

Scale Degrees and their relevance in music theory. Every note of the scale is different and no note in a scale may be repeated. To better understand the differences between the notes we will use the Major Scale.

The C Major Scale consists of 7 separate tones.

C / D / E / F / G / A / B

Each one of these notes is given a name through a Scale Degree. Here are the Degree Names corresponding to their notes in the scale.

C - Tonic
D - Supertonic
E - Mediant
F - Subdominant
G - Dominant
A - Submediant
B - Leading Tone

Scale Name and why it is called with Note distances referred to in reference to the scales in their original mode. When modes are generated, the distances from one note to the next note change. Intervals of Major and minor 3rds and diminished and Perfect 5ths and that those intervals are comprised of various numbers of half steps. When dealing with 3rds, 5ths and 7ths in scales however, the counting method is used. Roman Numerals are also used to relate Scale Degrees. Arabic numbers are used as following the C Major Scale.

C - 1
D - 2
E - 3
F - 4
G - 5
A - 6
B - 7

C in the C Major Scale" C as 1, D as 2 and E as 3". The C - E interval is a Major 3rd (four half steps) .

Tonic

The Tonic is the focal point of the scale. The scale derives its name from the Tonic, the above is a C Major Scale. Likewise, all of the other scale degrees are so named by their relationship to the Tonic. Any piece of music written using a certain scale will use the Tonic as its focal point.

Supertonic

The Supertonic is one whole step above the Tonic. This holds true for the Major and minor Scales.

Mediant

The Mediant is a 3rd above the Tonic. It is also midway between the Tonic and the Dominant. The mediant is the 3rd of our scale. 3rds or Tertian Harmony, are that upon which chords are based. It is important to recognize the Mediant or 3rd of any scale.

Subdominant

The Subdominant is located a 5th below the Tonic. This is the first time we have been asked to count backward from the Tonic.

C / B / A / G / F / E / D

A simple numbering of the scale is how 3rds, 5ths and 7ths are found. If we count backward from our Tonic, F is the 5th below the Tonic. While the Subdominant can also be considered a 4th above the Tonic and recognize the 5th below element as that is where its name is derived.

Dominant

The Dominant is located a 5th above the Tonic. Sub meaning below gives us our reason why we counted the Subdominant as a 5th below the Tonic. The 5th or Dominant is so named because of its dominating role in harmony and melody. The Dominant is the 5 in the R+3+5, or Tertian Harmony, method of constructing chords.

Submediant

Can you guess the relation and location of this degree just based on the name? Since the Mediant is a 3rd above the Tonic, the Submediant is a 3rd below the Tonic. The same counting method that we used in the Subdominant definition can be used here.

Leading Tone

The Leading Tone is one half step below the Tonic. When playing a scale, one often ends on the octave above the Tonic. Since the Leading Tone is only one half step away from the Tonic, hearing the Leading Tone leaves the listener wanting to hear the Tonic as resolution to the scale. The Leading Tone leads the listener back to the Tonic.

Subtonic

In minor scales the 7 degree is not a half step below but rather a whole step below the Tonic. This awkwardness of the minor scales is resolved with the different

forms of the minor scales but that will be a different lesson. Just note that the 7 degree scale name in minor scales is Subtonic.

The Roman Numerals

Scales Degrees are also described using Roman Numerals. While they do range from 1-7, the Roman Numerals serve another purpose. Nathan described in his lesson on the Major Scale the chords that are derived from that scale. When Roman numerals are used to describe Scale Degrees, they also describe that chord related to that degree by appearing in upper or lower case. Here is an example:

C - I
D - ii
E - iii
F - IV
G - V
A - vi
B - vii°

Roman Numerals are used in lower case for Scale Degrees and their related chords. An upper case indicates a Major chord, a lower case indicates a minor chord and lower case with this symbol ° indicates a diminished chord. The pattern of Major and minor chords is the same for any Major Scale.

Major / minor / minor / Major / Major / minor / diminished