

MODES

Modes, as the name implies, can be thought of as variations and/or versions of major or minor scales where one or more of whole or half steps is displaced. Simply put, they are scales that are a little different from major or natural minor. There are seven “traditional” modes that were identified in early ecclesiastical music, and they are also referred to as “Church Modes”. Two of the seven modes are already familiar to us—the major and natural minor scales. The seven names are of ancient Greek origin as follows:

- Ionian (the major scale)
- Dorian
- Phrygian
- Lydian
- Mixolydian
- Aeolian (the natural minor scale)
- Locrian (not used in ancient music, but theoretically recognized)

While modes were used in early music, they also had a place in the early twentieth century with the impressionists (Debussy, Ravel, Satie) and with composers such as Bartók and Stravinsky. In addition, European (and subsequently American) folk music relied heavily on “modality” and more recently, jazz has incorporated the use of modes.

There are a number of ways to describe the seven different modes. The most useful way to describe and hear modes is to compare them to the scales with which we have the most familiarity:

MODE	Half step alteration(s) to major scale	Half step alterations to minor scale
Ionian	None (same)	
Dorian		Raised 6 th degree
Phrygian		Lowered 2 nd degree
Lydian	Raised 4 th degree	
Mixolydian	Lowered 7 th degree	
Aeolian		None (same)
Locrian		Lowered 2 nd and 5 th degrees

It is also helpful to relate each mode to the major scale in the same way that we derived the *relative* minor scale (Aeolian mode) from the major scale (Ionian mode) by starting on the 6th degree of the major scale instead of the first. The five other modes each start on a different degree of the major scale.

N.B. While this is a useful method of understanding the mechanics of a mode, it tells us nothing about the quality or feeling of the mode. That is why the first way of describing modes is better.

MODE	Major scale starting on degree:
Ionian	1
Dorian	2
Phrygian	3
Lydian	4
Mixolydian	5
Aeolian	6
Locrian	7

The most important idea in music that emphasizes modality (as opposed to tonality, atonality, etc.) is that the featured mode will distinguish itself as something different from either the major or minor scale. Music that is based in the Dorian mode, for example, will emphasize the fact that it is minor sounding, but with a raised 6th degree (and it will not raise the 7th degree like melodic minor). So in those two ways, it will be distinct from the natural minor (Aeolian) that often uses a raised 7th. Similarly, the Mixolydian mode will distinguish itself from the major scale (Ionian) by emphasizing the lowered 7th degree. Since a mode cannot emphasize anything, it would really be the composer employing the mode who would emphasize that mode's distinguishing characteristics. Or, if nothing else, the listener would naturally hear that mode's distinguishing characteristics in the same manner that one distinguishes the difference between major and minor.