Luckily, the structural aspects of Irish tunes, compared with those of classical music, are quite simple and even formulaic in some respects, and therefore easy to remember. Understanding these structures will aid your learning a great deal. It's what happens within and through these simple structures that is so endlessly various and beautiful.

Despite my observations and caveats about music notation, I make extensive use of it in this book. The combination of music notation, the audio CDs, and these words on paper are the next best thing to personal contact. Thankfully, these three modes of demonstration, when used together, actually do convey a great deal of useful information.

Some Notation Conventions

There are many good books that teach the rudiments of reading music. I am not going to duplicate their content here. However, I would like to explore a few aspects of music notation that are particularly relevant to this book.

The Modal Nature of Irish Music

In today's common practice of western classical and popular music, almost all tonal music is considered to be in either a major or minor *key*; that is, based upon the central use of certain major or minor scales. The major and natural minor scales have early historical roots and are only two of seven *modes* that came to form the tonal basis for Gregorian chant and the rest of western medieval and renaissance music. These modes, and others, are also found in many ethnic musical traditions.

The word *mode* has a number of meanings, but in this case we use it to refer to "the selection of tones, arranged in a scale, which form the basic tonal substance of a composition."[iv] There are many more than seven modes in world musical traditions, but for the moment we need only be concerned with the seven so-called *church modes* of western European music.

The vast majority of traditional Irish music makes use of only four of these modes: the Ionian (which we commonly call the *major* scale), the Dorian, the Mixolydian, and the Aeolian (which we commonly call the *natural minor* scale). In fact, the first three of these account for most of traditional Irish melody.

Each of the seven modes, shown on the next page, contains a unique sequence of five whole steps (major seconds) and two half steps (minor seconds) that occur as you ascend through its scale. The half steps in the following figures are indicated by slurs.

The simplest way to listen to and get to know these modes is to play ascending scales on only the white keys of a piano. Starting on C and playing in this manner, you hear the notes of the Ionian mode. Starting on D, you hear the Dorian mode, and so on. Note well the locations of the half steps in each mode.