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Music Theory 201

Lesson 7: Major and Minor Modes

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The Construction of the Major Modes



The term modal scales is applied to a group of scales commonly used in pop and jazz music. Modes are different than the "regular" major and minor scales most students are familiar with. Each mode has a name, and mode names come from the Greek language and from a time before major and minor (as we know them) were clearly defined.

The scale we now know as major was originally called the **Ionian** mode and its relative minor was known as **Aeolian**.

The image displays six musical scales on a single staff in treble clef. The first row contains three scales: C Ionian (Major), Eb Ionian (Major), and A Ionian (Major). The second row contains three scales: A Aeolian (Natural Minor), C Aeolian (Natural Minor), and F# Aeolian (Natural Minor). Each scale is written as a sequence of notes with accidentals, and the name of the scale is written above it in red text.

We will use these two commonly known scales as a point of reference, as we look at the modal scales.

Let's look at the three major modes first: the **Ionian**, **Lydian**, and **Mixolydian**, each of which has major thirds.

The image displays nine musical scales on a single staff in treble clef, arranged in three rows of three. The first row shows C Ionian, C Lydian, and C Mixolydian. The second row shows Eb Ionian, Eb Lydian, and Eb Mixolydian. The third row shows A Ionian, A Lydian, and A Mixolydian. In the Lydian and Mixolydian scales of each row, the fourth and seventh degrees are highlighted with red circles to show their characteristic intervals.

Each mode has characteristic notes—particular notes that clearly set each apart from the regular major, or Ionian, scale. For example, notice that the fourth degree of the Lydian scale is a half step higher than its counterpart in the Ionian or major scale, and the seventh degree of the Mixolydian scale is a half step lower.

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The Construction of the Major Modes



When we talk about what key a piece of music is in, we often describe both the tonality (the tonic pitch), and the modality (the type of scale on that pitch). For example, "A minor" tells us the tonic pitch is "A" and the type of scale is "minor." Using the same terminology, if we say a piece of music is in "G Mixolydian," we are saying that the tonic pitch is "G" and the type of scale based on G is "Mixolydian."

Here is a simple melody in the key of C major. Listen to how its character changes as it is "adjusted" to become first a Mixolydian, then a Lydian melody.



Ionian

Mixolydian

Lydian

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The Construction of the Minor Modes



There are four minor modes (those with minor thirds), and we have already seen one of them, **Aeolian**. Since we are familiar with Aeolian—we know the scale by its other name, natural minor—we will use it as a point of reference. The following contrasts the Aeolian scale with the other three minor modes: **Dorian**, **Phrygian**, and **Locrian**.

Notice that the Dorian scale has a sixth degree a half step higher than that found in Aeolian; the Phrygian scale has a second degree a half step lower; and the Locrian scale has not only the lowered second degree but a lowered fifth degree, as well. These notes characterize the sound of these modes, setting them apart from "regular minor."

Let's look at these minor modes on two other tonics—C and E.

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Let's revisit our melody and see how it sounds, first of all adjusted to Aeolian as written, then as Dorian, Phrygian, and Locrian.



Aeolian

Dorian

Phrygian

Locrian

Notice that Dorian sounds brighter than Aeolian, but Phrygian and especially Locrian have a much darker sound quality.


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Writing Modal Melodies



- Use a "melodic cadence" of scale degrees 2 to 1 and/or 7 to 1 at the end of each of your four-measure melodies. Melodic cadences, like harmonic cadences, resolve more strongly toward the tonic pitch than other scale members, helping to give the tonic greater emphasis. Notice in the following example that the sense of rest (cadence) is much stronger on C, in the example on the right.



- Avoid leaping or spanning the interval of a +4th or o5th, which occurs within each modal scale. This is an unstable interval with a strong tendency to resolve—but not to a place that we want it to go! It implies the dominant 7 of the relative major (the major scale with the same notes), and we do not want to go there. In the following C Dorian example, the interval E \flat to A, whether leaped or spanned, implies an F7, the dominant of B \flat major, and we do not want B \flat as the tonic; we want C.



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