

Modes – a brief introduction

Chapter I

A 'mode' is a type of scale; and just as with any scale type, it has an ordered series of pitches which are usually played in ascending order (then descending order) in order to demonstrate their sound. As with any type of scale, they provide a set of notes that can be used as the basis for composing, improvising etc.

We ordinarily think of a given mode as being derived from a **parent scale**; a type of scale that is created when we start on a note other than the tonic of said parent scale. This is to take the **derivative** view of modes; that they are derived from a parent scale and that a relationship exists between them; such that they share the same notes, the same key signature and the same harmony.

An alternative view is the **parallel** view which sees modes as scales in their own right without the necessity of referring to a parent scale of any description. The parallel view extends to all scale types (whether they are a mode or not) and basically offers a comparison with the major scale (a parallel major scale used as a reference).

To explain these two different views further, let's refer to the Major scale in the key of C.

The **key of C Major** has the following notes:

C D E F G A B C

The best way to appreciate the difference between the major scale and its modes is to play them as you would normally play a scale when demonstrating its sound (this is not the place to be offering advice on how to use the same set of notes compositionally to create the sound of a particular mode).

So to demonstrate the sound of the C Major scale (C – C) play the notes in that order.

It sounds like the major scale with the note C as its Tonic or key centre. The Greek name for the major scale is **IONIAN**. All the modes of the major scale have Greek names as you will discover.

Now play **D – D: D E F G A B C D**

Hopefully you will notice that there is a difference in sound compared to the sound created when you played C – C. This time, the note D is the Tonic or key note so the gravitational pull has shifted from the note C to the note D. This changes the way the notes relate to each other; thus giving rise to a different sound. This mode is called **Dorian**. In this case we are playing the **key of D Dorian**.

Now play **E – E: E F G A B C D E**

This gives rise to the next mode in the major scale; namely, **Phrygian**. In this case, it is the **key of E Phrygian**; in which the note E is the tonic or key centre. Again, if played properly, it should sound different to the previous two scales.

This time play **F – F: F G A B C D E F**

This creates another mode with its own sound; namely, **Lydian**. In this case, it is the **key of F Lydian**.

And now **G – G: G A B C D E F G**

This is the **key of G Mixolydian**

Next play **A – A: A B C D E F G A**

This is the **key of A Aeolian**. Incidentally, we also call this mode the **natural minor scale**.

Finally, if you play **B – B: B C D E F G A B**

You create the **key of B Locrian**.

Once you have played them all, you should begin to appreciate that the same 7 notes (the notes of the Key of C Major) when played from different starting notes, can sound radically different. These are the modes and as you have seen, each one depending on what note of the Major scale you start on, gives rise to its own mode. This principle extends to all the keys in which the major scale can be played.

Hence:

I – Ionian (major scale)

II – Dorian

III – Phrygian

IV – Lydian

V – Mixolydian

VI – Aeolian (Nat minor scale)

VII – Locrian

I suggest you try out these modes in all keys of the major scale (using the circle of 5ths). This is best done on a keyboard though it can be played on any instrument.

As mentioned, this is a derivative way of looking at modes; as having a parent major. By understanding the relationship between a given mode and its parent major, it is possible to work out what notes it contains.

For instance, suppose you want to work out what notes are in the key of G Dorian. Well, based on the fact that the Dorian mode is built on the second note of a major scale, the question is really: **what key of the major scale has G as its second note?**

(Of course, the assumption I am making is that you are familiar with the circle of 5ths. If you are not, then I suggest you learn that first before confusion ensues. The circle of 5th will provide you with knowledge of all your major keys; important because a lot of theory hinges on your knowledge of it. So learn it well!)

The answer is that the key of F Major has G as its second note. It therefore follows that the key of G Dorian has the same notes and key signature as the key of F Major (in other words, it has one flat: a Bb) . In other words, the key of G Dorian is:

G A Bb C D E F G

By understanding this relationship, it is possible to work out the notes in any given mode. This is to take the derivate approach to working out the answer.

Think about this: you should already know that every major scale contains the notes of a natural minor scale (we call it the relative minor). The relative minor is to be found on the 6th note of the major scale. Consider that the key of A minor is the relative minor to the key of C major:

C D E F G **A** B C

Hence the notes in the A minor scale are: A B C D E F G A

This gives rise to a formula: that the relative minor (or Aeolian) is found on the 6th note of a major scale.

Conversely, in regard to the natural minor scale, the parent major is found on the 3rd note.

A B **C** D E F G A

The other modes can be treated in exactly the same way.

The parallel view of modes:

Often we don't want to think in terms of a parent major; we prefer to think of a mode as a scale in its own right. Incidentally, most of them can be thought of as being either **MAJORISH** or **MINORISH** in their sound and character. More on that later...

As with all scales, a parallel view can be taken, in which we compare a given mode to its parallel major (not relative or parent major):

For example:

The key of C Dorian can be compared to its parallel major: the key of C Major:

C Dorian: C D Eb F G A Bb C

C Major: C D E F G A B C

The difference between them is that compared with the major scale, the Dorian has a flattened 3rd and a flattened 7th. This gives rise to something we call a SCALE SPELLING. Hence the scale spelling for a Dorian mode is:

1 2 b3 4 5 6 b7 8

These scale spellings (for all scale types) are very useful for working out answers to what notes are in different scales/keys. You have got to learn them!!!

Here is a summary of the scale spellings for the modes of the major scale:

Ionian: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8

Dorian: 1 2 b3 4 5 6 b7 8

Phrygian: 1 b2 b3 4 5 b6 b7 8

Lydian: 1 2 3 #4 5 6 7 8

Mixolydian: 1 2 3 4 5 6 b7 8

Aeolian: 1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7 8

Locrian: 1 b2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7 8

Knowing these scale spellings and your circle of 5ths should put you in a position where you can work out the notes in any mode in any key. Pretty useful!!!

I mentioned earlier that some modes are MAJORISH and some are MINORISH. Well, what determines this is the nature of the 3rd note. Basically, if the 3rd note is natural then it is MAJORISH; and if it is flattened then it is MINORISH. There's more I could say about their uses but this is not the time. More on that later...

So here's another way of thinking:

- **The Dorian is really just a natural minor scale (Aeolian) with a natural 6th**
- **The Phrygian is really just the natural minor scale with a flattened 2nd**
- **The Lydian is really just a major scale with a sharpened 4th**
- **The Mixolydian is really just a major scale with a flattened 7th**
- **The Locrian is...really neither, to tell you the truth. It deserves a special category!!!**

