

## What is a Musical Mode?

The answer depends upon context. This course will focus on the meaning of musical mode that has to do with the concepts of contemporary scales, melodies and harmonic relationships. The center of gravity for this course is the seven-tone diatonic scale:

**do re me fa so la ti**

The working definition of a musical mode for this course is:

A mode of the diatonic scale is formed by shifting the starting point of the musical scale to another tone of the diatonic scale without changing the key signature or the order of whole and half steps within the scale.

Seven modes exist on the diatonic scale –  
one for each tone of the scale.

Here’s how this definition works in practice.

The diatonic scale of the key of “C” and the steps separating each tone are:

<b>Tone</b>	<b>C</b>		<b>D</b>		<b>E</b>		<b>F</b>		<b>G</b>		<b>A</b>		<b>B</b>	
<b>Step</b>		<i>whole</i>		<i>whole</i>		<i>half</i>		<i>whole</i>		<i>whole</i>		<i>whole</i>		<i>half</i>
<b>Solfege</b>	<i>do</i>		<i>re</i>		<i>me</i>		<i>fa</i>		<i>so</i>		<i>la</i>		<i>ti</i>	

A mode starting on “D” and using the tones of the C-Ionian scale is called “D – Dorian”. It takes this form:

<b>Tone</b>	<b>D</b>		<b>E</b>		<b>F</b>		<b>G</b>		<b>A</b>		<b>B</b>		<b>C</b>	
<b>Step</b>		<i>whole</i>		<i>half</i>		<i>whole</i>		<i>whole</i>		<i>whole</i>		<i>half</i>		<i>whole</i>
<b>Solfege</b>	<i>do</i>		<i>re</i>		<i>me</i>		<i>fa</i>		<i>so</i>		<i>la</i>		<i>ti</i>	

The key signature did not change. That is, no accidentals were added or deleted. The key signature for this new mode of “C” is the same as the key signature of the original “C” scale. *BUT*, the scale begins on the tone D.

The scale generated on the tone D is called a mode of the key of C.

The *do re me fa so la ti* scale beginning on the tone C is called the **Ionian Mode** of C. The scale beginning on the tone D is called the **Dorian Mode** of the C scale. Musicians nearly always use short hand to refer to the modes. These two scales would be called: **C Ionian** and **D Dorian**. Only when confusion is possible do we bother with the term “Ionian”. It is taken for granted that a music piece is in Ionian Mode unless otherwise specified or indicted by the choice of chords.

Musical modes originated when music was monophonic. At that time each mode has a unique sound. In the modern world of polyphonic music, the seven unique modes tend to get reduced in three major-sounding modes, three minor- sounding modes and one unstable mode.

If you are inclined toward detailed scholarship, a journey into the broad applications of modes in music would be fulfilling. There are many paths to follow. Medieval intervals and rhythmic relationships are defined as modes. The Greek scales from which we take our nomenclature for modes are formed using relationships that differ from contemporary use. Jazz makes extensive use of modes. Some modern art music deploys two or more modes simultaneously. This technique produces “poly modal” music.

Musical mode, in all the meanings the term carries, is a broad and compelling topic. To get started, focus on the contemporary use of musical modes. Master that concept intellectually and your greater understanding of how music works will enhance your enjoyment of listening to music. Master modes on your instrument and you’ll be a hot player.

For more information

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