it on chart misspelled as G7(b5). Of course, I don't think there's such a useful logical scale for G7 that has both the Db and the C natural at the same time. It's a C#, not a Db dammit! (-:

This is not necessarily a “sensible” choice for a minor II-V because of the #11 alteration. It's rather far out and it can confuse the ear a little bit... but, as you know, it's always a matter of context. It works sometimes. Experiment and let your ears be the final judge. And lastly : Ok, so why Lydian dominant then? Because : 1- It has the #11, synonymous with Lydian mode and 2- It's a dominant chord. Now it's easy to understand why some people refer to it as Mixolydian #11.

Mixo #11 Formula : 1 2 3 #4 5 6 b7

Altered Scale

Juicier, but not the juiciest yet, the altered scale has all the possible alterations you can put on a dominant chord : the b5, #5, b9 and the #9. There's barely enough room to put in the “good notes” now! It's also called Super Locrian sometimes or even the “diminished whole-tone scale”.

This baby monster is built on the seventh degree of the melodic minor scale. Ouch. Wanna play on a G7(alt) scale? Play Ab melodic minor. If you really want to go into the details of this you will bang your head against the wall a little, but that's fine. It's part of the process. Here's a little the theory about the actual altered scale...

G7 (altered) : G Ab Bb Cb Db Eb F

(Oh my! This is basically **Gb major scale** except for the tonic note. Ouch!)

People (like the editor Jamey Aebersold) will often refer to it as the diminished whole-tone because it starts like a diminished (G Ab Bb Cb) and ends with a stream of whole tone intervals (Cb Db Eb F G).

or, in analysis : 1 b9 #9 3 b5/#11 b13/#5 b7

See, this is only the “good notes” 1-3-b7 with four alterations added. Since this scale is soooo out, we are allowed to change the enharmonic spellings. #5 = b13 if you want, it doesn't matter. The nature of the scale makes the actual third look like a b4. That's weird.

On another note : I personally never, ever use the altered scale by thinking about it in this way. It's simply too cumbersome for me! I have my little shortcut. The huge advantage of my approach is that I can still hear the same things without imposing a strain on my brain when practicing/improvising.

Altered Scale : My little shortcut

I believe this is a well kept secret of the *jazz milieu*. It makes it much easier to create beautiful altered lines. Summed up in one sentence : **The altered scale is just a tritone substitution.**

Ok. Let's extrapolate on this a little. If we have G7, its tritone sub is Db7. If we use Db7 “plain” Mixolydian, it would sound a bit odd since we'd get the notes : Db Eb F **Gb** Ab Bb Cb. This is actually Gb major scale (see my psychedelic note above) starting from Db (fifth mode = mixo).

The Gb note (fourth degree of the above scale) really bugs me! So we'll simply raise it a half-step to a G natural so it's more compatible with our original G7 chord. What happens then? Well, we are dealing with a Db7 with a raised 4th degree a.k.a. Db7(#11). It's the Lydian Dominant above. Simple, right?!

Ok. So what am saying here :

“If you want to play on G7 altered, use the Db7(#11) instead.”

If you followed so far, you'll understand that Db7(#11) contains the same notes as G7 altered... G7(alt) is in fact Ab melodic minor, right? Ab melodic minor has a Lydian Dominant build on its fourth degree right? And that chord is (drum roll)... Db7(#11) !!!

Ab melodic minor : Ab Bb Cb Db Eb F G

G altered : G Ab Bb Cb Db Eb F

Db7(#11) : Db Eb F G Ab Bb Cb

All the same notes are present in those three scales. (-:

So ... you may be thinking “Wow, it's not really a shortcut, it's more information to retain.” What I believe (and how it works in my own head) is that I'd rather deal with a dom7(#11) scale than an altered scale. If I'm playing on Db7(#11) I'm thinking Mixolydian with one different note. If I'm playing on G7(alt) I have to somehow manage FOUR alterations instead of one.

Of course, I think the main advantage is seeing / thinking Dm7(b5) to Db7(#11) to Cm. The roots are descending chromatically: D-Db-C. It's perfect. It makes it easier to connect lines together. Got it? Of course, you don't have to utilize my shortcut. It's just my 2 cents. Maybe you'll find your own little shortcuts here and there, who knows?! (-:

Diminished Scale

I saved the best part for dessert. This option is a symmetrical scale of 8 notes. A diminished seventh chord can be found on the seventh degree of the harmonic minor scale. It's a neat little chord built of all minor 3rds intervals. In fact, we'll see that the 8-note diminished scale is born when “coupling” two diminished 7th chords together.

