

Daniel Lee

Lesson Name: Introduction to Modes

Course Type: Undergraduate or High School Music Theory

Lesson Length: 1 class period (approximately 50 minutes), although review can be used in future lessons

Abstract/Introduction

This lesson will introduce the Lydian, Mixolydian, and Dorian modes, as well as connect the major and minor scales/keys to the terms of Ionian and Aeolian. Students will need to know the WT/HT sequence within major and minor scales before receiving this lesson, and the visuals in this lesson include examples in treble, bass, and alto clefs. Also, musical excerpts and review/assessment examples are given in various keys.

This lesson is appropriate for undergraduate or high school theory students, or for anyone desiring a review of modes. During the lesson an acknowledgement of the system of assigning modes to specific white-key groups on the piano may be made (Dorian as D to D, Lydian as F to F, and Mixolydian as G to G), but the lesson focuses more on the altered pitches compared to the nearest major or minor scale, so students will be able to identify modes on any tonic/key center. This lesson was originally delivered via Zoom, and a copy of the slideshow used is included.

Goals

By the end of the lesson, the students will be able to:

- Identify the Lydian, Mixolydian, and Dorian modes in notated melodies, in addition to the Ionian and Aeolian modes.
- Listen to aural examples of melodies/pieces in Lydian, Mixolydian, and Dorian modes, and describe characteristics of each mode.
- Sing a scale in the Lydian, Mixolydian, and Dorian modes using computer assistance.

Materials

Visual Examples (projected or screen-shared would be best)

Audio Examples

Student Worksheet

Slide show presentation (optional)

Lesson Procedure [Visual and Audio examples marked in Blue]

Review

- “What are the two most common forms of scales we know?” [Major and Minor]
- “For the lesson today, the terms “scale” and “key” may be used interchangeably.”
- Identify examples of both types of scales [Vis-01, Vis-02]
- Introduce that major and minor belong to a bigger group called Modes

Modes Introduction

- “Follow along on worksheet as we go through each example”
- “We’re learning 3 new modes today, but they all connect to a major or minor scale/key”
- For each mode, play the audio example, then students fill in the worksheet for that example:
 - Lydian [Aud-01 and Vis-03]
 - Give piano example of Lydian vs. Major [Aud-02 and Vis-04]
 - Mixolydian [Aud-03, Aud-04, and Vis-05]
 - Give piano example of Mixolydian vs. Major [Aud-04 and Vis-06, Aud-05 and Vis-06]
 - Dorian [Aud-06 and Vis-07]
 - Give piano example of Dorian vs. Major [Aud-07 and Vis-08]
- Ask for volunteers to give their answers for each example
- Transfer answers to the final grid at the end of the worksheet [Key provided]

- Ask for volunteers: Summarize how Lydian, Mixolydian, and Dorian relate to either the major or minor key, and what's different. Statements should be similar to:
 - “The Lydian mode/scale is like a major scale, with a raised/higher 4th scale degree.”
 - “The Mixolydian mode/scale is like a major scale, with a lowered 7th scale degree.”
 - “The Dorian mode/scale is like a minor scale, with a raised/higher 6th scale degree.”
- Address Ionian and Aeolian on the list

Sing Modes and Modes in Context

- Project this website with audio on, or share the link if students are on their own devices:
<https://learningmusic.ableton.com/advanced-topics/modes.html>
- The keyboard at the bottom of the page is the most useful. Show students different types of scales and starting pitches, or give them time to experiment and play on their own.
- After one minute, ask students to mute and sing together on teacher-selected Lydian, Mixolydian, and Dorian scales, using the online tool if needed. A neutral syllable like “La” can be used.
- Why are they called modes?
 - Origins from Ancient Greek music, but the medieval church used a related system
- Why do modes exist?
 - Often appear in folk music throughout the world, not all music fits in Western Tonality
 - Some specific qualities to each mode (leading tones in different places, tetrachords and pentachords in different places)
- Are there other modes?
 - Yes, we haven't discussed Phrygian or Locrian yet
- Are there other scale types?
 - Not all scales include 7 pitches
 - Some have less (pentatonic)
 - Some have more (chromatic, octatonic)
 - Some aren't based in our chromatic system

