

How to Write Modal Progressions

It can be great fun to create chord progressions quickly on the fly within a particular mode. For improvisation, you can jam out to a mode without relying on backing tracks. For composition, you'll be able to access, harmonically, the emotional quality of any particular mode at any given time.

In this article, we will show you how to create modal progressions easily, even with as few as 2 chords. We will assume that you know what a harmonized scale is and can play them in any key. If you are unsure what a harmonized scale is or how to put them together and play them in any given key, read my other article on [How to Harmonize a Scale](#).

I. "Pure" Major and Minor Modes

Because Ionian is the "pure" major, you can easily make up progressions using any of the chords in the harmonized major scale for any key you choose. For example in the key of G (whose chords are G, Am, Bm, C, D, Em, F#dim) a progression | C | D | G | % | would work perfectly fine, as it is a | IV | V | I | I | progression.

For the Aeolian mode, you can use the same chords as that key's "relative major," so for Em (the relative minor of G) you could do | Am | Bm | Em | Em | which is a | IV | V | I | I | in Em. Another possibility is | Em | C | G | D | which is a | I | VI | III | VII |.

The only word of caution for these or any modal progression is to make sure that your "I" chord sounds like the "I" chord (for example if you attempt to write something in Am and you choose | Am | Dm | G | C | it might sound like it's in C major because the ear more readily hears a VI II V I in C more readily than it does a I IV VII III in Am. So in this case you might decide to choose | Am | Dm G | Am | C | as it's weighted more towards Am.

II. Using Chords that Contain the 'Special' Note: Dorian

There is one note that each mode special. If you are unfamiliar with this concept, read my article "[Memorizing the Modes](#)".

In Dorian, the ‘special’ note is the natural 6th. This is because Dorian is a minor mode, and the difference between it and the “pure minor” (a.k.a. Aeolian) is that it has a natural instead of Aeolian’s flat sixth.

So in order to make a chord progression in Dorian, we need to make a minor chord feel like the home-base chord, and we need at least one other chord that contains the natural sixth in it. If we take the key of G Dorian, for example, the chords are the same as the key of F (since Dorian is the second mode, and F is the key whose second note is *g*.) This gives us Gm, Am, Bb, C, Dm, Edim, F.

If our progression went | Gm | Bb | Dm | F | this would actually not be Dorian progression after all. The note in the key of G Dorian that makes it different from G Aeolian is *e*, the natural 6th, and none of these 4 chords has an *e* in it. Gm is spelled *g, bb, d*; Bb is spelled *bb, d, f*; Dm is spelled *d, f, a*; and F is spelled *f, a, c*.

You could still use a G Dorian scale to write a melody or improvise over these chords, but there is nothing to suggest that Dorian would be the scale to use, and since Aeolian is our default minor, our ear would most readily resonate with the Aeolian scale in this case. In order to build a G Dorian progression, we would have to use at least one chord in the harmonized scale sequence cited 2 paragraphs ago that has an *e* note. These chords are Am (whose fifth is *e*), C (whose third is *e*) or Edim (whose root is *e*.)

So let’s take our progression | Gm | Bb | Dm | F | and put in a C chord somewhere. Here’s a possibility: | Gm | C Bb | Dm | F |. Another is: | Gm | Bb | C | F |. We could have also done the same process with Am or Edim instead of C.

For Dorian, the II, IV and VI chords have the natural 6th note in them, and thus necessitate the use of the Dorian scale. You could sufficiently have a Dorian progression with simply the I chord plus any one of these, such as ||: Gm | C :|| or ||: Gm | Am :||

At the end of the article, we will summarize the best such ‘modal chords’ for each mode, but not before we explore one more example (mixolydian).

III. Using Chords that Contain the ‘Special’ Note: Mixolydian

The note that gives mixolydian its uniqueness from the pure major (Ionian) is its flat 7. If we choose the key B mixolydian, the chords are the same as that of E (because mixolydian is the fifth mode and the key whose fifth note is *b* is the key of E.) Thus we have B, C#m, D#dim, E, F#m, G#m, A. The chords that have the flat 7 in it (namely the note *a*) are D#m, F#m, and A. So to make a B mixolydian progression, simply use a III, V, or VII chord.

[By the way if you are wondering how to spell chords so quickly as we are doing, simply skip every other note. In other words, for the B chord take *b* then *d#* then *f#*. For the C#m take *c#* then *e* then *g#*, etc.]

If we choose to use the V chord of F#m, we can make the progression ||: B | F#m :|| and nothing more would be required, although you can certainly add more chords in the series just for variety, as in | B | C#m | F#m | A E |. Just make sure the B chord sounds like the chord of resolution, i.e. that you haven't accidentally 'flipped the mode' to sound like something other than B mixolydian.

IV. Summary

The following chart spells out each of the 7 major scale modes, whether they are categorized as minor or major, what note(s) makes them unique with respect to the other modes in their categories, and finally, which roman numerals *of their respective harmonized scales* would be useful for making a modal progression from because they contain the 'special' note.

mode	category	special note	chords that contain that note
Ionian	major	"pure"	all
Dorian	minor	nat. 6	II, IV, VI
Phrygian	minor	flat 2	II, V, VII
Lydian	major	sharp 4	II, IV, VII
Mixolydian	major	flat 7	III, V, VII
Aeolian	minor	"pure"	all
Locrian	minor	flat 2, flat 5	I, II, III, V, VI

If this is still unclear, take an example from the above chart by picking a key and a mode. We shall pick the key of D and mode Lydian. The chords in D Lydian are the same as those in A Ionian (because Lydian is the 4th mode and the key whose 4th note is *d* is the key of A). We take the chords from A Ionian and keep them in the same order except we start with D as the I chord and we have D, E, F#m, G#dim, A, Bm, C#m.

Lydian is a 'slippery' mode, i.e. it's relatively unstable and thus our ear is easily tricked into thinking that something else is the tonic. For example | D | E | A | A | would sound like | IV | V | I | I | in the key of A to most listeners, rather than | I | II | V | V | in D Lydian. So we may have to add more weight to the I chord with something like | D | E | A | D A |.

Another example of a D Lydian progression is | D | E/D | A/D | A/D | which is the same as our first attempt at it except now we are anchoring the progression to D by putting the root of the mode in the bass of each chord.

Good luck and have fun writing modal progressions!