

Nashville Acoustic Camps: “Dobro Crash Course 3” with Ivan Rosenberg
Class 1 Review and Homework

Minor chord overview

What is a minor chord? Root + its minor 3rd & 5th. The third is what distinguishes a major chord from a minor chord. A given minor third interval is a step and a half (aka “three frets” aka three “half-steps” on a fretted instrument) from the root, whereas a major third is two steps (aka “four half-steps” aka “four frets”) up from a root.

Is our “G major” Dobro tuning really such a disadvantage when it comes to playing minor chords? Not really. Several important full minor chords (Em, Bm, Cm, Gm) are available with combinations of barred notes and open strings and we can do a fair job of faking some others.

Sidebar:

I forgot to mention something in class: we should always remember that we’re playing Dobro, not strumming a guitar, so there’s never a necessity that we play *all three notes* of a given minor chord unless we’re playing certain pieces unaccompanied. Even in those cases, we can often work around the issue by arpeggiating (i.e. playing one note at a time) any minor chord that’s causing us grief on the Dobro. In most real-life musical situations, just **two** notes of a given minor chord will be more than sufficient, and there are multiple ways to easily play two notes of any minor chord with a straight bar as we saw in class. Moreover, in most situations, all we need is ONE note of a minor chord, e.g. if we’re playing a solo or backup phrase over a minor chord. So from a purely psychological standpoint, part of what we need to do for effective Dobro playing is abandon the idea that we need to, or ought to, play full minor chords very often on our instrument. We can leave that to the guitars and mandolins. Nobody has ever insisted that a fiddler play all the notes of a minor chord simultaneously, and much of what we do on Dobro is more like a fiddle than a guitar. This is a difficult psychological switch we have to make, especially if we’re coming from a guitar background. Yes, the Dobro is a kind of guitar and has a guitar-shaped body, but it’s used differently.

Ok, back to business: here’s a recap of the hidden minor double stops lurking within each straight bar chord position we think of as major, or as I would say if I wanted to be a YouTube influencer....

“TOP SECRET DOBRO TUNING CONSPIRACY HOAX FINALLY REVEALED!!!!”

Yes, everything we’ve been told about our tuning is a lie. What the so-called “experts” have been calling “G major” tuning (low to high: GBDGBD) also contains three different minor chord double stops for three different minor chords! First, we have a true **minor third** interval (B to D), which means that we have two octaves of root-minor third double stops built into what we’ve been thinking of as strictly a *major* tuning: **GBDGBD**. We’ll call this a minor double stop with the root on our B strings.

But the conspiracy goes further! G and B are the minor third and fifth, respectively, of an E minor chord! We don't get the root, but those other two notes we do get are very useful. All we need to complete the chord is to grab the E note with the bar on the second fret of our D strings. So, just in our open string tuning we have two octaves of Em double stops: **GBDGBD**. Again notes are part of the chord shape which is based off roots on the D (1st and 4th) strings.

But I said there were double stops for **three** different minor chords at each fret position. It's true. We have, of course, two octaves of double stops for G minor with our open strings: **GBDGBD**. These are from the minor chord shape we get with roots on the G strings.

From this discussion of our open strings, we can extrapolate that every straight-bar major chord position has embedded within it two octaves of double stops for three different minor chords. This workshop series will show you how to learn and use this information. Don't worry, we'll learn it all slowly, chord by chord.

Chord shapes

There are three easy to visualize minor chord shapes, one each for a root on the G strings, B strings, and D strings. See chart.

For each of these shapes, we can find ergonomic scale note pathways that outline and connect these chord triad notes. Let's use Em as an example:

- Near the nut, it's convenient to take advantage of the open strings for our 'home base' Em scale, which is based on the minor chord shape with roots on the D strings/2nd fret.
- Up the neck a bit, we get another shape where the roots are on the B strings/5th fret. This shape uses the 5th and 4th frets for the chord triad notes, and we can easily combine this position with open strings and first-position licks.
- Next, at the 9th fret, we begin our shape that has roots on the G strings. This is the shape you're probably most familiar with when it comes to minor chords.
- From the 12th fret and up, our patterns will repeat again, and there are good Dobro phrases to be made using the 12th and 14th frets, as we'll see during class.

The best Dobro piece I'm aware of that makes perfect use of each of these positions is Jerry Douglas's solo on "Bright Sunny South" with Alison Krauss and Union Station, and that's why we're going to learn it!

We spent our class time today going over these chord shapes and learning some licks and full or partial scales in each position.

Recap: the E minor scale and G major scale are composed of identical notes

1. If you know the G major scale, then you should instantly know the Em scale

- The Em scale is composed of identical notes as the G major scale
- The keys of Em and G share the same key signature (one sharp: F#)
- Em is called the “relative minor” of G, while G is the “relative major” of Em

To drive home this point, here are two iterations of the G major scale, with the Em scale highlighted within: G A B C D **E F# G A B C D** E F#

Two easy scales using identical notes! When playing in the key of Em, you’re using all the same notes that you do in the key of G!

Listening homework: 50x each

- AKUS “Bright Sunny South” (studio version)
- Barenberg, Douglas, Meyer “From Ankara to Izmir”

Pro tip: if you find these on youtube, you can go into the settings and play them at 75% or 50% speed (or a custom speed) without changing pitch. I do this all the time when learning from other players.

Dobro playing homework

Play each couple of bars in the handouts 50 to 100 times, preferably with the slower backing track, but use the faster one if you want a challenge. If the slower backing track tempo is still too fast, just play at half-speed (let a couple of beats go by before playing the next note). If you really drill everything in the handouts until they’re unforgettable and part of your musical DNA, you’ll have a great head start in learning two of the best Jerry Douglas solos of all time!

Reminder: for any questions about Dobro content, email me. For technical issues or anything having to do with Zoom or accessing files, email Megan. She may be on the road, so it could take a bit for her to get back to you. If you don’t hear back from her, get ahold of me and I’ll do my best to help...

See you next week!

Ivan