

Memorizing the Modes

by Dennis Winge

This article is for people who understand the basic concept of what a mode is (see my other article "Introduction to the Modes" if necessary) but want to reduce the amount of mental clutter involved in deriving them. This article assumes that you know how to construct a major scale in every key and you know what the basic names of the modes are and how to derive them, but now you're not sure how to put all that information together.

I. Numeric Analysis

In order to really understand and use how a mode works, you have to understand its intervallic structure. This means numbering the notes in terms of their interval against the tonic. I will explain.

The major scale in the key of C looks like this:

C - Ionian

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
C	d	e	f	G	a	b

The numeric analysis of the notes in C Ionian (or any Ionian) is 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. This may not mean much to you now but you'll see why it's important. Let's take C Dorian

C - Dorian

1	2	b3	4	5	6	b7
c	d	eb	f	g	a	Bb

(How did we get this? It's the 2nd mode of Bb. How did we know it was Bb? It's because Dorian is always the 2nd mode, by definition, and, also by definition, the distance between any root note and its major second is *up* a whole step. So in order to find the "parent key" here, we have go *down* a whole step from the note "C" that we were on.

So now we get to the good stuff. The way to analyze C Dorian is by numbering the intervals as they would relate to C major. You may ask "How did C major get into it? I thought this was related to Bb?" Yes, C Dorian is the second mode of Bb, but in analyzing intervallic structures we always use the major scale as the baseline standard against which compare. Let me illustrate:

Comparing the 2 scales above, you see that the e's are flat and the b's are flat. This means the intervallic analysis of C Dorian is 1, 2, b3, 4, 5, 6, b7. And this isn't just C Dorian, it's any Dorian mode!

Let's go further and take C Phrygian. Since Phrygian is the 3rd mode, and since it's two whole steps up from a root to its major 3rd, we have to go two whole steps *down* to find the parent scale. In this case it's the key of Ab and notes are:

C - Phrygian

1	b2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
c	db	eb	F	g	ab	bb

Here the intervallic structure of Phrygian is 1, b2, b3, 4, 5, b6, b7.

If you're feeling overwhelmed, don't worry because in the next section we'll show you how to reduce all this down in very simple terms so you can find your way around in any key, any mode! But for now, write out the intervallic structures for the remaining modes. Do the same thing we did, i.e. find C - Lydian and compare it to C major, then C - mixolydian and compare it to C major, and the same with Aeolian and Locrian.

II. Comparing Intervallic Structures

If you did all the work in the previous section, you will now get reap a great return on your investment. In summary, the intervallic structure of the modes looks like this:

Ionian

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
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Dorian

1	2	b3	4	5	6	b7
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Phrygian

1	b2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
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Lydian

1	2	3	#4	5	6	7
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Mixolydian

1	2	3	4	5	6	b7
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Aeolian

1	2	b3	4	5	b6	b7
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Locrian

1	b2	b3	4	b5	b6	b7
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Notice no 2 modes are alike. If they were, they wouldn't be called separate modes!

III. Assimilating all the Information and Memorizing It

Here is how we break down and simplify all this information. There are 2 main types of modes: major and minor. Ionian is the pure major. Aeolian is the pure minor.

We're going to group each mode into 1 of the 2 categories by looking at the 3rd which determines if a chord is major or minor. If the 3rd is flat, it's minor. If not, it's major. It looks like this:

Major Modes: Ionian, Lydian, Mixolydian

Minor Modes: Aeolian, Dorian, Phrygian

Next we're going to compare each mode's intervallic structure to that of the 'pure' one in its respective category. In other words, Lydian is the same as Ionian but it has a #4. Mixolydian is the same as Ionian but it has a b7.

In the minor modes, Dorian is the same as Aeolian, but with a natural 6th. (The symbol for natural is ♮.) Phrygian is the same but with a b2, and Locrian has a b2 and a b5.

Put all this information in a simple chart like this:

The Modes, Simplified

Ionian = mode I = pure major	Aeolian = mode VI = pure minor (b3, b6, b7)
Lydian = mode IV = major with a #4	Dorian = mode II = minor with ♮ 6
Mixolydian = mode V = major with a b7	Phrygian = mode III = minor with b2
	Locrian = mode VII = minor with b2 and b5

Memorize this chart and you'll see how it makes things so much easier. Allow yourself time to play around with it on your instrument. For example, pick a random key and a random mode. Let's say it's E phrygian, a very fun mode for guitar.

There are two ways to explore this mode on your instrument. First, say to yourself "ok, Phrygian is the 3rd mode, and since the 3rd of a scale is 2 whole steps above the root, I will go down 2 whole steps to find the parent key." This is a valid way of doing it, because it will help you find the proper fingering for E phrygian. The answer you would have gotten is the key of C, and the advantage here is that you can use your muscle memory of the key of C to get around quicker.

However, the big disadvantage of this approach is you will always have to think about 2 keys at the same time, i.e. E and C in this example. Do yourself a big favor and memorize the fact that Phrygian has a b2, and now just use an E minor (Aeolian) scale but flat the 2nd note. It may take a bit more time to play flashy lines with this approach, but from now on you'll always know how to call a spade a spade. Any phrygian mode you want to use for the rest of your life, you'll use the minor scale and flat the 2. It won't take as long as

you think because there are only 7 modes and you already know 2 of them (Ionian and Aeolian) so be patient at first because you will get faster and faster at playing them. But first, memorize the chart!