

Chapter One: Modes and Mode Signatures

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.

The word "mode" has a number of meanings, but in this case I use it to refer to "the selection of tones, arranged in a scale, which form the basic tonal substance of a composition."¹ 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 tunes make use of only four of these modes: the *Ionian* (which is commonly called the major scale), the *Dorian*, the *Mixolydian*, and the *Aeolian* (which is commonly called the natural minor scale).

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

One simple way to listen to and get to know these modes is to play ascending scales using only the notes of the D major scale: D, E, F#, G, A, B and C#. Starting on D and playing in this manner, you hear the notes and intervals of the D Ionian mode. Starting on E, you hear the E Dorian mode, and so on, as shown below. Note well the locations of the half steps in each mode.

Figure 1 consists of seven musical staves, each representing a different church mode. The notes are written in treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The modes are: D Ionian (Major), E Dorian, F-sharp Phrygian, G Lydian, A Mixolydian, B Aeolian (Natural Minor), and C-sharp Locrian. Each staff shows an ascending scale with slurs indicating the half steps between F# and G, and between C# and D.

Figure 1. The seven so-called church modes, played using the notes of the D major scale.

Another way to explore these modes is to play ascending scales on only the white keys of a keyboard instrument. Starting on C, you hear the notes and intervals of the C Ionian mode. Starting on D, you hear the D Dorian mode, and so on.

¹ Willi Apel, *Harvard Dictionary of Music*, 20th printing. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 452.

THE TONAL CENTER OF THE MODE

Each mode has a tonal center, which is the first as well as 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, for example, 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 the pitch of its tonal center at various points, especially at the final note of some of its important phrases.

Those who are familiar with major and minor scales (i.e., the Ionian and Aeolian modes) may find it helpful to understand the Mixolydian and Dorian modes in terms of how they differ from the Ionian and Aeolian.

- The Mixolydian mode is like the Ionian (major scale) with a flatted or lowered seventh note.
- The Dorian mode is like the Aeolian (natural minor scale) with a raised or sharped sixth note.

These comparisons are shown below. You might try playing through them or singing them. Note how only the position of the second half step differs in each comparison.

D Ionian
(Major)

D Mixolydian

E Aeolian
(Natural Minor)

E Dorian

Figure 2. Comparisons between the Ionian and Mixolydian modes, and the Aeolian and Dorian modes.

WATCH FOR MODE SIGNATURES

All eight tunes in this book are notated using mode signatures. A mode signature looks just like a key signature, but it has a different, broader meaning.

For example, when you see a signature of one sharp don't assume that the music is in G major (Ionian) or its relative minor (E Aeolian). It could just as easily be in D Mixolydian or A Dorian. (See *The Maids of Mt. Kisco* on pp. 34-36.) I favor the use of mode signatures as they result in fewer accidentals and also reflect the true modal nature of Irish music.

OUTSIDE THE MODAL BOUNDARIES

There are many Irish tunes that don't fit neatly into the profile of any of these modes. In one tune you may find both the major *and* minor forms of the third, sixth or seventh scale degrees. Then there are tunes that use only five or six pitches (instead of seven).

Some traditional players employ pitches that fall in between the half steps. This happens in particular in the area of C \natural to C \sharp and F \natural to F \sharp with instruments that are well-suited to small pitch gradations, such as the fiddle, flute, tin whistle and uilleann pipes.

C \natural is an especially variable note on the uilleann pipes which, according to Breandán Breathnach, possesses “several colors ... which are exploited to the full by the skillful performer. It lies approximately halfway between B and D”² – in other words, approximately halfway between the equal tempered C \natural and C \sharp . In fact, at least half the time C \natural

² Breandán Breathnach, *Folk Music & Dances of Ireland* (Dublin: The Talbot Press, 1971), p. 14.