

MODAL MADNESS!

By Joe Deninzon

Origins of Modal Music

Modes are a very effective way to set the mood and add color to your improvisations, regardless of musical genre.

The modes of the major scale have origins that can be traced to ancient Greece. Greek musical treatises describe scale systems similar to the modes we know today. The Dorian scale is named after an ancient Greek subgroup called the *Dorians*. The Locrian is named after *Locris*, a small region in central Greece. Other modes were named after neighboring areas in Asia Minor such as *Lydia* and *Phrygia*.

In *The Republic*, Plato suggested that soldiers should listen to music in the Dorian or Phrygian modes (or *harmonia*) when preparing for battle, and avoid the Lydian, Mixolydian, and Ionian, which were considered weak or feminine. Plato and Aristotle believed that the modes one listened to could shape their character, make them fit for certain jobs, and even cause a social revolution.

Church Modes

Modes such as the Dorian and Lydian were commonly used in Gregorian chant and other sacred music in Europe starting in the 9th century, when earlier texts written by a scholar named Boethius attempting to translate Greek music treatises into Latin were discovered. The modes described by the Greeks were adapted and used by the church to describe their system, which involved what we know as the Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, and Mixolydian. In 1547, a Swiss theorist named Henricus Glareanus, and later, and Italian theorist Gioseffo Zarlino added the Ionian and Aeolian modes and solidified the concept of the church modes. The most important characteristics of the Church modes were the “final” (the root note), and the “dominant” (the 5th from the root, or in some cases the 4th). The final and the dominant would often be droned while the modal chant was sung by the primary singers.

Modal Jazz

In the late 1950's, jazz artists like Miles Davis, pianist Bill Evans, John Coltrane, and Herbie Hancock, re-discovered modal music and were among the first to incorporate it into jazz. Groundbreaking albums like Miles Davis "Kind of Blue", John Coltrane's "Impressions", and Herbie Hancock's "Maiden Voyage" created the template for Modal Jazz and contain some of the greatest jazz compositions ever written.

Modal jazz was a reaction to the Bebop movement, which was popular in the 1940's. We will discuss Bebop later in this book, but the style was characterized by many chord changes, chromatic lines, and often, breakneck tempos showcasing the virtuosity of the musicians. Modal jazz, however, slowed down and simplified the elements of bebop and made jazz more accessible to the masses led to a commercial resurgence of jazz in the fifties and early sixties, with artists like George Shearing and Dave Brubeck. Instead of having many fast-moving chord changes within the form of a song, there would usually be 2, 3, or 4 chords to work with. Each chord would last for multiple measures and the challenge, as in the blues, was to create interesting solos using a limited melodic and harmonic framework.

Modes later became popular in rock, pop, folk music, and heavy metal. The Dorian mode can be heard in Simon and Garfunkel's "Scarborough Fair", Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall", Sting's "Be Still my Beating Heart", among many others. A good example of the Lydian and Ionian modes can be found in Frank Zappa's song "Inca Road". The Grateful Dead, Phish, and many other Jam Bands have incorporated modes in their extended improvisations. Locrian, Phrygian, and Aolian modes are popular in hard rock and metal. Songs like Metallica's "Master of Puppets" are an example where the Phrygian mode is used. For more recommended listening, see the extensive list at the end of this chapter.

Because of the slow harmonic movement of modal songs, I like to use modal music as a way of introducing students to the techniques of playing over chord changes.

3 Ways of Learning the Modes

Method 1: Up the C Major scale

There are three most common approaches for learning and internalizing the modes. The easiest is to learn them based on the notes of the C Major scale (all the white keys on the piano). If you play a C major scale, this is known as the Ionian mode. That same set of notes starting and ending on D is known as the Dorian, etc.

Each mode corresponds to a chord. In the following exercise, I have written out the arpeggio of the chord that corresponds with each mode, followed by the mode itself.

