

Modes as 'Clouds': Teaching Modes through Stacked Chords and Harmonic Layers

In music, the relationship between melody and harmony forms the essence of how we perceive different scales, modes, and tonalities. One highly effective method for students to internalize modes is to hear them as 'clouds' of notes — collections of sounds that float together to form the distinct flavor of each mode. This approach can take a concept that might seem abstract or theoretical and make it tangible through harmony and ear training. In this article, I'll explain how I've developed a method using stacked chords to represent modes and how I use a backing track to help my students hear these modes as harmonic clouds.

Modes from Lightest to Darkest

One of the key ideas behind teaching modes as harmonic clouds is recognizing how they shift in character from bright to dark as we move through the modal sequence. This progression is not just about flattening specific notes but about the overall emotional and harmonic 'weight' each mode carries. I have arranged the modes from **Lydian** to **Locrian**, based on how 'light' or 'dark' they sound, starting with lightest and ending with the darkest. As we move through each of the modes presented above, each step involves flattening one note from the previous one.

- **Lydian (1 2 3 #4 5 6 7):**
The Lydian mode has a raised 4th (#4), making it the brightest of all modes. The #4 creates a unique tension that feels ethereal or dreamy, often used in film music for its sense of expansion and wonder. Harmonically, this mode feels 'light' and open, with very little tension.
- **Ionian (1 2 3 4 5 6 7):**
Ionian is the major scale, featuring a perfect 4th and major 7th. While it's a stable, happy-sounding mode, the absence of the #4 makes it slightly less bright compared to Lydian. Its harmonic openness is why it is often used as the foundation of Western music.
- **Mixolydian (1 2 3 4 5 6 b7):**
By flattening the 7th degree (b7), Mixolydian introduces a dominant sound that feels bluesy and slightly unresolved. This small change from Ionian creates a tension that gives it an edgier, more complex sound, transitioning from brightness toward darkness.
- **Dorian (1 2 b3 4 5 6 b7):**
Dorian is a minor mode with a natural 6th, which brightens the minor tonality compared to Aeolian. The flattened 3rd (b3) and 7th (b7) give it a minor quality, but the natural 6th provides a lighter, more hopeful edge. This balance between light and dark makes Dorian versatile in both minor and jazz settings.

- **Aeolian (1 2 b3 4 5 b6 b7):**
The Aeolian mode, or natural minor scale, is darker than Dorian due to the flattened 6th (b6). This gives it a more melancholic, sad quality, making it a common choice for emotional or reflective music. Its flattened intervals create a distinctly minor 'cloud' of sound.
- **Phrygian (1 b2 b3 4 5 b6 b7):**
Phrygian darkens the sound further by adding a flattened 2nd (b2), creating an exotic, tense sound. This mode is often used in genres like flamenco and metal, where the b2 interval contributes to a sense of foreboding or mystery. With its flattened 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 7th, Phrygian feels heavily dissonant compared to Aeolian or Dorian.
- **Locrian (1 b2 b3 4 b5 b6 b7):**
Locrian is the darkest of all modes, with its defining feature being the flattened 5th (b5), which gives it a diminished quality. The combination of the b2 and b5 creates a highly unstable sound, rarely used as a tonic in compositions. It's often used to create tension and dissonance, making it the least 'resolved' of all the modes.

Introducing Modes as 'Clouds' of Notes

The idea of hearing modes as harmonic clouds stems from the need for students to stop thinking of modes merely as collections of notes played sequentially. While scales and modes are often taught as linear sequences (C-D-E-F-G-A-B for C Ionian, for example), in reality, modes exist as layers of harmonically related notes. By stacking these notes in thirds and playing them as extended chords, students can hear how each mode creates its own color and mood.

In this exercise, each mode is based on the root note **Bb**, and I've structured the modes in order of brightness to darkness: Lydian, Ionian, Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian, Phrygian, and Locrian. As you move down the list, each mode is defined by one note being flattened compared to the previous one, gradually darkening the harmonic palette.

The Backing Track: Building Harmonic Understanding through Sound

I've created a backing track to accompany this concept, where each note of a mode is played separately, stacked in thirds, with the root always being **Bb**. This allows students to hear how the notes come together to form a distinct harmonic 'cloud' for each mode. After each stack of notes is presented individually, I then play the corresponding chord to show how all these notes come together in a harmonic context.

For example, for **Bb Ionian**, the notes are presented as **bb, d, f, a, c, eb, g, bb** — stacked thirds that form the full Bbmaj13 chord. After the notes are heard individually, the chord itself is played, showing the full harmonic structure. I refer to this chord both

as **Bbmaj13** and **Cm7/Bbmaj7**, illustrating how the chord is constructed from stacked thirds.

