

Modes

The setting, the background, the mood, the attitude. Modes set the stage.

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PRELIMINARY NOTES:

“What’s the point of modes?”

Teachers have a hard time answering this extremely common question, either because they don’t know or they can’t relate. It’s a bit like asking an interior designer “What’s the point of shades of colors? Do we really need them or can we just stick to the major half dozen or so?” No, we don’t really need them. Colors and shades of color are relatively unnecessary. But it’s kind of the whole point of the profession, not to mention a huge enrichment to most people’s lives.

The point of music is the same as painting or standup or story telling or any other art: to communicate emotion landscapes. Modes are note sets that each have their own emotional content, but they are subtler than most common scales and alterations. Major scales feel happy; minor scales feel sad; blues scales feel grimy. But how does the dorian mode feel? That’s complicated.

If the most common story settings are “Once upon a time,” or “The other day I...” those would be our major and minor scales. But the Locrian mode might be “Call me Ishmael” and lydian might be “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” These stories might be more nuanced and not appeal to as wide an audience.

However—it is not the student’s fault that modes are often taught in a terrible, terrible way! Teachers often talk about the mode numbers and relatives. That’s ridiculous! “A minor” has nothing to do with the key of “C major” except for the fact that they have mostly the same number of sharps and flats. Why would you even bring that up, much less bringing it up first, as an intro to the topic!?!

“What was Abraham Lincoln like as a person?” “Well you’ve seen a slug, right? The two of them share about 70% of the same DNA, so just think of a slug, but he was president.”





The Shorthand

If you're taking a test on this stuff, this is what you need to scrawl on the inside of your forearm





UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

TRADITIONAL MODE ORDER

NAME	NUMBER	ALTERATIONS
Ionian	1	--
Dorian	2	b7 b3
Phrygian	3	b7 b3 b6 b2
Lydian	4	#4
Mixolydian	5	b7
Aeolian	6	b7 b3 b6
Locrian	7	b7 b3 b6 b2 b5

PROPOSED MODE ORDER

NAME	NUMBER	ALTERATIONS
Ionian	1	--
Mixolydian	5	b7
Dorian	2	b7 b3
Aeolian	6	b7 b3 b6
Phrygian	3	b7 b3 b6 b2
Locrian	7	b7 b3 b6 b2 b5
Lydian	4	#4





The Traditional Method

Easy to understand. Impossible to use.



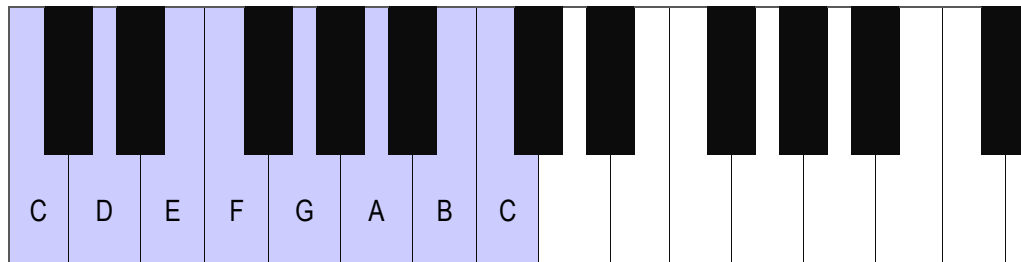


UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

1: Ionian

This mode (C Ionian, in this case) has the same notes as the major scale (C major, in this case).

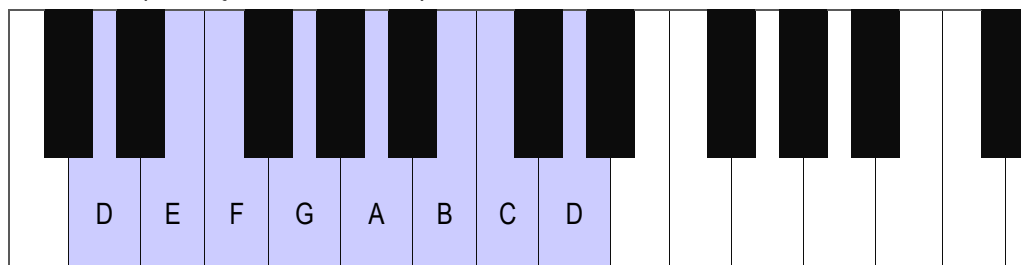
This example of the Ionian mode is called "C" Ionian because it begins on C.