Ex 1: Modes of the C major scale moving up the scale

Modes of the C Major scale moving up the scale

C Ionian

C Maj7

8

D Dorian

D min7

15

E Phrygian

E min7b9

22

F Lydian

F Maj#11

29

G Mixolydian

G7

36

A Aeolian

A min7b13

43

B Locrian

B min7b5

This may seem like the easiest approach to conceptualize the modes, but you should also think of them in the following ways.

Method 2: Modes off of the same note

Modal music is different from tonal/diatonic music, since the chords do not “resolve” and stay in one place most of the time. There are no “cadences” and common motions like that from the five-chord (dominant) to the one chord (tonic). In the following exercise, play ALL the modes off of the same note. In order to do this, pay attention to the INTERVALS between the notes. In the following exercise, I have written out these intervals. My advice is to MEMORIZE these intervals so that you can play any mode in any key at any time.

Ex 2: Modes off of the same note: C

Chapter 2 Ex 2

Modes off of the same note (C)

C IONIAN WH WH H WH WH WH H CMaj7

5

C DORIAN WH H WH WH WH H WH - Cmin7

9

C PHRYGIAN H WH WH WH H WH WH C7b9

13

C LYDIAN WH WH WH H WH WH H CMaj7#11

17

C MIXOLYDIAN WH WH H WH WH H WH C7

21

CAOLEAN WH H WH WH H WH WH Cmin7b13

25

C LOCRIAN H WH WH H WH WH WH Cmin7b5

29

Method 3: Grouping modes into “families”

The third way I recommend learning the modes is to group them into 4 families based on their most defining characteristics.

The “Major” family: Ionian and Lydian.

These modes are characterized by whole steps between the first three notes, and a raised 7th degree.

Both can be played over a **Major 7th chord**.

Defining Notes

The defining note of the Lydian is the raised 4th degree of the scale, also referred to as the #11.

If you see a chord in a chart that says CMaj7#11, you know that you will be improvising with a C Lydian mode over that chord. If you only see Cmaj7, you can play an Ionian, but are still free to throw in a raised 4th for a Lydian sound, which always works well and gives the music a dreamy atmosphere.

The “Minor” family: Dorian and Aeolian

These are two modes that have a whole step followed by a half step. Both sound like minor scales and are accompanied with minor chords.

Defining Notes

While both scales start with a major second interval followed by a minor second, their defining note is the 6th degree of the scale (also referred to as the 13th). In Dorian, it is raised. In Aeolian, it is flatted.

If you see a chord in a chart that says Cmin7 (also sometimes written as a C-7), Cmin9, or Cmin11, you would improvise using a C Dorian mode. If you see a Cmin7b13, Cmin9b13, or C min11b13, you would improvise using a C Aeolian mode.

The Dominant family: the Mixolydian

The Mixolydian is basically a major scale with a flatted 7th. The chord that corresponds with this is also known as a dominant 7 chord. In most non-classical music, it is simply written as a 7 chord. If you see a C7 in a chord chart, it means “dominant 7”.

Play a C Mixolydian if you see the following chords: C7, C9, C13, or Csus

The b9 family: Phrygian and Locrian

The two scales where the second degree (also referred to as the 9th) is flatted are the Phrygian and Locrian. The Phrygian is most common in Spanish Flamenco music and heavy metal.

If you see a chord in a chart that says Cmin7b9, Cmin11b9, or Csusb9 you would improvise using the C Phrygian mode.

The Locrian mode is most commonly used in a ii-V7-I progression in a minor key (see chapter 4).

If you see a chord that says Cmin7b5 (otherwise known as C half diminished or Cø), you would improvise over a C Locrian mode. We will cover this mode more in chapter 4.

In summary, here is a list of the most common chords you are most likely to encounter when someone hands you a lead sheet or chord chart and. I have also listed what modes sound good played against each group of chords. All of these modes are written off of C.

EX 3: The modal “families”

If you see this chord...	CMaj7	CMaj7#11	Cmin7	Cmin7b, Cmin7b6	C7, C9, C13, Csus	Cmin7b9, Cmin11b9, Csub9, DbMaj/C	C Min7b5 (Cø)
Play this mode	C Ionian or C Lydian	C Lydian	C Dorian	C Aeolian	C Mixolydian	C Phrygian	C Locrian

The Modal "families"

"Major" family:

Modes with raised 3rds and 7ths.

