

Modes

There is no rule in the universe that requires all scales to be in the diatonic form of *do re me fa so la ti do*. The scale could begin on any one of the tones. We could run the scale as *so la ti do re me fa so*.

When a scale begins on a tone that is not the tonic tone, we create a “mode” of the diatonic scale. There are seven modes on the diatonic scale. Each has a unique name and sound.

The Seven Modes of the Diatonic Scale

Name of Mode	Solfege	Step Pattern	Example
Ionian	<i>do re me fa so la ti do</i>	w-w-h-w-w-w-h	G-A-B-C-D-E-F#
Dorian	<i>re me fa so la ti do re</i>	w-h-w-w-w-h-w	A-B-C-D-E-F#-G
Phrygian	<i>me fa so la ti do re me</i>	h-w-w-w-h w-w	B-C-D-E-F#-G-A
Lydian	<i>fa so la ti do re me fa</i>	w-w-w-h w-w-h	C-D-E-F#-G-A- B
Mixolydian	<i>so la ti do re me fa so</i>	w-w-h w-w-h-w	D-E-F#-G-A- B-C
Aeolian	<i>la ti do re me fa so la</i>	w-h-w-w-h-w-w	E-F#-G-A- B-C-D
Locrian	<i>ti do re me fa so la ti</i>	h-w-w-h-w-w-w	F#-G-A- B-C-D- E

Note that the key signature is unchanged throughout all seven modes.

The modes are described by stating both the mode and the tone on which the scale begins. This allows us to understand the key signature. For example, C-Mixolydian has the same key signature as the key of G. That is one sharp.

The most commonly used modes in traditional music are:

Ionian – the overwhelming number of melodies and tunes in traditional music are in Ionian mode

Dorian – this mode has a minor tonal center. Found frequently in Celtic music and American folk ballads

Mixolydian – The flat 7th on this scale gives this mode its unique character. Mixolydian mode is frequently used in Celtic music and appears in old-time tunes a great deal too.

Aeolian – This mode is often called the “natural minor”. It is a common choice for sad ballads

The other modes rarely appear in traditional music. They do appear frequently in jazz. Phrygian mode is use for a lot of flamenco music. Sometimes that mode is called “gypsy mode”.

When asked what key a melody is in, players will often say something like “It’s in A mix”. That answer conveys that the key signature has two sharps and the usual V chord in the key of A is not used. That V chord is “E”. The E chord is E – G# - B. Because there is no G# in the 2-sharp key signature of A mixolydian, that expected V chord is not played. It is usually replaced by a G chord. In A mixolydian the G chord is the VII chord.