A Brief Explanation of Modal Scales

By Grey Larsen

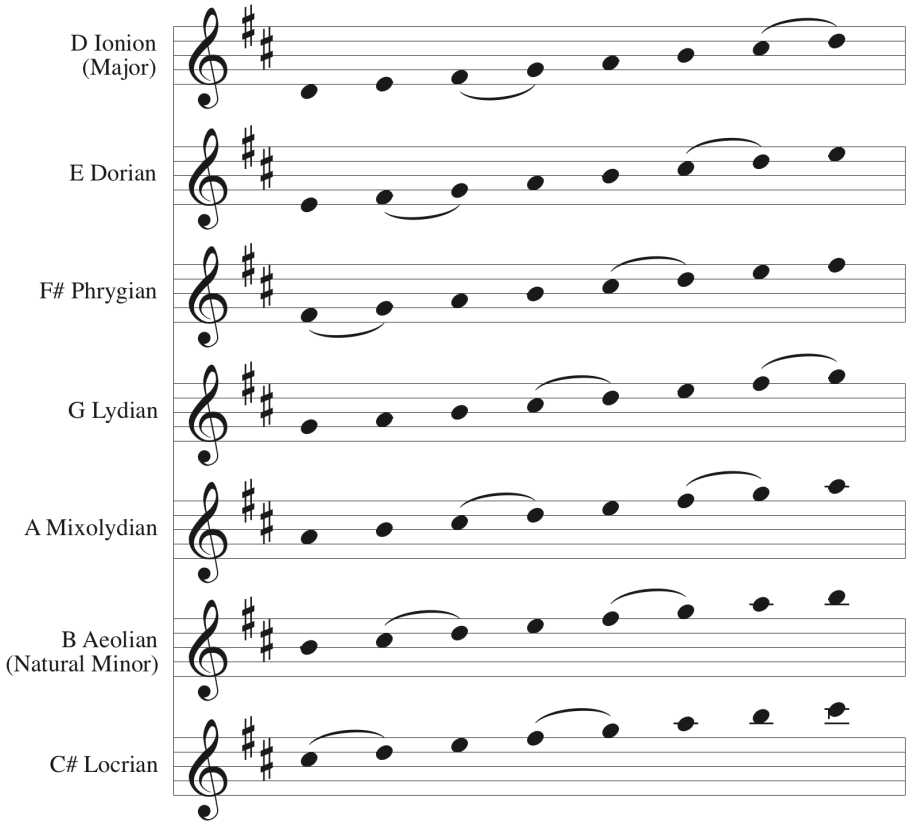
In today's common practice of western classical and popular music, almost all tonal music is considered to be in either a major or minor key, that is, based upon the central use of certain major or minor scales. The major and natural minor scales have early historical roots and are only two of seven 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 I use it to refer to the selection of tones, arranged in a scale, which form the basic tonal substance of a piece of music. There are many more than seven modes in world musical traditions. Here we'll look only at the seven so-called "church modes" of western European music.

The vast majority of traditional tunes from Celtic traditions 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.

These modes are shown below, using the notes of the natural scale of the tin whistle in D and the Irish flute. Note the key signature of two sharps. Half steps are indicated with slurs.



THE SEVEN SO-CALLED "CHURCH MODES" AS PLAYED USING
THE NATURAL SCALE OF THE TIN WHISTLE IN D OR IRISH FLUTE

One simple way to listen to and get to know these modes is to play ascending scales on a D whistle or Irish flute using only the notes of its natural scale: D, E, F♯, G, A, B and C♯. Starting on low 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 above. Note well the locations of the half steps in each mode.

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.

The Tonal Center of the Mode

Each mode has a tonal center, which is the first, and lowest note of its scale. In most traditional tunes in Celtic traditions, 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." Melodies will usually come to rest on the pitch of its tonal center at various points, especially at the ends of some of its important phrases.

Charts of Tin Whistle Keys and Scales

At greylarsen.com/tw you can download "Charts of Tin Whistle Keys and Scales." This document shows whistles in all 12 keys and which modes are easily playable on each one.

More Information

More information on modal scales as they are used in traditional Irish music can be found in several of my books:

The Essential Guide to Irish Flute and Tin Whistle
The Essential Tin Whistle Toolbox
150 Gems of Irish Music for Flute
150 Gems of Irish Music for Tin Whistle
300 Gems of Irish Music for All Instruments
Down the Back Lane: Variation in Traditional Irish Dance Music