CHORDS: C Maj7

IONIAN

CHORDS: C Maj7#11
Also sounds good over regular CMajor 7

6 raised 4th (also referred to as #11)

LYDIAN

"Minor" family:

Modes with lowered 3rds.

CHORDS: Cmin7, Cmin9,, Cmin11

11 flatted 3rd flatted 7th

DORIAN

CHORDS: Cmin7b13

16 flatted 3rd flatted 6th flatted 7th

AOLEAN

Dominant family

Mixolydian mode: raised 3rd, flat 7th.

CHORDS: C7, C9, C13, Csus

21 flatted 7th

MIXOLYDIAN

b9 family

Modes with flatted 2nd degree of scale, also referred to as "b9th", as well as lowered 3rd.

CHORDS: Csusb9, Cmin7b9

26 flatted 2nd (or 9th) flatted 3rd flatted 6th flatted 7th

PHRYGIAN

CHORDS: Cmin7b5

31 flatted 2nd (or 9th) flatted 3rd flatted 5th flatted 6th flatted 7th

LOCRIAN

Recommended Listening:

Dorian

“So What” (Miles Davis)
“Footprints” (Miles Davis)
“Impressions” (John Coltrane)
“Invitation” (Bronislau Kaper)
“King Kong”, “Cosmik Debris”, “Blessed Relief” (Frank Zappa)
“Be Still My Beating Heart” (Sting)
“Scarborough Fair” (Simon & Garfunkel)
“Eleanor Rigby” (The Beatles)
“Light My Fire” (The Doors)
“Billie Jean” (Michael Jackson)
“Born to be Wild” (Steppenwolf)
“Rooster”, “Down in a Hole” (Alice in Chains)
“YYZ” (Rush)
“Another Brick in the Wall” (Pink Floyd)
“Fêtes” (Claude Debussy)
“15 Step” (Radiohead)
“Give it to me Baby” (Rick James)
“Reptilia” (The Strokes)
“Little Sunflower” (Freddie Hubbard) (“A” section is Dorian, “B” section is Lydian/Ionian)
“Equinox” (John Coltrane)
“Actual Proof” (Herbie Hancock)
“I Heard it Through the Grapevine” (Marvin Gay)

Phrygian

“For the Love of God” (Steve Vai)
“White Rabbit” (Jefferson Airplane)
“Calling to You” (Robert Plant)
“Wherever I May Roam” (Metallica)
“Sullen Girl” (Fiona Apple)
“Would?” (Alice in Chains)
“Caravan” (Duke Ellington) (“A” section)
“London Calling” (The Clash)
“White Rabbit” (Jefferson Airplane)
“Symphony of Destruction” (Megadeth)

Lydian

- “Divertimento” (Torrie Zito/Eddie Daniels)
- “Lords of Karma”, “Flying in a Blue Dream” (Joe Satriani)
- “Dreams” (Fleetwood Mac)
- “Reeling in the Years” (Steely Dan)
- “Theme from The Simpsons” (Danny Elfman)
- “Theme from The Jetsons” (Hoyt Curtin)
- “Maria” from “West Side Story (Leonard Bernstein)
- “Inca Road” (Frank Zappa)

Mixolydian

- “Norwegian Wood: (Beatles)
- “Maiden Voyage” (Herbie Hancock)
- “All Blues” (Miles Davis)
- “Mercy Mercy Mercy” (Joe Zawinul)
- “Dancing in the Street” (Martha Reeves & the Vandelles)
- “You Really Got Me” (The Kinks)
- “Baba O’Reilly”-violin solo (The Who)
- “Shake Your Body (Down to the Ground” (Jackson 5)
- “Sweet Child of Mine” (Guns N Roses)
- “Born This Way” (Lady Gaga)

Aolean

- “Smells Like Teen Spirit” (Nirvana)
- “Self Esteem” (The Offspring)
- “One” (Metallica)
- “Losing My Religion” (REM)
- All Along the Watchtower (Bob Dylan)