



Figure 1-1. The seven so-called church modes, as played on the white keys of the piano.



THE TONAL CENTER OF THE MODE

Each mode has a tonal center, which is the first, lowest, note of its scale. In Irish music this tonal center can reside on any one of various pitches, most commonly D, E, G, A, or B. We often say that a tune in the Mixolydian mode with a tonal center of D is “in D Mixolydian.” Similarly, a tune in the Dorian mode that has a tonal center of E is “in E Dorian.” The tune will usually come to rest on that pitch at various points, especially at the ends of some of its important phrases.

As mentioned earlier, it is very important to sense, identify, and retain this tonal center. The notes of the tune gain “meaning” in their relation to it. Keeping track of the tonal center and each note’s intervallic relationship to it will greatly enhance your ability to learn, internalize, and remember tunes.

Those who are familiar with the major and minor modes (i.e. the Ionian and Aeolian), many find it helpful to understand the Dorian and Mixolydian modes in terms of how they differ from the Ionian and Aeolian. The Mixolydian mode is like the Ionian (major) with a flatted or lowered seventh note. The Dorian mode is like the Aeolian (natural minor) with a raised sixth note.

These comparisons are shown on the next page. Play through them on an instrument or sing them. Note how only the position of the second half step differs in each comparison while the position of the first half step remains the same.