

Phrygian Mode

The Scale & Vibe

The Phrygian scale begins on the 3rd degree of the scale, Me. This mode sounds intensely minor. Phrygian mode is frequently found in flamenco, Romani, jazz and heavy metal music. It's the go-to mode when film composers want music to have the greatest possible sense of gravitas. The mode isn't found much in singer-songwriter or traditional music. Too bad. Phrygian is the darkest or saddest of all the useful modes. It's one of the most expressive modes. Okay, "grieving and depressing" too.

Me Fa So La Ti Do Re

A-Phrygian scale: A B \flat C D E F G

B-Phrygiann scale: B C D E F \sharp G A

E-Phrygian scale: E F G A B C D

The Key Signature

The root tone of a Phrygian scale is always the 3rd degree of the Ionian scale that sets the key signature.

A-Phrygian: The tone A is the 3rd degree of the F-Ionian scale. So, the key signature of this mode has one flat (B \flat)

E-Phrygian: The tone E is the 3rd degree of the C-Ionian scale. So, the key signature of this mode has no accidentals

B-Phrygia: The tone B is the 3rd degree of the G-Ionian scale. So, the key signature of this mode has one sharp (F \sharp)

Altered Tones

To create a Phrygian scale from the Ionian scale using the same root tone, alter the scale tones in this way: lower the 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 7th tones of the scale by a half step each.

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|----------|---|-----------|-----------|---|---|-----------|-----------|
| Phrygian | 1 | b2 | b3 | 4 | 5 | b6 | b7 |
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A-Ionian scale: A B C \sharp D E F \sharp G \sharp

A-Phrygian scale: A B \flat C D E F G

E-Ionian scale: E F \sharp G \sharp A B C \sharp D \sharp

E-Phrygian scale: E F G A B C D

Chords

The most prominent chords in the Phrygian mode will be the tonic chord plus those chords which include the altered tones of the scale. These tones are the flatted 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 7th tones.

E-Phrygian prominent chords

E minor – E G B (tonic and b3)

G major – G B D (b3 and b7)

F major – F A C (b2 and b6)

D minor – D F A (b2 and b7)

C major – C E G (b6, b3 and root tone)

A minor - A C E (b6 and root tone)

The strongest chord changes in E-Phrygian move among E minor, F major and D minor.

A good way to explore chords in Phrygian is to compare the Phrygian scale against the Aeolian scale. Both are minor-sounding. The differences between the two scales will highlight the strongest chords and tones to use in Phrygian mode.

Jam track

An E-Phrygian jam track in 4|4 at moderate tempo using these chords:

Em7 Dm^{SUS2} Em7 F Dm^{SUS2} Em7 Fmaj7 C9 Dm^{SUS2} Em7

If you aren't familiar with chord extensions, just play the letter name of the chord
Em Dm Em F Dm Em F C Dm Em.

But, bone up on chord extensions. They make chord changes vibrant.

Examples of Phrygian mode

Pop Song – White Rabbit – Jefferson Airplane

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EUY2kJE0AZE>

Pop Song – Surfer Girl – The Beach Boys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHNcMs8W660>

Pop and orchestral – Steve Vai

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9IrWyZ0KZuk&index=2&list=PL6C9FEDB8B6E6A914&t=0s>

More Resources

Youtube is filled with short videos demonstrating the modes. Here are some links to Phrygian mode:

A solid, short look at Phrygian on the site eHow

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Yf364XTRBQ>

Rick Beato holds forth on Phrygian. The focus is film scoring. But, there is a lot of great information in this video. Subscript to Rick's Youtube channel. He provides a huge amount of useful information about music.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c0scmuNFC-E>

Hack Music Theory always provides clear, short and excellent advice. Here are some of their Youtubes on the modes:

What are Modes anyway??

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEEIzai3tlo>

How to get a mode to sound like a mode

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BWqJONvxNEg>

Rick Beato again on modes. He moves VERY fast. But, the sounds are wonderful. It's a helpful youtube that gives the sounds of the modes along with a great deal of theory.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HJ5mBb9Pgo>