

**Common Ground on the Hill**  
**Understanding and Using the Modes**  
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**Modal Exchange**

The technique of modal exchange borrows chords from one mode and uses them in another mode. Great songwriters and tune smiths have applied this technique very successfully in some of the most popular compositions ever written. The technique goes by several Names: Modal Exchange, Chord Borrowing, Modal Interchange.

**The Answer!**

A number of steps are required to understand modal exchange. The details can be frustrating. So, here's the answer for one case of modal exchange.

Assume you are working on a composition in D-Ionian. You'd like to enliven the piece but just aren't getting anywhere with the standard seven chords of the mode: D, Em, F#m, G, A, Bm, C#°. You can borrow chords from any other parallel mode to change the vibe of the piece. Use this chart to borrow chords into D-Ionian

<b>Borrowed Chord Options For a Melody in D-Ionian</b>	
<b>Mode to Borrow From</b>	<b>Chord Options</b>
D-Dorian	Dm, F Am, B° C
D-Phrygian	Dm, Eb, F, Gm, A° Bb, Cm
D-Lydian	E, G#°
D-Mixolydian	F#°, Am, C

Let's say the D-Ionian chord progression supporting the melody is:

D G A D

Inject a Dorian vibe by borrowing a few chords and the progression becomes:

D G A D **F C Am** G D

Inject a Phrygian vibe by borrowing a few chords and the progression becomes:

D G A D **Cm Bb** A D G A D

Inject a Lydian vibe by borrowing a few chords and the progression becomes:

D G A D G **E** A D

Inject a Mixolydian vibe by borrowing a few chords and the progression becomes:

D G A D **Cm Bb** A D G A D

- Use only one or two, perhaps three, borrowed chords. The goal is to change the mood of a piece, not to change the harmonic center or key of the music.

- Some borrowed chords work better than others. For folk music, traditional music, singer-songwriter music the diminished chord is often too harsh.

People often associate each mode with a different vibe. The “mood” of a mode is subjective. Here’s a guide to how many people feel the modes.

### **Modes and Moods**

Each mode has a different vibe. How anyone interprets that vibe is subjective. Here’s how the modes affect my mood.

**Ionian** – bright, happy, safe, predictable, comfortable, expected. Can be boring too!

**Dorian** - a minor vibe, but somehow not as dark as the natural minor (Aeolian mode). This mode can feel a bit “here and there”. Could want to be a major vibe, but, certainly delivers a minor feeling. Frequently found in Celtic music. Ambiguity is the power of Dorian mode.

**Phrygian** – this is the darkest of all the modes. This mode is darker than the natural minor (Aeolian mode). That doesn’t mean Phrygian is to be avoided. The mode has inherent tension and beauty. Frequently found in Romani and flamenco music as well as heavy metal. Used well, Phrygian mode is a powerful tool. Sometimes called “gypsy mode”.

**Lydian** – the brightest of all the modes. Sometimes hard to distinguish this Lydian vibe from the Ionian vibe. But if the overall effect is over-the-top bright and happy, the melody is probably in Lydian mode. “Don’t worry – be happy”

**Mixolydian** – like Dorian mode, Mixolydian is something of a chameleon. The vibe lies somewhere between bright and dark and seems to change the moment you experience it. This is a powerful mode often found in Celtic and Old Time music.

**Aeolian** – this mode is often called the “Natural Minor”. It’s what most people mean when they say a melody is in a minor key. The vibe is dark, moody, and sad.

**Locrian** – the vibe is unsettled, disturbing, irritating. Listeners cannot tolerate the Locrian mode for long. All modes, except for Locrian, have either a major or minor chord as the tonic harmonic voice. That means melodies end on a stable sound. Listeners intuitively know the place their ears call home. But the tonic harmonic voice of Locrian is a diminished chord. By definition a diminished chord is that tool of tension that transports listeners to resolution but is not itself the resolution. Diminished chords are unstable. If the tonic chord of a mode is unstable, the entire mode is unstable. Locrian mode is a powerful tool in jazz, orchestral music, and some rock-n-roll. But, it doesn’t show up in traditional music.

### **Four Steps to Identify Borrowed Chords**

1. Identify the parallel modes and make a chart showing the scale of each parallel mode
2. Build triads on each tone of the scale in the mode – respect the key signature of the mode!
3. Examine the triads and discard all triads that are shared between the mode in which the piece is written and the mode you want to use to enliven the piece.
4. The remaining chords on the list can be borrowed into the original mode.