We are still resolving to Cm here so we'll find the chord built on the seventh degree as being a B diminished seventh chord like this : B D F Ab = Bdim7.

Now, the cumbersome diminished scale is created when adding another diminished seventh chord a **semitone below** our original Bdim7. It's going to be Bb dim7 chord : Bb C# E G. We can think of it as some kind of an approach chord to the Bdim7, like a “harmonic appoggiatura”.

So if we combine B-D-F-Ab and Bb-C#-E-G and play it in a linear fashion we get this scale :

B C# D E F G Ab Bb

Look at it closely : it has 8 notes and it's symmetrical. The order is whole-step, half-step, whole-step, half-step, (etc.) throughout. Neat, huh?! Our 12 available notes (the chromatic scale) allow for only three of these to exist in reality. It means that you can practice the diminished scale in 3 complimentary keys and “magically” have all the 12 keys down. Cool!

A great way to see this in the context of a minor II-V is through a Dom7th(b9) chord. Still in Cm, we'll think of the B dim7 chord (B-D-F-Ab) as the notes 3-5-b7-b9 of the V chord, G7(b9).

The notes B-D-F-Ab seen through Bdim7 = 1-b3-b5-bb7

The same notes seen through a G7(b9) = 3-5-b7-b9

After you nail this, all you have to do is approach each note by a half-step down, and you're set! That is why some people will say "Oh, the diminished scale is half-whole-half-whole" (instead of starting with a whole-step like I just did). The reason behind this is that they're thinking about the dominant chord... the G7(b9) diminished scale is : **G Ab Bb B C# D E F** (same notes as above but starting from G).

I want to warn you : there are many, many ways in which you can perceive and work with this diminished scale. The above paragraph is one common way to do it. Another way to think about it is through the enclosed triads. You should really consult [this "Question and Answer" article I created for a visitor of JazzGuitarLessons.net...](#) See the few paragraphs in the "Final note" section.

To finish off with the concept, it's obviously important to think of the B diminished scale in terms of G7 if you're dealing with a minor II-V of some sort (well, that's why you're reading this, right?!) We have the basic notes for a G7(b9) and we add the C#, the E, and the Bb. The final chord symbol that dictates exactly the diminished scale in this case is G13(b9, b5, #9). The b5 = #11 can be used since it's not a "normal" diatonic scale of 7 notes.

Whole Tone Scale

One last one! This is a really "hyper" type of scale. When we looked at the diminished or altered, we could see that most notes were "flats", semi-tone lower than in the major scale of reference. The whole-tone scale gives the opposite feeling : it's a sound with "sharps". It sounds bright and resonates in a somewhat confusing way at the same time. It's also a symmetrical scale and contains only six notes.

The simplest way to build the whole-tone scale is through the chromatic scale : Take the original 12 notes, play every other note. On the guitar / bass, it amounts to playing on only one string the frets 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13 etc. (or the frets 2, 4, 6, etc.) Probably the neatest thing about it is that there's only **two** possibilities! Talk about laziness : learn 2 keys and you have them 12 right away. (-:

Analyzing this as pertaining to an altered dominant chord yields interesting results. We are interested in its application to a G7 dominant chord so, starting on a G root : G A B C# D# F

Whole-Tone Scale Formula : 1 2 3 #4 #5 b7.

The complete dominant chord is thus V7(#11 #5), another possible option for minor II-V-I progression. The two alterations are, of course, a whole-step apart. We could also say V7(b5 #5) or even V7(b5 b13).

In your course of study, you should also approach the whole-tone scale like the diminished and start finding what triads are "inside" and play around them. I'm sure you'll come across plenty of augmented triads. ;-)

If you like nomenclature, the dominant chord/scale we extracted from the whole-tone scale can be called an "Augmented Mixolydian #11" or a "Lydian Dominant Augmented" or ... Well, it doesn't really matter. Just learn to play it and hear it well in context.

The Dominant Chords/Scales Wrap Up

Our “champion finalists” are :

G7(b13, b9) : Harmonic Minor of Destination or H.M.D.

G7(b13) : Melodic Minor of Destination or M.M.D

G7(#11) : Mixolydian #11 or Lydian Dominant

G7(altered) (the real altered scale has b5, #5, b9 and #9 + the basic 1-3-b7 “shell” chord)

G13(b5, b9, #9) ... from the diminished scale. Symmetrical 8-note scale with huge potential.

G9(#11, #5) from the whole-tone scale.

For the altered scale we have a little shortcut : Think of the tritone sub dom7(#11)!