Let's go through each mode, explain its harmonic structure, and discuss its relationship to the tonal palette.

1. Lydian: **Bbmaj13#11 = C7/Bbmaj7**

The **Lydian mode** is the brightest and most open-sounding mode in our progression. It is characterized by the raised 4th degree, which gives it a sense of openness and airiness. In the context of Bb as the root, the notes of Lydian are: **bb, d, f, a, c, e, g, bb**. When stacked in thirds, this gives us a **Bbmaj13#11** chord. I explain this chord to my students as **C7/Bbmaj7**, because you can think of the upper structure (C7) as stacked on top of a Bbmaj7 foundation. This illustrates how the Lydian mode adds brightness and harmonic tension through the #11.

2. Ionian: **Bbmaj13 = Cm7/Bbmaj7**

The **Ionian mode** is essentially the major scale and is one step 'darker' than Lydian, with its characteristic natural 4th degree. In this case, the notes are **bb, d, f, a, c, eb, g, bb**.

Stacking these notes in thirds gives us the **Bbmaj13** chord, which has all the characteristics of a Bb major chord with extended harmonies. For students, I introduce this as **Cm7/Bbmaj7** to show the relationship between the Bbmaj7 chord and its upper structure, **Cm7**. This reinforces the idea that modes are not just scales but harmonic layers.

3. Mixolydian: **Bb13 = Cm7/Bb7**

Next in the progression is the **Mixolydian mode**, which introduces a flat 7th compared to the Ionian mode. The notes are **bb, d, f, a, c, eb, g, bb**, which, when stacked in thirds, form the **Bb13** chord.

I explain to students that **Bb13** can be viewed as **Cm7/Bb7** because it represents a dominant seventh chord with extensions. This dominant structure, with the flat 7th (Eb), gives the Mixolydian mode its characteristic bluesy and tension-filled sound.

4. Dorian: **Bbm13 = Cm7/Bbm7**

The **Dorian mode** darkens the sound further by flattening both the 3rd and 7th degrees compared to the Mixolydian mode. The notes of **Bb Dorian** are **bb, db, f, ab, c, eb, g, bb**, which, when stacked, form the **Bbm13** chord.

This can be explained to students as **Cm7/Bbm7**, where the minor chord (Bbm7) gives the Dorian mode its characteristic sound — a blend of minor tonality with a brighter 6th. This mixture of light and dark makes Dorian one of the more versatile modes.

5. Aeolian: **Bbm11(b13) = Cm7b5/Bbm7**

The **Aeolian mode** introduces a flattened 6th, further darkening the harmonic structure. The notes for **Bb Aeolian** are **bb, db, f, ab, c, eb, gb, bb**. Stacked in thirds, this forms the **Bbm11(b13)** chord.

For students, I explain this as **Cm7b5/Bbm7**, which highlights the interaction between the Cm7b5 chord and the Bbm7 chord. The flattened 6th and 7th give Aeolian its distinctive minor tonality, often associated with sadness or melancholy.

6. Phrygian: **Bbm11addb9,b13 = Cbmaj7/Bbm7**

Moving into the **Phrygian mode**, we flatten the 2nd degree. The notes of **Bb Phrygian** are **bb, cb, f, ab, c, eb, gb, bb**, which give us the **Bbm11addb9,b13** chord when stacked in thirds.

This can be understood as **Cbmaj7/Bbm7**, as the lowered 2nd degree (Cb) adds a layer of tension and darkness. The Phrygian mode has a distinctively exotic sound due to this flat 2nd, making it a powerful tool for creating tension in compositions.

7. Locrian: **Bbm7b5addb9,11,b13 = Cbmaj7/Bbm7b5**

Finally, the **Locrian mode** introduces a flattened 5th, the darkest mode of them all. The notes are **bb, cb, eb, gb, ab, db, gb, bb**, which create the **Bbm7b5addb9,11,b13** chord.

This chord can be understood as **Cbmaj7/Bbm7b5**, where the half-diminished chord (Bbm7b5) reflects the inherent instability and tension of the Locrian mode. It is rarely used as a tonic due to its dissonance but is valuable for creating a sense of unresolved tension.

Conclusion: Teaching Modes through Harmonic 'Clouds'

By teaching modes as harmonic clouds using stacked thirds and extended chords, students can move beyond thinking of modes as linear sequences and start hearing them as collections of related sounds. This approach helps them internalize the unique character of each mode, from the bright openness of Lydian to the dark tension of Locrian.

The backing track I've created gives them a concrete way to experience these harmonic clouds in real-time, enhancing their ear training and harmonic understanding. If you want your students to fully grasp the richness of modal harmony, consider using this method in your teaching. Modes aren't just scales — they are clouds of sound, ready to be explored and understood.