

The Seven Modes

Seven scales made from one set of notes. Play the white keys from C to C and you have the major scale; start on D, or E, or any of the rest, and the tones and semitones fall in a different order. Same notes, seven different homes, seven different moods. Below, each mode is written from C so the differences show at a glance — the gold boxes are the notes that set it apart from plain major.

The modes, all built on C Ordered brightest to darkest — gold marks every note that differs from C major

Lydian

Major, with a raised 4th

STARTS ON DEGREE
4th · F in C major

C

D

E

F#

G

A

B

C

T

T

T

S

T

T

S

Brighter than major itself

The sharpened fourth lifts the whole scale. Film composers reach for it when something is vast or wondrous.

Ionian

The major scale

STARTS ON DEGREE
1st · C in C major

C

D

E

F

G

A

B

C

T

T

S

T

T

T

S

The one you already know

Every other mode is measured against this. Nothing is altered; the leading note rises firmly to the tonic.

Mixolydian

Major, with a flattened 7th

STARTS ON DEGREE
5th · G in C major

C

D

E

F

G

A

Bb

C

T

T

S

T

T

S

T

Major with the edge taken off

No leading note, so it never quite pulls home. The sound of bagpipes, blues and a great many rock songs.

Dorian

Minor, with a natural 6th

STARTS ON DEGREE
2nd · D in C major

C

D

Eb

F

G

A

Bb

C

T

S

T

T

T

S

T

Minor, but not sad

The raised sixth is the tell. It gives folk songs and sea shanties their particular briskness.

Aeolian

The natural minor scale

STARTS ON DEGREE
6th · A in C major

C

D

Eb

F

G

Ab

Bb

C

T

S

T

T

S

T

T

The ordinary minor

The relative minor of the major scale, written out as a mode. Settled, and unmistakably melancholy.

Phrygian

Minor, with a flattened 2nd

STARTS ON DEGREE
3rd · E in C major

C

Db

Eb

F

G

Ab

Bb

C

S

T

T

T

S

T

T

Dark, with a Spanish accent

The semitone right at the bottom presses down on the tonic. Flamenco guitar lives here.

Locrian

Minor, flattened 2nd and 5th

STARTS ON DEGREE
7th · B in C major

C

Db

Eb

F

Gb

Ab

Bb

C

S

T

T

S

T

T

T

The one with no floor under it

The flattened fifth removes the interval every other mode rests on, so nothing settles.

Brightest to darkest

Each step down flattens one more note

Lydian

Ionian

Mixolydian

Dorian

Aeolian

Phrygian

Locrian

Finding one fast. To play E Dorian, ask which major scale has E as its second degree — D major. Play D major and treat E as home.

Hold the tonic down. A mode only sounds like itself over a drone or a pedal bass; without one the ear hears the parent major scale.

Aim at the tell-tale note. Lydian's #4, Mixolydian's b7, Dorian's b6, Phrygian's b2. Land on it and the mode announces itself.