Ok, so now for some more “weird” options for altered dominants. I'm writing briefly about them here because some of you **will** encounter them in original jazz compositions from the 1960's onwards. You may encounter them within a minor II-V-I progression or not. (All from a G7 perspective).

F/G

Simply a G7sus4 sound with a ninth. Can be plain Mixolydian or otherwise.

Ab/G

Gives a G7sus4(b9 b13) sound. Originates from either H.M.D or the symmetrical diminished scale.

Db/G

Is a G7(b9 b5) sound. Either the altered or diminished scale.

G7sus4(b9)

Really cool sound. This is either the Phrygian mode or the second mode of melodic minor.

Fm/G

Same as above.

A/G

Lydian dominant sound. It's G13(#11).

Approaching the One Chord

Ahhhh. We finally arrive at the point of resolution of the minor II-V-I progression. The **one** minor chord. As simple as it may seem, there's often confusion and discrepancies when playing minor chords, in jazz especially. There's this constant questioning : “We know it's a minor triad. Ok, but ... minor 7th, or minor 6th....? and what about that minor with a little triangle?! Oh my god, what about this minor7th chord, it says “flat 5” on the chart...” etc.

The main problem, I find, is that guitarists will basically automatically go for a typical minor 7th sound at all times. Did you notice, it rings “wrong” sometimes when you do that? The reason behind this is that minor chords do not work the same way as major chords. In jazz, you can usually play a major 7th anywhere and it “fits” when the chart says it's a major chord of some sort (maj7, maj6, 6/9 or else). But it's not the case in minor : you cannot play minor 7th every time it's a minor chord of some sort. Going straight for the minor 7th is very amateur-ish (and I've heard this quite a lot at jam sessions and in my many years of experience as a teacher!)

So, what's the problem then? A lot of the confusion can be dissolved right away by choosing between two kinds of minor chords. Ask yourself : is it a **tonic minor** chord, or not?

A tonic minor chord is really a “one minor”. It's the tonic of the piece (or the tonic of the key of the moment.) If you just played a minor II-V-I by itself, that last chord is a tonic minor. If you're playing the tune “Solar”, in C minor, the first chord is a tonic minor. “Autumn Leaves” (the uber-classic version Cannonball recorded in 1959), that first vamp is Gm6 and it's very tonic minor.

What is **not** a tonic minor? Chords in key that function as III^m or II^m or minor chords that last for a long time in a “modal” context. They may be pre-dominants and take part in a broader progression. For example, the II-V in major. The II^m7 chord is most definitely not a tonic minor, it's part of the cadence. Another example, the first chord in “All the Things You Are” is Fm7 functioning as VI^m7, the second chord, Bbm7, is really a II^m7. We hear VI^m7-II^m7 and it's part of a larger VI-II-V-I-IV in the key of Ab major. The II^m7 and the VI^m7 are therefore **not** tonic minors in this context. Amongst the few last chords in the same tune, Cm7 is a III^m7, also part of a larger progression. Once again III^m7 is not a tonic minor in this context. Now for the “modal” context, simply take “So What” or “Impressions” : two minor 7th chords a half-step apart. Very **not** tonic minor, both chords are Dorian sounding.

Now, there's still one more step for deciding what to play after you understand the above....

If it's not a tonic minor, play minor 7th for sure.

In the scope of this article, deep down we really want to deal only with a tonic minor sound since it's the one chord in the minor II-V-I. So here's what we need. If it is a tonic minor. You still have four choices :

1. “Plain” minor triad,
2. Minor sixth,
3. Minor with a major 7th or
4. Minor 7th.

Surprisingly, you can still play a minor 7th quality on a tonic minor. At least, this decision will now be well informed, right? (-:

What I mean here is you can have a piece that's in a minor key and the one chord is of a minor 7th quality. You still find minor II-V-I's inside the piece, but the tonic chord is a “smooth jazzy” minor 7th. For example, tunes like “Black Orpheus” and “Blue Bossa” have “I minor 7” tonics. It's still tonic minor by definition, but not the same tonic minor sound you heard in the 1940's with bebop. If you play with old timers or more traditional musician, tonic minor will mean #1 or 2 or 3 in the above list.

Looking back at the chord quality we used for the one chord for the minor II-V-I in the first few paragraphs of this article, I intentionally made sure we had a real tonic minor sound to start with. The sound of a minor triad with a major 7th (or with a “softer” 6th even) is very common in jazz. If you were not familiar with this concept at all beforehand, this will change your playing for the better.

Reminders about minor chords spelling :

Minor Triad : 1-b3-5

Minor 7th : 1-b3-5-b7

Minor major 7th : 1-b3-5-7

Minor 6 : 1-b3-5-6

Keep in mind, the major in the chord name “minor major 7” qualifies the seventh! Also, the sixth in the chord name “minor 6” is a plain sixth, as found in the major scale. It's not the 6th that is minor, it's the chord!