Mode Attributes

- “The different placements of whole and half steps in each mode creates specific attributes for each mode.”
- The Ionian mode (major) is built with two tetrachords (4-note scales), each with a leading tone to the last note [Vis-09]. Similarly, there are two major pentachords (5-note scales) that provide a strong tonic-dominant relationship [Vis-10]
- In the Lydian mode, both scale degrees 1 and 5 (tonic and dominant) have their own leading tones [Vis-11]
- The Mixolydian mode also has two major pentachords, but in different places than the major scale [Vis-12]

Informal Assessment

- Show [Vis-13], which is also on their worksheet, and ask students to fill in the missing information on their own. When ready, show [Vis-14] and review as needed.
- Show [Vis-15], also on the worksheet, and work together as a class to fill in the missing information. Compare responses to the ones provided in [Vis-16] and review as needed.

References

<https://learningmusic.ableton.com/advanced-topics/modes.html>

A Few Notes for Instructors

If you are unfamiliar with modes, this paragraph will provide a brief overview. However, many resources and detailed explanations can be found through online searches for the following terms: modes, Greek modes, Church modes, examples of modes. In Western music, the most common forms of scales/keys are major and minor (for the sake of this explanation, we'll stick with the natural minor scale because it reflects the key signature). Both these scales can be express in a series of whole and half steps: Major (WWHWWWH), and Minor (WHWWHWW). Modes other than major and minor were more common in early Western music, and are also found in the music of cultures around the world outside of Western European art music. Many folk songs throughout history are/were based on various modes, which is one of the primary reasons for studying them in music theory. The Dorian scale/mode is made up of the following W/H pattern: WHWWHW. The Lydian scale/mode follows this pattern: WWHWWH. The Mixolydian scale/mode follows this pattern: WWHWWHW. Each of these three modes sound very similar to a major scale (Mixolydian and Lydian) or a minor scale (Dorian). One shortcut to remember these W/H patterns is the Dorian scale is found on the piano by playing all the white keys from D to the next octave D. The Lydian scale can be found by playing all the white keys from F to F. The Mixolydian scale can be found by playing all the white keys from G to G.

The major scale is also known as the Ionian scale/mode, while the (natural) minor scale is known as the Aeolian scale/mode. Two additional modes exist, but they are less commonly found in Western music: The Phrygian scale/mode (white keys from E to E on the keyboard, HWWHWW), and the Locrian scale/mode (white keys from B to B on the keyboard, HWWHWW). The Locrian mode is generally viewed as being more of a theoretical mode (to complete "the set") and examples outside of melodies created specifically to demonstrate how Locrian looks/sounds are difficult to find. The Phrygian mode is more common than Locrian, but less common than the three modes studied in this lesson. While looking for Phrygian examples, two considerations came forward.

First, examples of the Phrygian mode are sometimes found when music in a minor key momentarily centers around the fifth (v) of the key, without tonicizing it. In a minor key, a Phrygian scale naturally occurs from the fifth to the next fifth when no accidentals are used. So, one of the questions in the examples found through online searches could be: Is this actually in the Phrygian mode, or is this example just from a minor key that is temporarily centered on the fifth (v) of the key?

Second, online searches for Phrygian examples revealed that scale and pitch collections from other cultures closely or exactly matched the Phrygian scale. For example, the *Bhairavi Thaata* is an Indian *raga* (collection of pitches used for improvisation) that matches the Phrygian mode exactly. However, instructors should be careful to present scales and pitch collections from other cultures through the lens of Western music, and if/how they are similar to the scales found in Western music should also be discussed with care.

For multiple reasons, including the reasons listed above, I chose to focus this lesson on the Dorian, Lydian, and Mixolydian modes. This lesson is meant to be an introduction and framing of modes in terms of their nearest major or minor scale, but future lessons can go deeper into the three modes from this lesson and/or address more thoroughly the Phrygian and Locrian modes.