Why am I learning this?

Modes are basic musical tools that have been used around the world for millennia. You want to know them just like you want to know the continents, even if you don’t visit them all equally. They are particularly useful for improvisation and for improving your sense of pitch.

A mode is a kind of key, scale, or melody. As kinds of scales, modes are more precisely ways of stepping through a scale from different starting points. The term modes most often refers more specifically to the diatonic modes (modes of major).

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History and etymology

Musicians around the world have used what we now call diatonic modes (ways of stepping through a scale), pentatonic modes, modes of melodic minor, and other modes for millennia and octatonic and hexatonic modes for more than a century. But the term has only been used in this way in modern times. Ancient Greeks used and theorized thirteen or seven transpositions of a scale called tonoi. Medieval theorists translated tonos into Latin as modus, the origin of the English term mode. Meanwhile, church musicians used and theorized eight or twelve kinds of melodies called toni, or tones in English. Then in early modern times, keys appeared, first eight and then twenty-four. Modes, tones, and keys were all hopelessly confused with one another, and consequently the term mode now has three different meanings (kinds of scales, kinds of melodies, and kinds of keys). The Greek tonoi; the church tones, diatonic modes share several of the same names (referring to Greek ethnicities), but they are not the same thing. Since the Renaissance, modes have been associated with different affects, which is the origin of the simplistic notion that major is happy and minor is sad.

Modes as kinds of keys

In tonal music, the modes (kinds of keys) are major and minor. The mode includes not just the scale but the set of chords and how these materials are used to project harmonic function. It is also possible for a piece to be in major-minor, where both scales and sets of chords are used equally.

Modes as kinds of scales

Modes can be ways of stepping through a scale from different starting points (to make different scales). The most common are the diatonic modes. The names of these modes are also used to refer to particular scales, e.g., C dorian. Scale-degree names and numbers are commonly used with diatonic modes, pentatonic modes, and modes of melodic minor parallel to how they are used with major and minor scales.

Diatonic modes (modes of major)

The diatonic modes are also called the modes of major in jazz theory. They are often incorrectly called church modes (see Modes as kinds of melodies).

Ionian is the same as the major scale:

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      1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8
do re mi fa sol la ti do
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Example: Björk, "Isobel," from *Post* (1995). The verse is framed by the lower tonic and the dominant, while the chorus is framed by the dominant and the upper tonic. The 6–7–8–b7 ostinato uses what might be called a melodic dorian scale form: a raised seventh degree on the way up and a lowered seventh degree on the way down. The light/dark mode suits the song’s reference to a “tiniest spark” living “in a forest pitch dark.”

**Phrygian** (the third mode of major) is like natural minor with a lowered second degree:

Example: Björk, "Army of Me," from *Post* (1995). The bass and melody in the verse establish the mode by circling around the tonic. The chorus consists of a descent from the subtonic to the tonic with a final drop from the subdominant. This focus on the subdominant illustrates how the subdominant in phrygian is more stable than the dominant, which lacks a perfect fifth above. The dark mode contributes to the song’s expression of anger and exasperation.

**Lydian** (the fourth mode of major) is like major with a raised fourth degree:

Example: Björk, "Enjoy," from *Post* (1995). The verse is framed by the lower tonic and the dominant, while the chorus is framed by the mediant and the upper tonic, and it focuses on the dominant. The upward pointing mode helps the song’s expression of romantic excitement.

**Mixolydian** (the fifth mode of major) is like major with a lowered seventh degree:

Example: Nirvana, "All Apologies," from *In Utero* (1993): The introduction establishes the mode with a guitar figure framed by the lower mediant and the upper mediant. The melody shares this frame. The mode’s characteristic lowered seventh degree, given particular emphasis in the accompaniment and the off-tonic ending, contributes to the song’s air of resignation.

**Aeolian** (the sixth mode of major) is the same as natural minor:
Example: Nirvana, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," from *Nevermind* (1991): The opening 5–b7–8 figure in the vocal melody highlights the absence of the leading tone. The verse and pre-chorus consist of an undulating and backtracking descent from the upper tonic to the lower tonic. The chorus is more intense but directionless, bouncing around between the upper tonic, the mediant above, and the dominant below, in keeping with the song's stream of non-sequiturs.