### **Step 1: Parallel modes and their scales**

When modal scales begin on the same tone, the modes are called “parallel”. Parallel modes ALWAYS have different key signatures. Here are the parallel modes whose scale begin on the tone “D”

Mode	Key Signature: Accidentals	Scale Tones						
D-Ionian	D: f# c#	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C#
D-Dorian	C: no accidentals	D	E	F	G	A	B	C
D-Phrygian	Bb: b <sup>b</sup> e <sup>b</sup>	D	E <sup>b</sup>	F	G	A	B <sup>b</sup>	C
D-Lydian	A: f# c# g#	D	E	F#	G#	A	B	C#
D-Mixolydian	G: f#	D	E	F#	G	A	B	C
D-Aeolian	F: b <sup>b</sup>	D	E	F	G	A	B <sup>b</sup>	C
D-Locrian	E <sup>b</sup> : b <sup>b</sup> e <sup>b</sup> a <sup>b</sup>	D	E <sup>b</sup>	F	G	A <sup>b</sup>	B <sup>b</sup>	C

**Step 2: Build triads on each scale tone of each mode**

Mode	Key Signature	Triads						
D-Ionian	D: f# c#	D I	Em ii	F#m III	G IV	A V	Bm vi	C# <sup>o</sup> vii <sup>o</sup>
D-Dorian	C: no accidentals	Dm i	Em ii	F III	G IV	Am v	B <sup>o</sup> vi <sup>o</sup>	C
D-Phrygian	Bb: b <sup>b</sup> e <sup>b</sup>	Dm i	E <sup>b</sup> II	F III	Gm iv	A <sup>o</sup> v <sup>o</sup>	B <sup>b</sup> VI	Cm vi
D-Lydian	A: f# c# g#	D I	E II	F#m iii	G# <sup>o</sup> vi <sup>o</sup>	A V	Bm vi	C# VII
D-Mixolydian	G: f#	D I	Em ii	F# <sup>o</sup> iii <sup>o</sup>	G IV	Am v	Bm vi	C VII
D-Aeolian	F: b <sup>b</sup>	Dm i	E <sup>o</sup> ii <sup>o</sup>	Fm III	Gm iv	Am v	B <sup>b</sup> VI	C VII
D-Locrian	E <sup>b</sup> : b <sup>b</sup> e <sup>b</sup> a <sup>b</sup>	D i <sup>o</sup>	E <sup>b</sup> II	Fm iii	Gm iv	A <sup>b</sup> V	B <sup>b</sup> VI	Cm vii

**Step 3: Discard all triads that are shared between the original mode and the mode that will lend chords**  
 The reason that shared chords are of no value in this procedure is that hold the listener in the original mode. And that’s counter to the purpose of using borrowed chords.

Mode	Triads						
D-Ionian <i>original mode</i>	D I	Em ii	F#m III	G IV	A V	Bm vi	C#° vii°
<b>Modes from which chords will be borrowed</b>							
D-Dorian	Dm i	Em ii	F III	G IV	Am v	B° vi°	C
D-Phrygian	Dm i	Eb II	F III	Gm iv	A° v°	Bb VI	Cm vi
D-Lydian	D I	E II	F#m iii	G#° vi°	A V	Bm vi	C# VII
D-Mixolydian	D I	Em ii	F#° iii°	G IV	Am v	Bm vi	C VII
D-Aeolian	Dm i	E° ii°	Fm III	Gm iv	Am v	Bb VI	C VII
D-Locrian	D i°	Eb II	Fm iii	Gm iv	Ab V	Bb VI	Cm vii

The grayed-out chords are shared between D-Dorian and the other modes

**Step 4: List the options for borrowing chords**

<b>Borrowed Chord Options For a Melody in D-Ionian</b>	
<b>Mode to Borrow From</b>	<b>Chord Options</b>
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D-Mixolydian	F#°, Am, C

Aeolian and Locrian options are not listed in this chart. Aeolian is the relative minor of the Ionian mode. Exchanging chords between these modes doesn't have a dramatic effect. Because of its diminished tonic chord, Locrian is simply not much use to the singer-songwriter or folk musician.

### Next Steps

Work through this procedure for G-Ionian and C-Ionian. Keep the list of borrowed chord options for future reference.

Remember too that an original melody may be in Dorian or Mixolydian or Phrygian. The same technique of borrowing chords can be used in that case too. Here's an example.

Suppose the original melody is in D-Dorian and you'd like to spice it up with some borrowed chords from other modes. We'll start with borrowing chords from the Lydian mode.

Mode	Chords on the Modes						
D-Dorian	Dm	Em	F	G	Am	B°	C
D-Ionian	D	Em	F#m	G	A	Bm	C#°
Chords Available to be Borrowed from D-Ionian INTO D-Dorian							
	D		F#m		A	Bm	C#°

This process may seem tedious and time consuming. It is the first time or two. But, keep notes of the results and stash the list of borrowed chord options away for future use. Work through at least Ionian, Dorian, Mixolydian modes in the key signatures you find most useful. Those are probably G, D, C, A and E.

The technique of Modal Exchange opens up endless possibilities for creating fresh harmonic progressions and melodies.

More detail available at:

[www.billtroxler.com](http://www.billtroxler.com)

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