

Diatonic Modes

Firstly - modes, despite being widely misunderstood are actually pretty simple.

Better still, the concept behind modes is simply a variation of something that you should have seen before – namely the relationship between the major and minor scale

Remember how the keys of G major and Em are 'related' by sharing the same pool of notes.

Yet remember how these two keys are completely different and separate beyond sharing that note pool.

The way to hear the difference between the minor and major scale is not by comparing the two relatives [like G and it's 'relative minor' Em]. The commonality of the note pool messes around with your ears and makes it hard to spot the difference between them when they are played one after the other.

A better way of being able to hear the difference is to play the major and minor scale but from the same tonic.

For example, try comparing G major and G minor.

G major = G, A, B, C, D, E, F#

G minor = G, A, Bb, C, D, Eb, F

This is therefore much more meaningful to your ears.

Modes are essentially scales just like any other. Remember how the major and minor scales are simply two different 'templates' defining a series of intervals. Modes simply provide yet more ways of carving up an octave using alternative 'templates' of intervals.

Nothing more, nothing less.

Think back to the natural minor and how it was derived from its 'mother' key - the diatonic major - and how the tonic of the minor scale is located on the 6th degree of the major scale.

Modes are derived in exactly the same way but with one small difference.

They each use a different starting note [tonic] from its relative major [which I'll call the centre key].

So, if there are seven notes in a diatonic major scale, and each of these notes can be the tonic of a mode in it's own right, then there can be only seven diatonic modes.

The main point to note is that the major scale is used only derive / calculate the modes.

Just like the major and minor scales, the modes will therefore have the same note pool as the centre key from which they are derived.

The similarity ends there as each mode is essentially a scale in its own right.

The major scale is composed of the following [familiar by now] series of intervals:

Tonic, major 2nd, major 3rd, perfect 4th, perfect 5th, major 6th, major 7th

The tonic of the major scale can also be thought of as the tonic of the 1st mode.

This 1st mode has a name and is known as the 'Ionian' mode.

The scale of G major is therefore the same as the mode called 'G Ionian'.

Looking from the 2nd degree of the major scale, in modal terms you can reconsider it from being the 2nd degree of the major scale to becoming the tonic of a new scale – or more accurately termed, a new mode.

By looking from this new tonic you'll see a completely new and different series of intervals emerge.

The mode that has it's tonic located on the 2nd of the major scale is called:

The Dorian Mode

Let's take a look at the modal intervals using the notes from the key of G major so that you can see examples.

The notes in the key of G major are:

G, A, B, C, D, E, F#

So, by making the 2nd note of the major scale the tonic, we will see that we now have a new series of note values:

A, B, C, D, E, F#, G,

And we therefore have a new series of intervals:

tonic, major 2nd, minor 3rd, perfect 4th, perfect 5th, major 6th, minor 7th.

The series of intervals shown above is known as the Dorian mode.

The example has the note A as the tonic and is therefore the mode of:

A Dorian

This template of intervals shows that the Dorian mode is essentially a minor scale with a 6th that is major instead of minor.

All of the chords that we calculated from the centre key [in this case G major] still apply but they are rotated in the same way as the notes themselves.

In the key of G major the triads are:

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
G	Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#m b5

In the key of A Dorian the triads are:

I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Am	Bm	C	D	Em	F#m b5	G

Think of A Dorian essentially as being in a 'key' in its own right

For example a I, IV, V chord progression in A Dorian would be:

Am, D, Em

When creating melodies it has a minor tonality but the major 6th makes it sound less 'dark / sad / sombre' than the natural minor [with its minor 6th].

Also, although the mode is calculated from G major, never think that you are in the key of G simply because you share the same notes.

For the sake of simplicity and to ease understanding, consider this 'similarity as simply a coincidence - and that it is a pretty useful coincidence too when it comes to working the notes of the modes out.

Rule: When you are in A Dorian - just like being in the key of Am but with a major 6th

What we've just seen applies to all modes.

