

# Introduction to Modes

One concept that is critical to an understanding of modes is that of a *tonic*. To illustrate the concept, let's start with this collection of notes: A, B, C, D, E, F and G (all played as "naturals", no sharps or flats).

If we were to start and end that particular collection of notes on C we would establish that note as the tonal center – or *tonic* – of the collection and it would sound to us like a major scale. (See the first diagram, top right.) The tonic, then, is the tonal center of a group of notes used in a melody.

But what if you were to play through that same collection of notes starting and ending on D instead of C? (See the 2nd diagram from the top.) Now something mysterious happens. The collection of notes that sounded so clearly major before now has a distinctly minor tint. That is the power of the tonic. That note not only tends to bring a melodic line to a place of rest or resolution, it also helps lend a particular melodic character – a flavor, you might say – to an otherwise random collection of notes.

The most common (so-called *diatonic*) modes are derived, like our example, from a collection of notes that could give you a major scale. We'll continue to use the collection without sharps or flats for purposes of illustration, but the notes of any major key would work. What distinguishes one mode from the next is that *for each one a different note from the collection is established as the tonic*.

Since there are seven notes in our collection, we get seven modes – one for each distinct tonic. These are outlined in the diagrams to the right. In the uppermost diagram you see all the notes we have to choose from, with C highlighted. In each successive diagram, we start and end on the next note in the collection: first C, then D, then E, etc. Below the mode's name you see the series of whole (W) and half (H) steps that make it. Below that, you see the mode expressed relative to a major scale. For example, the 5th mode – the Mixolydian – is a major scale with a flatted 7th scale degree.

The 1st and 6th modes are already familiar to you by their more common names: the major and natural minor scale, respectively. The others may seem new at first, but some—the Dorian and Mixolydian modes, for example—are fairly common in the music we play.

Here's a mnemonic device that will help you remember the names of the modes in order: I Don't Pucker Like Miles And Louis!

**Ionian Mode (C)**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1  
 √√√√√√√  
 W W H W W W H

(Major scale)

**Dorian Mode (D)**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1  
 √√√√√√√  
 W H W W W H W

(1 - 2 - b3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - b7)

**Phrygian Mode (E)**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1  
 √√√√√√√  
 H W W W H W W

(1 - b2 - b3 - 4 - 5 - b6 - b7)

**Lydian Mode (F)**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1  
 √√√√√√√  
 W W W H W W H

(1 - 2 - 3 - #4 - 5 - 6 - 7)

**Mixolydian Mode (G)**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1  
 √√√√√√√  
 W W H W W H W

(1 - 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 - b7)

**Aeolian Mode (A)**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1  
 √√√√√√√  
 W H W W H W W

(1 - 2 - b3 - 4 - 5 - b6 - b7)

**Locrian Mode (B)**

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 1  
 √√√√√√√  
 H W W H W W W

(1 - b2 - b3 - 4 - b5 - b6 - b7)