

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.

MODES

(of the C major scale)



Ionian (C Ionian/Major) **same as the current-day major scale**



Dorian (D Dorian) **built off of the major scale's 2nd degree**



Phrygian (E Phrygian)



Lydian (F Lydian)



Mixolydian (G Mixolydian) **built off of the major scale's 5th degree**



Aeolian (A Aeolian/Natural Minor) **built off of the major scale's 6th degree**



Locrian (B Locrian)

Different Modes, Same Tonic



C Ionian (C major)



C Dorian (like C minor with a raised 6th scale degree)



C Phrygian (like C minor with a lowered 2nd scale degree)



C Lydian (like C major with a raised 4th scale degree)



C Mixolydian (like C major with a lowered 7th scale degree)



C Aeolian (c minor)



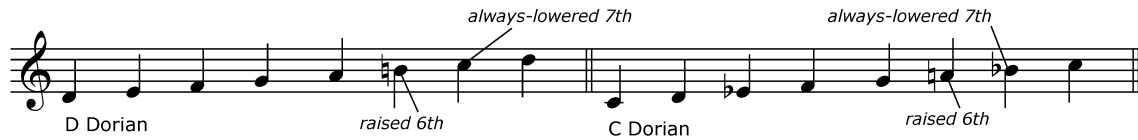
C Locrian (like C minor with lowered 2nd & 5th scale degrees)

MODES IN CONTEXT

A lot of modal music relies on one of two modes, the Dorian mode or the Mixolydian mode. This is to say that a piece or passage that is “in” one of these modes will feature the characteristic notes of that mode in a prominent way—which will help distinguish that mode from the more conventional major or minor sounds of tonal music.

The Dorian mode is like a minor scale, but with a raised 6th scale degree and a 7th scale degree that is never raised (as compared to harmonic or melodic minor):

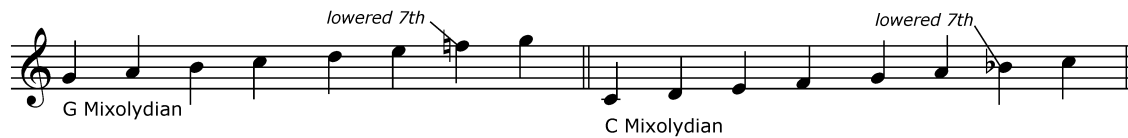
The Dorian scale:



The characteristic, or “featured” notes are the raised 6th and always-lowered 7th.

The Mixolydian mode is like major scale, but with a lowered 7th scale degree:

The Mixolydian scale:



The characteristic, or “featured” note is the lowered 7th.

These modes can start on any tonic, just like traditional scales and keys. Something could be “in” *C Dorian* or *G Dorian*, for example.

Mode-Writing Practice For Dorian and Mixolydian Modes

There are two approaches in figuring out how to write-out a mode; one that uses major scales and another that modifies a given major or minor scale.

Using a related major scale

The Dorian mode goes from the 2nd scale degree to the 2nd scale degree of a major scale, so it can be thought of as a "relative" scale to a given major scale. For example, a G Dorian scale can be thought of as the relative Dorian to F major because G is the 2nd scale degree of F. The notes in a G Dorian scale are the same as those in an F major scale (just starting on a different note):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
F major:	F	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	F
G Dorian:	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	F	G

The Mixolydian mode goes from the 5th scale degree to the 5th scale degree of a major scale, so it can also be thought of as a relative scale to a given major scale. For example, an F Mixolydian scale can be thought of as the relative Mixolydian of Bb major because F is the 5th scale degree of Bb. The notes in an F Mixolydian scale are the same as those in a Bb major scale (just starting on a different note):

1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
Bb major:	Bb	C	D	Eb	F	G	A	Bb
F Mixolydian:	F	G	A	Bb	C	D	Eb	F

Using a parallel major or minor scale

The Dorian mode can also be thought of as a "conventional" natural minor scale with a raised 6th scale degree. Start with writing out a natural minor scale and then raise the 6th ("↑6") scale degree a half step:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
G natural minor:	G	A	Bb	C	D	Eb	F	G
G Dorian:	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	F	G
					↑6			

The Mixolydian mode can also be thought of as a "conventional" major scale with a lowered 7th scale degree. Start with writing out a major scale and then lower the 7th ("↓7") scale degree a half step:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
F major:	F	G	A	Bb	C	D	E	F
F Mixolydian:	F	G	A	Bb	C	D	Eb	F
						↓7		

OTHER SCALES

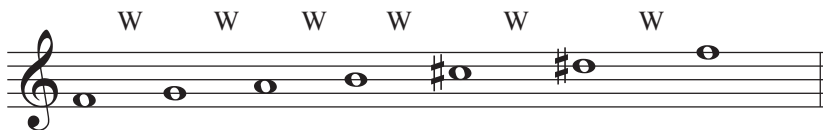
The "church" modes are those which are derived from or related to the diatonic scales, and those which carry the traditional Greek names (*Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian*, etc.). There are other scales which are made of different intervals that are *not* based on the seven-note diatonic scale.

WHOLE TONE

The whole tone scale is most associated with jazz, but can be traced back to the French composer Claude Debussy. It is a six-note scale made up of only whole steps (whole, not half, tones). It has a wonderfully vague and rootless (unclear tonal center) quality:



Because of the consistency of the pattern, there are only two possible versions of the whole tone scale, the one above and the one below, which uses the other six notes of the chromatic spectrum:



In a more "fun" context, this scale was often used in old sit-com TV shows when someone was entering a dream sequence, or when they were recalling something from the past. They might say something like: "I remember it like it was yesterday..." and then the background music would run a whole tone scale up and down a few times while the image cross faded to a "past" scene.