2: Dorian

This mode (D Dorian, in this case) has the same notes as the major scale that is 2 half steps lower (C major, in this case) than the starting note.

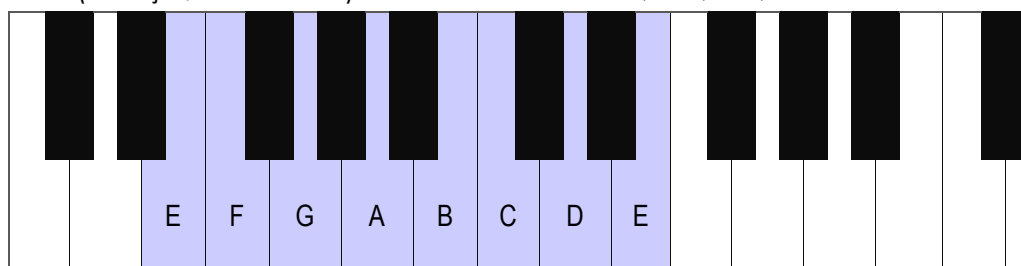
This mode is played the same as if you played the major scale, (D major, in this case) but lowered the 3rd and 7th note.



3: Phrygian

This mode (E Phrygian, in this case) has the same notes as the major scale that is 4 half steps lower (C major, in this case) than the starting note.

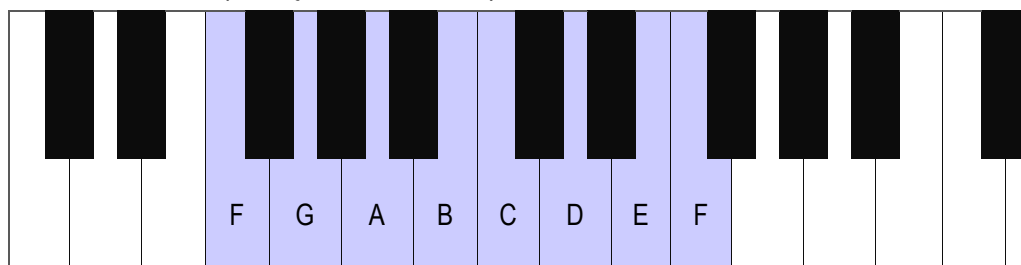
This mode is played the same as if you played the major scale, (E major, in this case) but lowered the 2nd, 3rd, 6th, and 7th note.



4: Lydian

This mode (F Lydian, in this case) has the same notes as the major scale that is 5 half steps lower (C major, in this case) than the starting note.

This mode is played the same as if you played the major scale, (F major, in this case) but raised the 4th note.



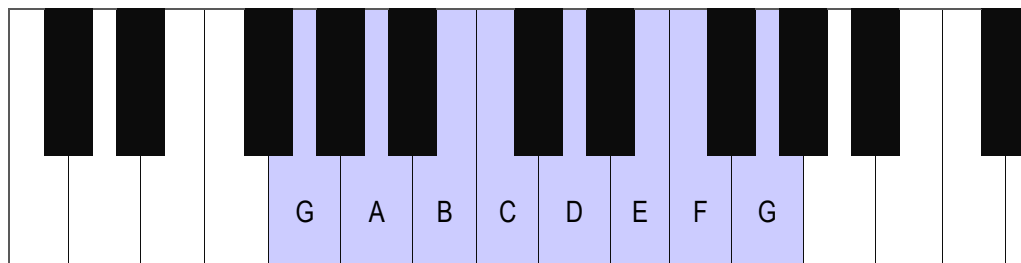


UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

5: Mixolydian

This mode (G Mixolydian, in this case) has the same notes as the major scale that is 7 half steps lower (C major, in this case) than the starting note .

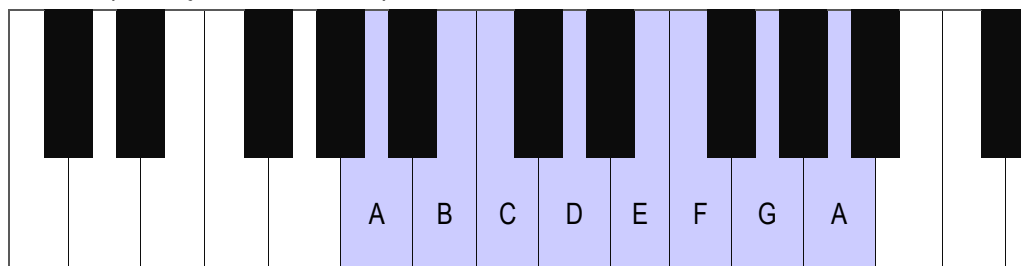
This mode is played the same as if you played the major scale, (G major, in this case) but lowered the 7th note.