So we finally get to the possible scale choices for the (quite confusing) one chord on a II-V-I in minor :

Dorian Minor

... is what is commonly taught in school. Unless you know the context and that the chord is really a minor *seventh*, I would not recommend it for the minor II-V-I context. It will seldom be the best choice. I know teachers (including myself) just want to get going with students, so we give three scales : major, dorian and mixo. But after a while, improving students shouldn't always go for Dorian by default.

So, it's not really a good option to gravitate naturally towards. Here's an exception though to show you how it can actually be chosen sometimes :

Em(b5) – A7(b9) – **Dm7** – G7

That's a basic turnaround in C major. It's often used as a tag at the end of pieces. The first two chords constitute a minor II-V in the key of D minor. The assorted “one minor” (Dm7 in bold) is really the start of another cadence, a II-V in C major this time. If you see this chord-by-chord, then yes, the Dm7 can be improvised over with the Dorian scale as the “one minor” in a minor II-V-I. This is just an example. Use your own judgment and ears, always.

Natural Minor

Quite easy to figure out and sometimes useful. If you know your relative major-minor keys well, this is easy. For a II-V-I in C minor, play in C natural minor (same notes as Eb major) for improvisation one the “one” chord. I would only use this option in circumstances when it's clearly in minor, but it's not either minor 6 or minor with a major seventh. Remember : the natural minor scale produces a minor 7th sound. It's how I would approach the above mentioned tunes “Black Orpheus” and “Blue Bossa” when there's a cadence.

Harmonic Minor

Part of our first little shortcut to play on minor II-V-I. If you've been using this trick, it's only logical to keep going with that scale once you reach the "one minor" chord. What bugs me the most here is the presence of a b6. The rest of the scale seems fine... but to hear an Ab on a tonic Cm chord just doesn't please my ears. In short, harmonic minor is good, but not quite a *master key* like melodic minor can be.

Melodic Minor

Real nice. My all around favorite solution for tonic minor sound. It has both the natural 6 and the natural 7. Remember : the tonic minor sound originates for a minor triad with either the natural 6 or the natural 7. The other fun fact : it's the same as the major scale except for the b3 (minor third degree).

The Last Solution for Improvising over the Minor II-V-I *The best way to address the problem*

This is an approach that first came to my knowledge through the (very good) Jerry Coker book titled [Clear Solutions for Jazz Improvisers](#). The author goes to great lengths to help you select a way to internalize/memorize the whole process. I won't go into such details here. The melodic minor scale is all you need really! Then you can learn this approach the way you want; everybody will always reason in slightly different ways in the end. It's doesn't matter in which way you think of it, as long as we're on the same page!

You know your melodic minor scale (all keys), inside out? Good. Here are the scales giving maximum benefits in sound / theory for harmonic clarity and melodic expression :

II^m7(b5) : Use sixth mode melodic minor (aka Locrian Natural 9)

V7(alt) : Use seventh mode melodic minor (aka altered scale)

I tonic minor : Use melodic minor scale.

Translated in a II-V-I in C minor :

Dm7(b5) : Use F melodic minor.

G7(alt) : Use Ab melodic minor

Cm6 : Use C minor.

If you're going to think of each chord as the parent melodic minor scale, here's the trick :

II^m7(b5) : think a minor third up.

V7(altered) : think half a step up.

I minor : is melodic minor scale.

(Yet) another way to think about it : use modes 6, 7 and 1 of the melodic minor scale.

What Jerry Coker points out that I find really interesting is that the three melodic minor scales in use for properly outlining this cadence [form a well known structure](#). Look at just the roots of our reference scales : F-Ab-C. It's an F minor triad, right? The Fm triad is located on the **fourth degree** of our tonic

of the moment (we're in the key of C). To adopt this thinking to all the keys, it's easy for us to think of the minor triad built on the fourth degree of the tonic of the moment... so think of IVm to get all three scales to use.

Let's change keys to illustrate. Say a II-V-I in G minor. This is the discussion you can potentially have happening in your own mind :

"We're in G minor. What is the II-V-I cadence?"

"It's Am7(b5) to D7(alt) to G tonic minor."

"What scales should we use?"

"Melodic minor scales formed by notes in the minor triad found on the degree IV of the tonic."

"Which is?"

"C minor triad is on the fourth degree of G minor."

"What notes are in this triad?"

"C, E flat and G."

"So what scales should we use?"

"C melodic minor, Eb melodic minor and G melodic minor."

