

MODAL SCALES IN TRADITIONAL IRISH MUSIC

“MODE SIGNATURES” INSTEAD OF KEY SIGNATURES

In my transcriptions I use “mode signatures” instead of key signatures. 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 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 below, 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.

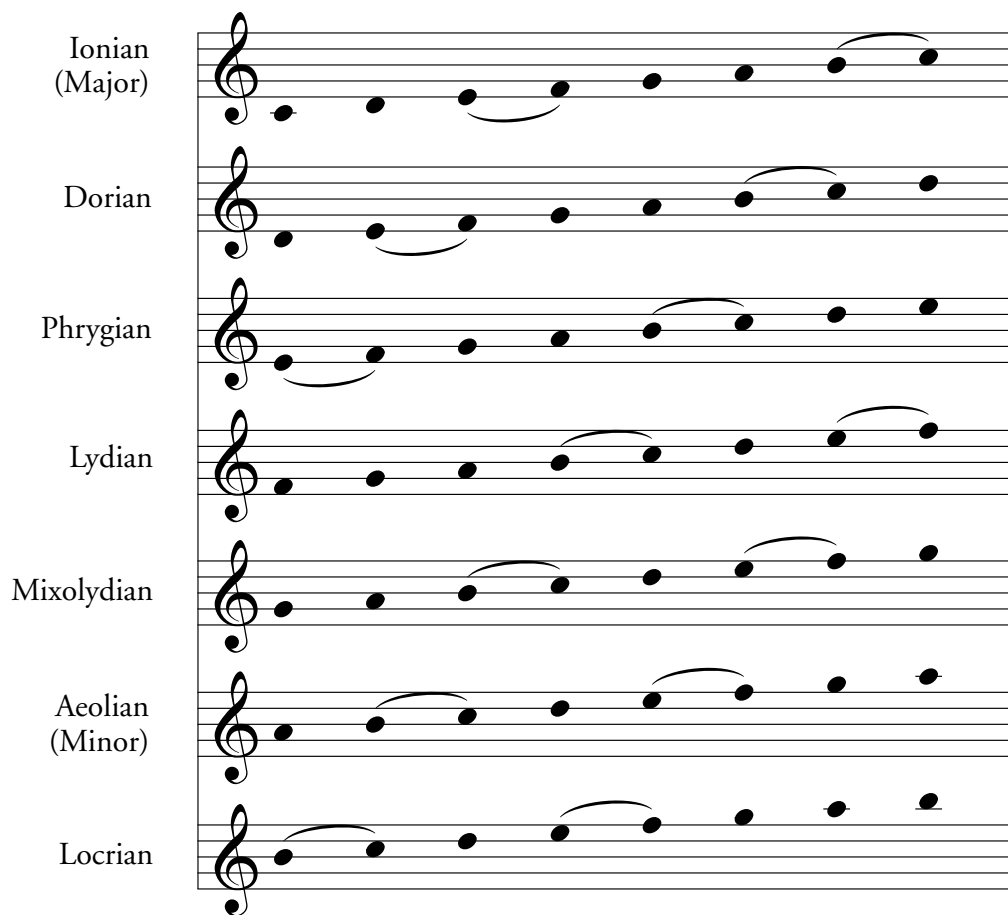


Figure 1: The seven so-called church modes, as played on the white keys of the piano.

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 the pitch of the tonal center at various points, especially at the ends of some of its important phrases.

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 below. Play through them on an instrument or sing them. Note how only the position of the second half step differs in each comparison.

G Ionian
(Major)

G Mixolydian

E Aeolian
(natural minor)

E Dorian

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

The combinations of mode and tonal center most commonly encountered in Irish tin whistle, flute, and uilleann pipe music are shown below in Figure 3. The ones containing G-sharps (i.e. A Ionian and B Dorian) are encountered less often than the others.

The image displays twelve musical staves, each representing a different mode. The modes are grouped into four sets of three. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature indicated by sharp signs (#) on the appropriate lines. The modes and their key signatures are: D Ionian (two sharps), G Ionian (two sharps), A Ionian (three sharps), D Mixolydian (two sharps), G Mixolydian (two sharps), A Mixolydian (three sharps), E Dorian (two sharps), A Dorian (two sharps), B Dorian (three sharps), E Aeolian (two sharps), A Aeolian (two sharps), and B Aeolian (three sharps). Each staff contains a short melodic phrase consisting of several notes, some of which are beamed together or have slurs over them, illustrating the characteristic sound of each mode.

Figure 3: The modes most commonly encountered in Irish flute, tin whistle, and uilleann pipe music. Note well the mode signatures.

WATCH FOR MODE SIGNATURES

Note that in Figure 3 I have used the appropriate “mode signatures” for each mode, instead of using accidentals. *Take special note of these mode signatures.* Musicians who are used to operating on the assumption that every signature indicates a major key or its relative minor key will have to expand their thinking somewhat.

You may have noticed that there are no flats in these mode signatures. Modal scales that include flats, such as G Dorian, D Aeolian, and F Ionian are encountered in the special repertoires of the fiddle, banjo, and accordion. Players of keyed flutes and pipes can play in these modes as well, but traditionally they rarely do. It is very difficult, and usually impractical, to play in these modes on a D whistle.

In the Irish Tune Bank transcriptions I use mode signatures, not key signatures. Therefore, when you see a signature of two sharps, for example, don't assume that the tune is in D major (Ionian) or B minor (Aeolian). It could just as easily be in E Dorian or A Mixolydian. There is a growing trend toward using these mode signatures, as they result in fewer accidentals and they reflect the true modal nature of Irish music.