6: Aeolian

This mode (A Aeolian, in this case) has the same notes as the major scale that is 3 half steps higher (C major, in this case) than the starting note .

This mode is played the same as if you played the major scale, (A major, in this case) but lowered the 3rd, 6th, and 7th note.

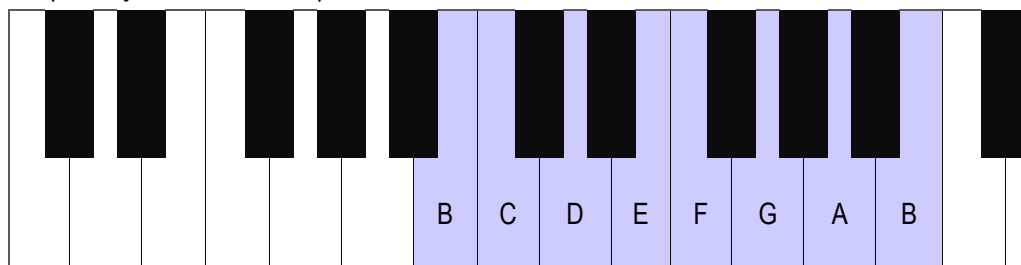


This mode is also known as a "natural minor scale".

7: Locrian

This mode (B Locrian, in this case) has the same notes as the major scale that is 1 half step higher (C major, in this case) than the starting note .

This mode is played the same as if you played the major scale, (B major, in this case) but lowered the 2nd, 3rd, 5th, 6th, and 7th note.





The Useful Method

Longer to implement; More practical to use.