"To fit what chords?"

"For Am7(b5) use C melodic minor. For D7(alt) use Eb melodic minor. For Gm use G melodic minor."

All of the above should, of course, all happen very quickly in your mind in improvisation. Also, you can still use my little substitution trick for using the altered scale if you wish. ;-)

To give you even more options, here are two other suggestions :

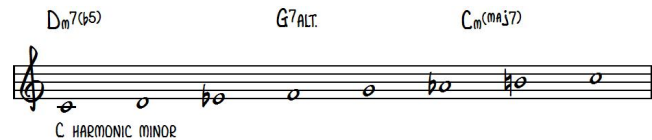
1. Think of the entire minor II-V-I as IVm-V-I instead. Since to outline the IIm7(b5) you'll use the sixth mode melodic minor, it winds up sounding like a IVm chord. For example on C minor II-V-I, use F melodic minor on Dm7(b5). Fm is the IVm chord in C. IVm-V-I is (perhaps) easier to handle in your mind. (It is in mine.)
2. Screw the "best solution" and use only two scales instead of three! The first one and the last one. Basically meaning : use the solution for IIm7(b5) as is but then employ Melodic Minor of Destination (see above) to outline V7(b13 b9) and stick to the same scale on the I chord. For example, on a minor II-V-I in C, use F melodic minor for Dm7(b5) and then use C melodic minor scale for both the G7 and Cm.

Cheat Sheet : II_m7(b5) – V7(alt) – I_m(maj7)

The **II chord** is often called half-diminished or even just “half” or “split”.
 The **V7 chord** is always altered in some way : V7(b9) or otherwise.
 The **I chord** is a tonic minor sound : minor triad, m6 or m(maj7).

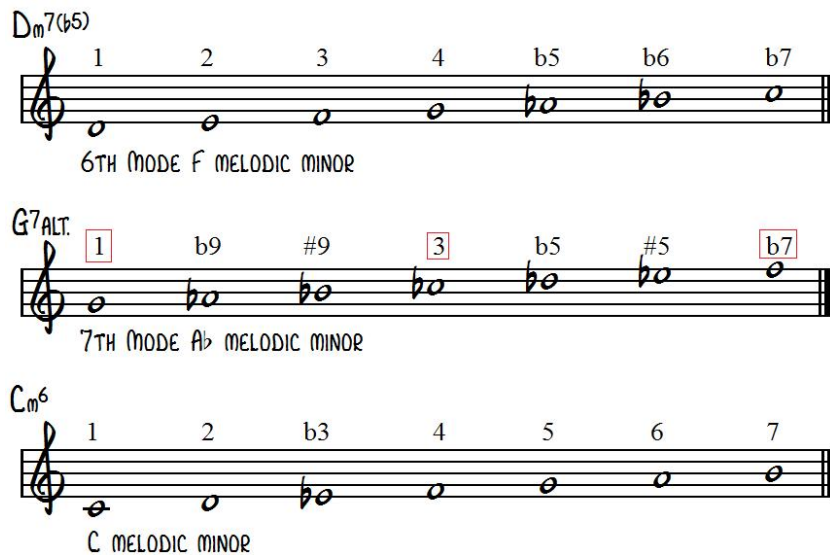
Shortcut Solution :

Play in the key of I_m (harmonic minor) throughout. In C minor :



Best Solution :

Three melodic minor scales whose roots constitute the notes of the IV_m triad. In C minor, use F_m triad notes = F-A_b-C. Diagram includes scale degrees analysis.



Think of using the 6th, then 7th then first mode of the melodic minor scale.

More useful scales on the V chord : Harmonic Minor of Destination (H.M.D.) = V7(b13 b9), Melodic Minor of Destination (M.M.D.) = V7(b13), Lydian Dominant = V7(#11), Diminished scale, etc.

Reference in 15 important keys :

Dm7(b5) - G7(b9) - Cm

Gm7(b5) - C7(b9) - Fm

Cm7(b5) - F7(b9) - Bbm

Fm7(b5) - Bb7(b9) - Ebm

Bbm7(b5) - Eb7(b9) - Abm

Ebm7(b5) - Ab7(b9) - Dbm

D#m7(b5) - G#7(b9) - C#m

Abm7(b5) – Db7(b9) - Gbm

G#m7(b5) - C#7(b9) - F#m

C#m7(b5) – F#7(b9) - Bm ---> Think in Cb also

F#m7(b5) - B7(b9) - Em

Bm7(b5) - E7(b9) - Am

Em7(b5) - A7(b9) - Dm

Am7(b5) - D7(b9) - Gm