

A La Mode: An introduction to the medieval modes

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http://moeticae.typepad.com/mi_contra_fa/class-notes.html

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Today, most music is written in either a *major key* or a *minor key*. A song can contain the same notes, but depending on which are the most important ones, it structures the way the music moves up and down, and also our perception of the emotion of the music.

The notes of a major key is identical with the diatonic scale. The most important note is “do.” The song will almost always end on it – so this note is called the **final**. The next most important note is usually “so,” a fifth up. Even if these notes are not the most frequently played, they serve as structural elements – measuring out the shape of the melody. Major key songs are often described as being happy, triumphal or upbeat.

The minor key also uses the notes of the diatonic scale, but the most important note is “la.” The song will almost always end on it. “Mi,” a fifth up from “la,” is the next most important note. The music moves between and around these two tones, and the result is music often described as melancholy, spooky, or sad.

Extend this idea a little farther and you get the modes. In the early Middle Ages, there were four:

- The **protus mode** (a.k.a. Dorian mode) starts on “re” and goes up the diatonic scale. “Re” is the most important note and the final. “La,” the fifth up, is the next most important note (dominant).
 - D Dorian: D E F G A B C D (Diatonic scale starts on C)
 - A Dorian: A B C D E F# G A (Diatonic scale starts on G, includes F#)
- The **deuterus mode** (Phrygian mode) starts on “mi” and goes up the diatonic scale. “Mi” is the most important note and the final. “Ti”, the fifth up, is the dominant.
 - E Phrygian: E F G A B C D E (Diatonic scale starts on C)
 - B Phrygian: B C D E F# G A B (Diatonic scale starts on G, includes F#)
- The **tritius mode** (Lydian mode) has “fa” as a final and “ut” as the dominant.
 - F Lydian: F G A B C D E F (Diatonic scale starts on C)
 - C Lydian: C D E F# G A B C (Diatonic scale starts on G, includes F#)
- The **tetrardus mode** (Mixolydian mode) has “so” as a final and “re” as the dominant.
 - G Mixolydian: G A B C D E F G (Diatonic scale starts on C)
 - D Mixolydian: D E F# G A B C D (Diatonic scale starts on G, includes F#)

Music written in different modes was thought to have different qualities, just like we perceive major and minor key songs to have different qualities.

Each mode comes in two flavors: authentic and plagal. This just refers to the range of a melody arranged in the mode. An authentic mode ranges mostly from the final to an octave above. Plagal modes range from the fifth above the final to a fourth below. Either sort were given “license” to go a

tone below the range; authentic modes could go a tone or two tones above the octave, and plagal modes could reach up to the sixth rarely.

- Protus has final “re,” so authentic protus will range from “re” to “re” an octave up. It is allowed to go as low as the “ut” below “re”, and as high as “mi” or “fa” above it, if required.
- Plagal protus ranges instead from the “so” below “re” to the “la” above “re.” Again, small excursions are sometimes allowed.

Authentic tritus rarely goes below its final. In all the other modes, the note below the final is a tone away. In tritus, with “fa” as the final, the note below is “mi,” only a semitone away. This sounded strange and was not often done.

Other than the range, there is another difference between the authentic and plagal modes. Each mode has a tenor or reciting tone. I quote Pat Yarrow on this: “In authentic modes, the tenor is a fifth above the final (or tonic). In plagal modes the tenor is a third below the tenor of the corresponding authentic mode. Whenever the tenor would fall on B, it moves to C.” Authentic modes were expected to mostly stay in the higher registers, going down to the final only occasionally. Plagal modes were expected to stay among the lower notes, rising up to the fifth only sometimes.

Heinrich Glarean defined Ionian and Aeolian modes in 1547. “Number-us” terminology seems to have fallen out of favor, with the Greek modal names being used.

- Aeolian mode: has “la” as the final and “mi” as the dominant.
 - A Aeolian: A B C D E F G A
 - E Aeolian: E F# G A B C D E
- Ionian mode: has “ut” as the final and “so” as the dominant.
 - C Ionian: C D E F G A B C
 - G Ionian: G A B C D E F# G

You may know these two modes and the minor key and the Major key.

The last mode is Locrian. It was rarely, if ever, used. Some sources say it was a purely theoretical construct, added for completeness' sake. Pat Yarrow claims to have examples of chant in Locrian, but I do not have them.

- Locrian mode: has “ti” as the final and “fa” as the dominant.
 - B Locrian: B C D E F G A B
 - F# Locrian: F# G A B C D E F#

The table on the next page summarizes the characteristics of the medieval modes.

Final	Range	Tenor/ Dominant	Authentic or plagal	Other names	Mode #
D	D-d	a	authentic protus	Dorian	1
	A-a	F	plagal protus	Hypodorian	2
E	E-e	c	authentic deuterus	Phrygian	3
	B-b	a	plagal deuterus	Hypophrygian	4
F	F-f	c	authentic tritus	Lydian	5
	C-c	a	plagal tritus	Hypolydian	6
G	G-g	d	authentic tetrardus	Mixolydian	7
	D-d	c	plagal tetrardus	Hypomixolydian	8
A	A-a	E	authentic	Aeolian	9
	E-e	c	plagal	Hypoeolian	10
C	C-c	G	authentic	Ionian	11
	G-g	E	plagal	Hypoionian	12
B	B-b	F (?)	authentic	Locrian	?
	F-f	?	plagal	Hypolocrian	?

Examples of Songs in Modes

In looking for examples of modal songs, I turned to the Internet for assistance. I found some of the following examples, which I offer with a caveat:

Several webpages were insistent that the modes are defined by their chordal progressions, and so This Song or That Song don't really count. When the modes were in use in the Middle Ages, this was definitely not the case! The modes were defined as described above – there was no concept of 'chordal progressions' in the early Middle Ages, and I haven't seen much evidence for it in the High Middle Ages. The Renaissance gets to be a different story.

I strongly recommend dragging out a melody instrument and 'noodling around' in the various modes – start on the tonic, perhaps play the scale a few times, then improvise something structured by the tonic and the dominant. That will help you learn the characteristics of the mode.

Dorian Mode

Most ballads, e.g. Scarborough Faire, Barbara Allen
Many common medieval pieces: Cantiga 100, Douce Dame Jolie
A Horse with No Name, America

Phrygian Mode

White Rabbit, Jefferson Airplane
Pyramid Song, Radiohead

Lydian Mode

Themes to “The Simpsons” and “The Jetsons”
Flying Theme from E.T.

Mixolydian Mode

Folsom Prison Blues, Johnny Cash
Norwegian Wood, The Beatles
Sweet Home Alabama, Lynyrd Skynyrd

Aeolian Mode (minor key)

Losing My Religion, R.E.M.
Wade in the Water, spiritual
Hey Jude, The Beatles
O Come, O Come Emmanuel, Advent carol

Locrian Mode

Army of Me, Bjork (maybe? in the bass line?)

Ionian Mode (Major key)

Joy to the World, Christmas carol
Ode to Joy, from Beethoven's 9th Symphony
Happy Birthday
Most songs

References

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