The Seven Modes

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There is an ongoing curiosity about the 7 traditional modes. As in all things musical, the most important aspect is to get the sounds of those modes in our ears and be able to recognize the differences when we hear them...and ultimately use them.

The most common way for students to get exposed to the modes is by applying relative thinking. That is: the Ionian mode is the major scale, the Dorian mode is the major scale from the 2nd degree to 9th degree, the Phrygian Mode is the major scale from the 3rd degree to the 10th degree, and so on. Each mode is then relative to its parent major scale and uses all seven notes from that scale. There is absolutely nothing wrong with that approach and there is a lot to be learned from it. But...it causes your ear to hear the modes in relation to that beginning major scale, so the entire exercise kind of sounds like...well, variations of the major scale.

The applied approach for this exercise is called derivative thinking. That is, all 7 modes will have the same root! In this case the root will be C because C has no #'s or b's. Thus it is the easiest key in which to see/hear the differences in modes.

As each mode is played you will hear some background chords that evoke the character of the mode. You can play along with me by following the included mode chart. The tab is there as well, but if you follow the standard notation you will be better able to see what happens in each mode.

Here we go. I am going to use solfege syllables and explain as we progress.

IONIAN

The major scale. Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Ti Do. We all know that one!

DORIAN

A minor mode. The difference between major and minor is that in minor the 3rd degree is flatted. That is the only difference in generic major and minor. It is the condition of the other scale degrees that
defines specific major or minor modes.
Dorian is: Do Re Me Fa Sol La Te Do.
Mi flatted is Me (pronounced may). Ti flatted is Te (pronounced tay).
The characteristic notes in Dorian are the 6th degree, La, which is the same 6th degree in Ionian, and Te, the flatted 7th. Dorian is a popular mode in jazz and bluegrass and has deep classical roots as well.

PHRYGIAN

Another minor mode, this one considerably "darker" than Dorian. Do Ra Me Fa Sol Le Te Do
Ra is flatted Re. Le is flatted LA (pronounced lay).

The characteristic notes in Phrygian are the flatted 2nd (of course!), the flatted 6th, and the flatted 7th. The flatted 2nd gives the mode a mysterioso quality, while the flatted 6th adds a sadder quality when compared to Dorian.

Here’s a curious thing about Phrygian. If you play the mode against a major chord (!) you get a distinctly Spanish quality. It's a musical mystery!

LYDIAN

Lydian is a major scale with # 4th degree, Fi (pronounced fee).

Do Re Mi Fi Sol La Ti Do

It is, of course that #4 that makes the scale Lydian and differentiates it from its cousin, Ionian. It's kind of a major scale with attitude! There is a musical philosophy out there that since F# occurs in the overtone series and that since F does not ever really show up, that Lydian should be the basis for Western music, not Ionian. I'm not going to get into that except to say that Lydian happens to be my personal favorite!

MIXOLYDIAN

A major scale, this time with a flatted 7th, Te.

Do Re Mi Fa Sol La Te Do.

May be the 1st blues scale. Think Gospel music or "straight ahead" blues.
**AEOLIAN**

This is commonly known as the "relative minor" to a major key. It is also called "natural minor". Briefly visiting the aforementioned *relative* thinking, Aeolian is based on the scale beginning on the 6th degree of the major scale. So...C major and A minor are related to each other in that they both share the same key signature, no #'s or b's. Actually, *ALL* these modes are *relative* to their parent Ionian mode. C Ionian, D Dorian, E phrygian, etc, are all relative and share the same key signature. Returning to *derivative* thinking, C Ionian, C Dorian, C phrygian, etc. are not relative as they all have different key signatures.

Aeolian minor is similar to Dorian until you get to the 6th degree which is flatted, (Le is a flatted La). That flatted 6th degree completely changes the character of the mode. It is decidedly *sadder* in mood. The mode is, Do Re Me Fa Sol Le Te Do.

**LOCRIAN**

This is the 7th and final mode of the system...and certainly the strangest!

Do Ra Me Fa Sa Le Le Do. Fa is the only unaffected scale degree!

But, here’s something to mentally file in your chord/scale relationship category. Locrian is the *perfect* mode to use with a min7(b5) chord! (also called a 1/2 diminished chord). Sounds great every time!

Listen to the audio and play along as you follow the notation sheet. All these modes are played several times with chordal accompaniment meant to amplify their individual characters.

Finally, please take another look at the opening paragraph!

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