



# An Introduction to Modes

By Scott Blanchard

Today, I'll introduce you to the modes of the major scale. Modes in music, although assuming differing roles over time, originated in ancient Greek culture. In more recent history, modes are often employed in many genres of music, ranging from jazz to rock, blues to classical, and many more. For our purposes, **we can define the word mode as a specific reordering of the notes of a scale, playable from any starting note within the given scale.** So why will understanding modes help you be a better musician? What will you be able to do with them once you understand them? Read on below to find out more.

## The Ionian Mode

A little earlier, I said that we'd be looking at the modes of the major scale. This means for each note of the major scale, we have a specific set of notes from which to construct a mode. I'll be introducing the modes in the key of C Major, so we won't need to use any accidentals. The Ionian mode is the first of seven modes we'll discuss. The Ionian mode is a good starting point because it is the same as the major scale.

Check out this C Ionian mode below, keeping in mind the pattern of whole and half steps. (Note: In all these examples, you'll see the last note an octave above the first scale degree, or tonic, making the scale seem to contain eight notes instead of seven. This extra note is displayed to show where the next octave begins. Also, there is a tendency in practice to resolve the seventh note of the scale up to the tonic.)

### C Ionian (Major)

The image shows a musical staff in treble clef with a C-clef. The notes of the C Ionian (Major) scale are written from C4 to C5. Above the staff, interval symbols are placed: 'W' (whole step) between C4 and D4, 'W' between D4 and E4, 'H' (half step) between E4 and F4, 'W' between F4 and G4, 'W' between G4 and A4, 'W' between A4 and B4, and 'H' between B4 and C5. Below the staff, the scale degrees are labeled: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, (1). The final note, C5, is enclosed in parentheses to indicate it is the octave tonic.

That was easy, right? Your first mode, and you already knew it!  
Let's take a look at the second mode.

# The Dorian Mode

The Dorian mode is the second mode built from the major scale. Since the Ionian mode in C Major started on the C-note, the Dorian will begin on the D-note, or the second scale degree in the key of C Major. So, to build the Dorian mode, we'll continue from D all the way up to the next C-note, using notes in the key of C Major. Be sure to note the pattern of whole and half steps for each mode; the formulas change based on the starting point related to the major scale. In addition, another helpful way to learn and identify modes is to relate them to the major scale using raised ( $\sharp$ ) or lowered ( $\flat$ ) scale degrees.

For instance, a Dorian mode can be simplified to a major scale with lowered ( $\flat$ ) 3rd and lowered ( $\flat$ ) 7th scale degrees. In the following examples, you'll note that each mode has scale degrees beneath it relating to the major scale. Check out the diagram below to see what we just did.

## D Dorian

A musical staff in treble clef showing the Dorian mode starting on D. The notes are D, E, F, G, A, B, C. Above the staff, intervals are marked: W (D-E), H (E-F), W (F-G), W (G-A), W (A-B), H (B-C), and W (C-D). Below the staff, scale degrees are listed: 1, 2,  $\flat$ 3, 4, 5, 6,  $\flat$ 7, (1). Vertical grey bars highlight the 3rd and 7th degrees.

Scale degree: 1 2  $\flat$ 3 4 5 6  $\flat$ 7 (1)

## D Major

A musical staff in treble clef showing the D major mode starting on D. The notes are D, E, F $\sharp$ , G, A, B, C. Above the staff, intervals are marked: W (D-E), W (E-F $\sharp$ ), H (F $\sharp$ -G), W (G-A), W (A-B), W (B-C), and H (C-D). Below the staff, scale degrees are listed: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, (1). Vertical grey bars highlight the 3rd and 7th degrees.

Scale degree: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 (1)

Okay, so all we did was build a seven-note scale off the D-note using the notes in C Major. Dorian – done!

## The Phrygian Mode

Next, to build the third mode of the major scale (from the third scale degree of C Major, of course), the Phrygian mode, we'll start on the E-note, and continue up to the next D-note, completing our seven-note scale. See the full E Phrygian mode below.

### E Phrygian



Scale  
degree: 1   ♭2   ♭3   4   5   ♭6   ♭7   (1)

## The Lydian Mode

The Lydian mode is, as you probably have guessed, built off the fourth scale degree, which is an F-note in the key of C Major. So we'll do as we have done before by starting on an F-note and ascending all the way up to the following E-note using notes in the key of C Major. Here it is below.

