

Using Eastern Harmony in Western Compositions

by Dennis Winge

Are your ears craving some new exotic-sounding harmonies? Are you stuck writing the same old types of tunes and need some fresh material to inspire you? Have you heard unusual modes but not sure how to use them in tunes?


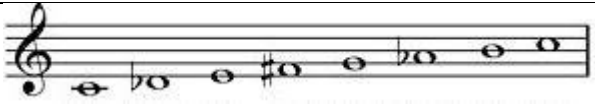


This article will show you how to take an unusual scale or mode and make a tune out of it. By "unusual" I mean one that is apart from the usual Major Scale and its modes, Melodic Minor and its modes, Diminished, Whole Tone, Harmonic Minor etc. You may have heard a cool-sounding scale in Mediterranean or Indian music, for example, but its potential for use in your everyday playing may not be immediately apparent.

I am certainly no expert on Ragas or Indian classical music, I am just a jazz guitarist who discovered a way to take some of the "thaats" from India (the equivalent of a Western scale or mode). I simply take the notes and harmonize them like we do with Western scales. Of course in Indian music there is no real "harmony." The notes are played against a drone, and it is very fun to do this on guitar. So before we get into harmonizing, let's explore the thaats themselves and also discuss the possibilities of playing melodically over a drone.

I. The 4 Thaats that are unusual to Western ears

There are 10 basic thaats, and we are not concerned here with the ones that have direct Western equivalents (like, for example, *Bilawal*, which is the same as the Ionian mode). We are going to list the ones that have no Western equivalents (except for "Bhairav" which is also known as "Double Harmonic.")

They are:

Thaat	Intervals	Standard Notation in "C"
Bhairav	1 b2 3 4 5 b6 7 8	
Puravi	1 b2 3 #4 5 b6 7 8	
Marva	1 b2 3 #4 5 6 7 8	
Todi	1 b2 b3 #4 5 b6 7 8	

II. The Joy of Modal Playing

If you're like me you might think at first that it's a bit too "static" to just play modally with a set of 7 notes over a drone. But the advantages of just taking one of these scales and working with it are many:

A. New sounds. You're familiarizing your ear with the character of the scale, and exploring its emotional potential.

B. Intervallic training. Can you really play it for 5 minutes with no mistakes? I'll bet at least once your fingers will do a pattern they know so well and throw in an interval outside the mode. It's great practice to think only in intervals rather than rely on your ear or on finger patterns.

C. Fretboard theory. Can you play the scale in any position? Can you do the scale in 2 octaves using 7 different fingerings? Similar to the "interval" training described above, doing scales like this could shed light on some weaker areas in your fretboard knowledge.

D. Chromaticism. Can you access the other 5 notes that aren't in the mode and still preserve the original character of the mode? It's great fun and a good challenge.

So, have fun with playing these scales at different tempos and time signatures and in different keys.

III. Harmonizing the Scales

Here is where East meets West. We take each of the 7 notes and harmonize them out to 7th chords. The result looks like this:

Bhairav

Imaj7 bIIImaj7 IIIm6 IVm(maj7) V7b5 bVIImaj7#5 bII7/VII

Puravi

Imaj7 bIIImaj7sus4 IIIm6 bVI7#5/#IV Vmaj7b5 bVIImaj7#5 bII7sus4/VII

Marva

Imaj7 bIIImaj7#5sus4 IIIm6 #IVm7b5 Vmaj7b5 VIIm7 #IVm/VII

Todi

Im(maj7) bIIImaj7sus4 bIII7#5 bVI7/#IV Vmaj7b5 bVIImaj7 bII7sus4/VII

If you have any trouble understanding the above, just do it for yourself and you'll see. For example, the 1, 3, 5, and 7 of Bhairav in the key of C is c, e, g, and b which of course is C major 7. The chord built off the 3rd degree of that scale, again for example, is e, g, b and db

which is Em6.

Once you harmonize the scale, play around with the chords and see what might sound like a pleasant "progression." I put the word progression in quotes because the chords aren't really taking you anywhere because it's all modal, but certain combinations of chords may better give you the feeling of movement moreso than others.

To illustrate what I mean, let's take a random mode and a random key for one of the above thaats. I choose the 3rd mode of Todi and the key of C#.

The Todi scale in C#: c# - d - e - g - g# - a - c - c#

Third Mode of C# Todi e - g - g# - a - c - c# - d - e

Harmonized Scale of Third Mode: E7+5 A/G Abmaj7b5 Amaj7 C69 Dmaj7sus4

So I take these chords and start playing around with them and simply see where my ear takes me. My ear can relate to the sound of the C69 and also the very last melody note "a" over an E7+5 sounds like an early resolution so it felt good to use it at the end. Here's what it looks like:



Here is the example in audio format: <https://youtu.be/ngh2wOdXxuY>

Notice also that I stuck very closely to the mode at hand while improvising. I didn't do anything fancy and I didn't even go above or below one octave and it still sounded relatively interesting to my ear.

This may not be an award-winning song but at least it opens you up to possibilities. I used this concept on "Puravi Sketch" on my new album One Small Step (releases February 2019) and I'd love to hear yours as well. :) Good luck and have fun.