**Locrian** (the seventh mode of major) is like phrygian with a lowered fifth degree:

Example: Rush, "YYZ," from *Moving Pictures* (1981): The introduction and coda of "YYZ" feature a tritone ostinato in the bass and a slow-moving locrian melody in the synthesizer part above it, which descends from b5 (with neighboring b6) through b3 and b2 to 1. The instability of the harmony portrays the constant motion of an airport (the code for Toronto International Airport is YYZ, which is also spelled out in Morse code in the opening rhythm), and the symmetrical division of the octave provides a good representation of a crossroads (Nicole Biamonte).

From the preceding, it is apparent that there are three major-like diatonic modes, three minor-like modes, and one oddball. Together, they form a spectrum of modes from bright to dark (from raised to lowered degrees), exhausting all the possible inflections of scale degrees available in the chromatic scale.

Notice that when the modes are arrayed from bright to dark with the same *tonic*, as they are here, the *key signatures* (properly speaking, the diatonic collect ions) lie adjacent to one another on the circle of fifths. Here, they stretch from one sharp to five flats. Conversely, when the modes are arrayed from bright to dark with the same *key signature*, for example the white keys, as they were shown earlier, the *tonics* form a chains of fifths, for example F–C–G–D–A–E–B. Analogously, one can go from light to dark by staying in a single time zone (tonic) from noon to 6:00 (sharp to flat) or by traveling east in a rocket ship in a single moment (key signature) across six time zones (tonics).
Pentatonic modes

Of the pentatonic modes, the most common are the two that contain tonic triads.

Major pentatonic (the regular pentatonic scale):

```
1  2  3  5  6  8
\(\text{do re mi sol la do}\)
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Minor pentatonic:

```
1  b3  4  5  b7  8
\(\text{do me fa sol te do}\)
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Example: Led Zeppelin, "Moby Dick," from Led Zeppelin IV (1971): Each of the chords sports a minor pentatonic scale. As heard here, the minor pentatonic scale is often used in blues. In fact, the pentatonic scale can be expanded into two versions of the blues scale through the addition of a note between 2 and 3 of the major pentatonic, or between 4 and 5 of the minor.

Modes of melodic minor

The most common modes of melodic minor are melodic minor itself, the acoustic scale (the fourth mode), and the super locrian scale (the seventh mode).

Melodic minor (ascending):

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1  2  b3  4  5  6  7  8
\(\text{do re me fa sol la ti do}\)
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Acoustic scale (the fourth mode of melodic minor):

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1  2  3  #4  5  6  b7  8
\(\text{do re mi fi sol la te do}\)
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The acoustic scale is also called the lydian-dominant scale in jazz theory. This name refers to the scale's combination of the raised fourth degree from lydian with the lowered seventh degree from mixolydian (the fifth mode of major). This combination illustrates a more general principle, that tens of scales can be created by combining different inflections of different scale degrees!

Super locrian (the seventh mode of melodic minor) is like locrian with a flat fourth degree:
Super locrian is also called the **altered scale** in **jazz** theory, because enharmonically it contains every possible alteration of a dominant ninth **chord**, as shown above: b9, #9, b5, and #5.

Example: Miles Davis, "Gone," from Porgy and Bess (1958) (Ethan Hain)

**Other modes**

Since the diatonic, pentatonic, and melodic minor **scales** have an asymmetrical step pattern, there is a mode for each different note of the **scale**. That is not the case with symmetrical **scales**. The **chromatic** and whole-tone **scales** have one mode each, and the octatonic and hexatonic scales have two modes each.

**Modes as kinds of melodies**

A mode can be a kind of melody with a particular **scale** and movement. The most well known instance is the set of eight modes in the Roman Catholic Church, which are called **church modes** or **tones**. The Orthodox Church also has a set of eight modes called tones. The term **mode** in this sense can also be applied to, for example, Indian **ragas** and Javanese **pathet**.

**Further reading**

- Miguel Roig-Francolí, *Understanding Post-Tonal Music*, Chapter 1
- Joseph Straus, *Introduction to Post-Tonal Theory*, Chapter 4

**External links**

The Wikipedia article on **modes** is generally well written, although it does not clearly differentiate the three meanings of the term mode.