### F Lydian



Scale  
degree: 1   2   3   #4   5   6   7   (1)

By now you're probably seeing a pattern, and here it is one more time.

**To build any mode from the major scale, all you have to do is stay in the key of your given major scale and build a seven-note mode off each scale degree.**

Let's proceed by constructing the last few modes.

# The Mixolydian, Aeolian and Locrian Modes

In the key of C Major, the Mixolydian mode is built off the G-note, continuing up to the following F-note.

## G Mixolydian



Scale

degree: 1 2 3 4 5 6  $\flat$ 7 (1)

In the Key of C Major, the Aeolian mode is built from the A note, continuing up to the next G-note. So, the notes in A Aeolian are A–B–C–D–E–F–G. Now, you may already be familiar with this scale, also known as the A Natural Minor Scale. So, any Aeolian mode is the natural minor scale. Let's take a look.

## A Aeolian (Natural Minor)



Scale

degree: 1 2  $\flat$ 3 4 5  $\flat$ 6  $\flat$ 7 (1)

This is great; two of the seven major scale modes are scales you probably already know (Ionian = major, Aeolian = natural minor), and they all use the same notes as the major scale, but just have different starting notes.

Let's look at the last mode, Locrian.

The Locrian mode is built off the seventh scale degree, which is the B-note in the key of C Major. Using all the notes in this key, let's construct the last major scale mode, starting on B and ascending up to the next A-note. Check out the example below.

## B Locrian



Scale  
degree: 1    ♭2    ♭3    4    ♭5    ♭6    ♭7    (1)

## Playing Major Scale Modes in Other Keys

Playing modes in other keys will lead back to the same process of constructing modes that we used for the C Major modes. Let's take the key of F Major for example.

We know that our F Major scale, or F Ionian mode as you now know, is comprised of the notes F-G-A-B♭-C-D-E.

So, we'll build G Dorian next, reordering the notes to G-A-B♭-C-D-E-F.

## F Ionian

## G Dorian



Scale  
degree: 1    2    3    4    5    6    7 (1)    1    2    ♭3    4    5    6    ♭7 (1)

Reordering the notes, as illustrated below in a visual context is another way of building modes. Keep following this process and you'll be able to build major modes for any key.

<b>F Ionian</b>	<b>F-G-A-B<sub>b</sub>-C-D-E</b>
<b>G Dorian</b>	<b>G-A-B<sub>b</sub>-C-D-E-F</b>
<b>A Phrygian</b>	<b>A-B<sub>b</sub>-C-D-E-F-G</b>
<b>B<sub>b</sub> Lydian</b>	<b>B<sub>b</sub>-C-D-E-F-G-A</b>
<b>C Mixolydian</b>	<b>C-D-E-F-G-A-B<sub>b</sub></b>
<b>D Aeolian</b>	<b>D-E-F-G-A-B<sub>b</sub>-C</b>
<b>E Locrian</b>	<b>E-F-G-A-B<sub>b</sub>-C-D</b>

## **Conclusion**

Each major mode has its own special flavor and is assigned (although not limited) to a designated diatonic Western harmony. Look at the example below to see what I mean.

<b><u>Mode</u></b>	<b><u>Chord</u></b>
Ionian	I
Dorian	ii
Phrygian	iii
Lydian	IV
Mixolydian	V
Aeolian	vi
Locrian	vii <sup>o</sup>

For specific information on applying these modes to your playing, go to the Licks section of this newsletter for some great guitar, piano and bass examples of modes in different contexts, complete with some sweet drum grooves.

In addition, be sure to check out intermediate guitar lessons in jazz (taught by Tom Dempsey, Amanda Monaco, Mark Dziuba and Jody Fisher) and rock (taught by Jeff Peretz, Glenn Riley, Tim Quick, Joel Gregoire, Jared Meeker, Ralph Agresta, Dave Martone, Ken Steiger and Tobias Hurwitz). If you get comfortable with these lessons, there are many advanced mode-related lessons on our site to discover!

Not a guitar player? Don't fret! (pun intended). Keyboard players will want to check out Andrea Amos and Leo Marchildon's Adult Refresher lesson "In Other Modes." Bassists will enjoy lessons on modes taught by Matt Scharfglass and Chris Kuffner.

Get these modes up to speed, and you won't believe the difference in your lead lines!