

Names and Moods of the Modes

The names of the modes are a gift from ancient Greece - mostly. If you want to learn the history of the modes check out Wikipedia. The names of the modes in current use were derived from the Greek traditions during the medieval period. These modern names are sometimes called the “church modes”.

The Greek names may be difficult to remember. Here’s a mnemonic that may help.

I – Don’t – Particularly – Like – My – Aunt’s – Lover

Ionian – Dorian – Phrygian – Lydian – Mixolydian – Aeolian – Locrian

Say What Your Mean in Mode-Speak

The modes are described by stating both the mode and the tone on which the scale begins. Saying a piece is in Dorian mode gives only half the needed information.

If the mode of the piece is in Dorian and the key signature is G (one sharp) the proper way to describe the music is: A-Dorian.

This communicates that the piece is in Dorian mode and it’s scale begins on A. That forces the key signature of G. Dorian mode begins on the second degree of the scale. If the second degree of the scale is A the key signature must be G.

A piece in C-Mixolydian has the same key signature as the key of G. That is one sharp. The Mixolydian mode begins on the fourth degree of the scale. C is the fourth tone in the key of G. So, C-Mixolydian has a G key signature but the scale begins on C.

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.