

Lesson Three

How to get a grip of the Modal Scales

© Pianoscales.org

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form
or by any means without permission from the publisher except for personal use.

Part 1: The principle of modal scales

What separates modes from scales

Scales and modes are often treated as synonyms and that is a feasible approach. But to clarify the distinctions, modes can be seen as alternate versions of scales. The seven most common modes* are either alternative versions of major or minor scales (with Locrian as the exception, more about that later).

* There are more, which will be revealed in following parts in this lesson series.

Major modes

There are three modes based on the Major scales, which can be referred to as “major modes”:

- Ionian
- Lydian
- Mixolydian

Ionian

Ionian is actually identical with its major counterpart. Thus, for example, C Ionian and C Major consist of the same notes and in the same order:

Degrees	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C Ionian	C	D	E	F	G	A	B
Degrees	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C Major	C	D	E	F	G	A	B

So, if you hear anyone refer to the Ionian mode (or scale), you can relax to the fact it is the same thing as the Major scale.

Lydian

Lydian mode is related to the Major scale but contrary to the Ionian not completely identical, which the table below illustrate with F Lydian and C Major as examples:

Degrees	1	2	3	#4	5	6	7
F Lydian	F	G	A	B	C	D	E
Degrees	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C Major	C	D	E	F	G	A	B

As you can see, whereas notes are identical, the note order differs. What makes the character of the Lydian mode different from the Major scale is the #4 degree, meaning the fourth scale note is raised compared to the Major scale formula.

The specific conditions of Lydian mode can among other things be used for creating chord progressions that partially diverge from the typical major diatonic based progressions. Here are a few examples:

- C - **D** - Em - G
- F - C - Dm - **G**
- A - **B/A** - C#m

(The chord that diverges from the “major context” in bold.)

Mixolydian

Mixolydian is also related to Major, but as the table below illustrate, the mode differs in one aspect. Here is how that difference is seen when G Mixolydian and C Major are compared:

Degrees	1	2	3	4	5	6	b7
G Mixolydian	G	A	B	C	D	E	F
Degrees	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C Major	C	D	E	F	G	A	B

Once again, notes are identical whereas the note order isn't. What makes the character of the Mixolydian mode different from the Major scale is the b7 degree, meaning the seventh scale note is lowered compared to the Major scale formula.

You may recognize similarities to the dominant 7th chord (with the chord steps 1, 3, 5, b7) with the Mixolydian scale degrees. This establishes some the specific conditions for chord progressions that partially diverge from the typical major diatonic progressions, such as these examples:

- **G7** - Am/G - Em
- **E7** - Amaj7 - D6

(The chord that diverges from the “major context” in bold.)

Minor modes

There are three modes based on the Natural Minor scales, which can be referred to as “minor modes”:

- Aeolian
- Dorian
- Phrygian

Aeolian

Aeolian is actually identical with its minor counterpart. Thus, for example, C Aeolian and C Minor consist of the same notes and in the same order:

Degrees	1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
C Aeolian	C	D	Eb	F	G	Ab	Bb
Degrees	1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
C Minor	C	D	Eb	F	G	Ab	Bb

So, just as Ionian and Major are identical (see above), Aeolian and Minor are practically the same thing.

Dorian

Dorian is comparable to Minor but contrary to the Aeolian, not completely identical with its “parent scale”. The table below illustrates the relationship using F Dorian and C Minor as examples:

Degrees	1	2	b3	4	5	6	b7
F Dorian	F	G	Ab	Bb	C	D	Eb
Degrees	1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
C Minor	C	D	Eb	F	G	Ab	Bb

As you can see, whereas notes are identical, the note order differs. What sets the Dorian mode apart from the Minor scale is the 6 degree, which is raised compared to the Minor scale formula.

Dorian is closely related to jazz and the most used chord progression in that style, ii - V - I, is based on the Dorian mode. Here are a few examples:

- Cm9 - F7 - Bbmaj7
- Dm6 - G7 - Cmaj7

- Em7 - A13 - Dmaj9

All three chord progressions above are examples of the ii - V - I progression with various chord extensions.

Phrygian

Phrygian is also comparable with Minor. The table below illustrate the likeness with G Lydian and C Minor as examples:

Degrees	1	b2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
G Phrygian	G	Ab	Bb	C	D	Eb	F
Degrees	1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
C Minor	C	D	Eb	F	G	Ab	Bb

Once again, notes are identical but the note order differ. What makes the character of the Phrygian mode different from the Minor scale is the b2 degree, which is lowered compared to the Minor scale formula.

Phrygian is commonly used in flamenco music and the reason is the minor 2nd degree. Two examples of chord progressions:

- Am - G - F - **E**
- Cm - Bb - Ab - **G**

(The chord that diverges from the “minor context” in bold.)

Diminished modes

The last of the seven modes are the Locrian, which is neither major nor minor, instead it can be referred to as a “diminished mode”:

Locrian

To illustrate the qualities of Locrian it is probably better to compare it with chords than with another scale. The table below shows a comparison between B Locrian and the B half-diminished chord (Bm7b5):

Degrees	1	b2	b3	4	b5	b6	b7
B Locrian	B	C	D	E	F	G	A
Degrees	1		b3		b5		b7
Bm7b5	B		D		F		A

The Locrian mode is uncommon in popular music styles such as rock, pop and country, but is relatively common in some jazz styles.

Part 2: The background and the names

The ancient heritage

The modes have an ancient heritage, which explain the Greece sounding names. The names were often taken from regions or people. If you are curious, here are some brief background information related to each mode.

Ionian

The Ionian mode name was taken from a group of people – the Ionians was one of the major tribes in the ancient Greece.

Lydian

The Lydian mode emerged in the ancient Greece and the name was taken from a group of people, the Lydians, who once lived in western Anatolia.

Mixolydian

The Mixolydian mode is believed to be discovered by the Archaic Greek female poet Sappho and melodies based on the scale were considered suitable for females and persons with a soft temperament.

Aeolian

The Aeolian mode name was taken a group of people – the Aeolians was one of the major tribes in the ancient Greece.

Dorian

The Dorian mode name was taken a group of people – the Dorian was a tribe in ancient Greece and many believe that Dorian melodies during that era expressed courage and manhood and were singed by young soldiers.

Phrygian

The Phrygian mode name was taken from a region in ancient Greece. In the classical age, Phrygian melodies was considered merry and amiable.

Locrian

The name originates from the Locrians, who once lived in Central Greece.