They are all calculated from a parent major scale - the centre key

They adopt all of the available chords from the centre key

They have a new series of intervals

They are essentially keys in their own right

Given that there are 7 notes in a major scale, there are therefore 7 associated modes.
 So let's go through the seven of them using G major as the Centre key.
 The Modes "from" G major:

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Ionian Mode	G Tonic	A Major 2nd	B Major 3rd	C Perfect 4th	D Perfect 5th	E Major 6th	F# Major 7th
Dorian Mode	A Tonic	B Major 2nd	C Minor 3rd	D Perfect 4th	E Perfect 5th	F# Major 6th	G Minor 7th
Phrygian Mode	B Tonic	C Minor 2nd	D Minor 3rd	E Perfect 4th	F# Perfect 5th	G Minor 6th	A Minor 7th
Lydian Mode	C Tonic	D Major 2nd	E Major 3rd	F# Augmented 4th	G Perfect 5th	A Major 6th	B Major 7th
Mixolydian Mode	D Tonic	E Major 2nd	F# Major 3rd	G Perfect 4th	A Perfect 5th	B Major 6th	C Minor 7th
Aeolian Mode	E Tonic	F# Major 2nd	G Minor 3rd	A Perfect 4th	B Perfect 5th	C Minor 6th	D Minor 7th
Locrian Mode	F# Tonic	G Minor 2nd	A Minor 3rd	B Perfect 4th	C Diminished 5th	D Minor 6th	E Minor 7th

What helps to hammer home the differences between the modes is to show them based around the same tonic.
 Using G as the tonic things will be much clearer [especially to your ear],
 The Modes with a tonic "of" G:

	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII
Ionian [from G]	G Tonic	A Major 2nd	B Major 3rd	C Perfect 4th	D Perfect 5th	E Major 6th	F# Major 7th
Dorian [from F]	G Tonic	A Major 2nd	Bb Minor 3rd	C Perfect 4th	D Perfect 5th	E Major 6th	F Minor 7th
Phrygian [from Eb]	G Tonic	Ab Minor 2nd	Bb Minor 3rd	C Perfect 4th	D Perfect 5th	Eb Minor 6th	F Minor 7th
Lydian [from D]	G Tonic	A Major 2nd	B Major 3rd	C# Augmented 4th	D Perfect 5th	E Major 6th	F# Major 7th
Mixolydian [from C]	G Tonic	A Major 2nd	B Major 3rd	C Perfect 4th	D Perfect 5th	E Major 6th	F Minor 7th
Aeolian [from Bb]	G Tonic	A Major 2nd	Bb Minor 3rd	C Perfect 4th	D Perfect 5th	Eb Minor 6th	F Minor 7th
Locrian [from Ab]	G Tonic	Ab Minor 2nd	Bb Minor 3rd	C Perfect 4th	Db Diminished 5th	Eb Minor 6th	F Minor 7th

So here's a lil' math thing.

Try working out the notes and the centre keys for all 7 of the modes where the tonics are:

C,

then E,

then A

[that's 21 different scales]

The object of the exercise is to practice using intervals and scale spellings and to become familiar and at ease with this "music arithmetic".

It can seem daunting at first but does become easier to grasp with a little time and effort.

A thing to note:

If you are playing in the key of G and the chord of Am is sounding, and you are using the notes from the scale of G major, you are still in the key of G major, not the mode of A Dorian.

This is because the Tonic is G, and the song is in the key of G.

Example:

Chord progression I, IV, V in G is G, C, D

The same progression in A Dorian is Am, D, Em

Clearly not the same

There will be a time where you switch modes and scales around on a per chord basis.

In fact, there will be times when you'll switch modes over the same chord.

You'll find this occurring when you use compositional and improvisational techniques known as:

"Parallel Modulation"

"Melodic Substitution"

We'll look at these subjects in detail in the future as they are an art in their own right that once mastered, will add whole new dimensions to your powers of improvisation and composition.