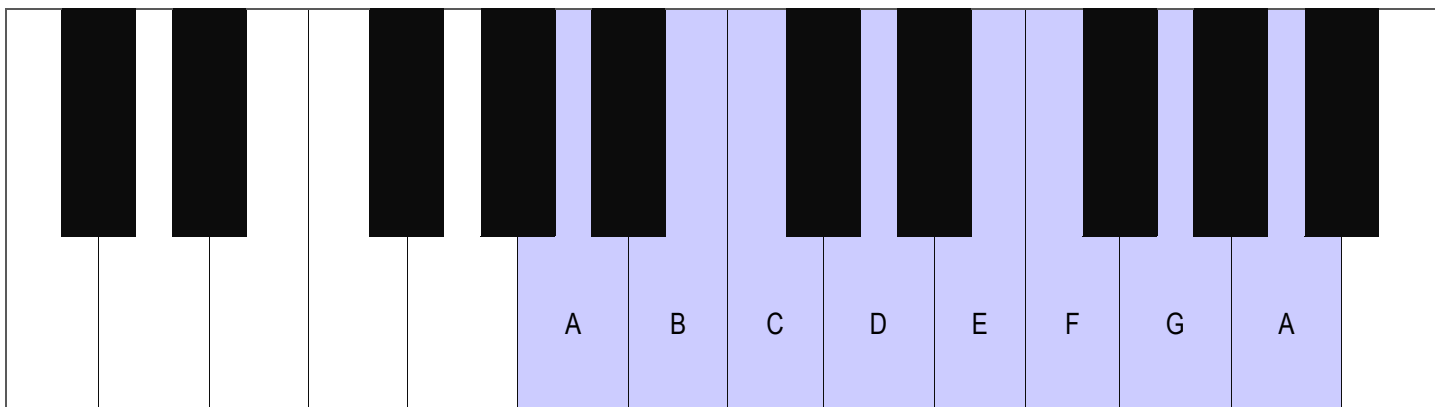


UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

RELATIVE VERSUS PARALLEL

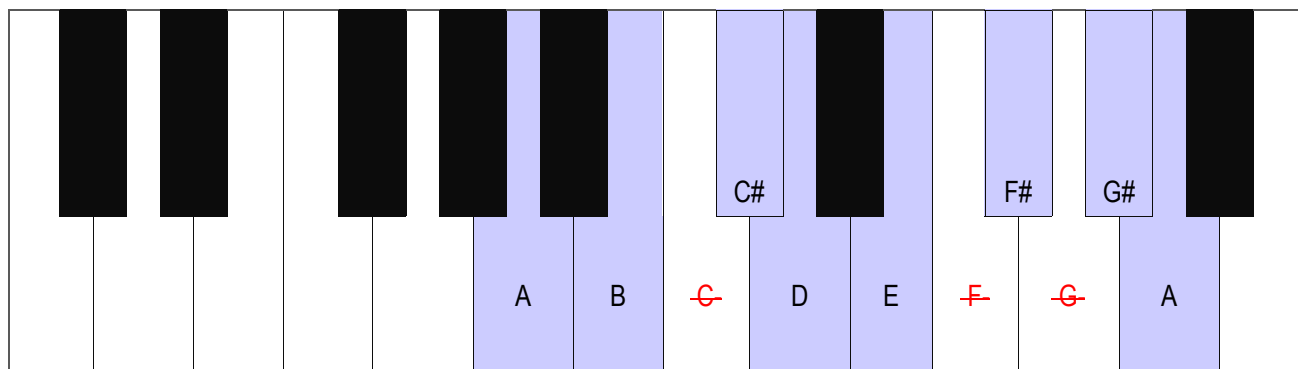
Modes are most commonly taught using "relative" keys: keys which have the same sharps and flats ("accidentals"). A "parallel" key is one that has the same starting pitch, but different accidentals.

KEY OF A MINOR



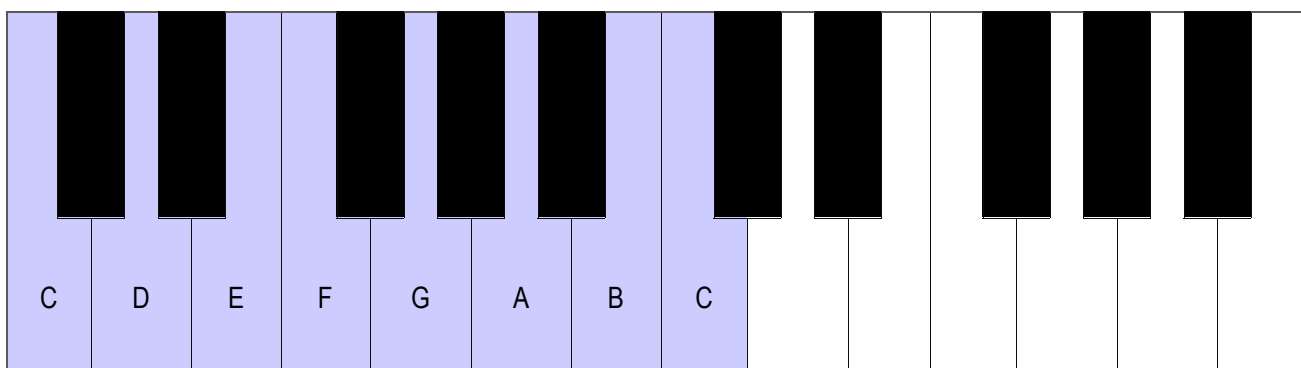
"Parallel" - same root, different accidentals

A MAJOR ("PARALLEL" TO A MINOR)



"Relative" - different root, same accidentals

C MAJOR ("RELATIVE" TO A MINOR)

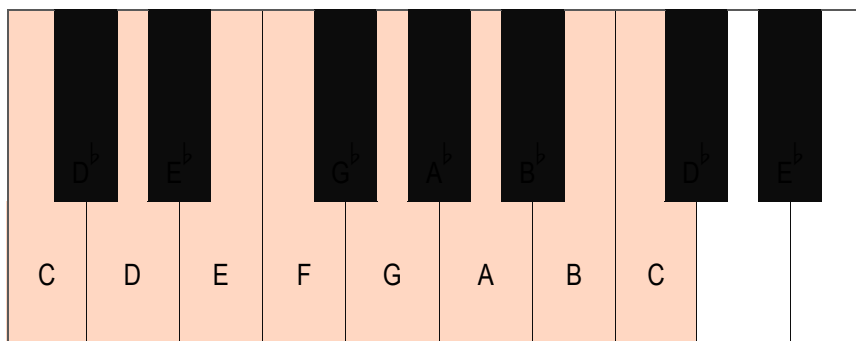




UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

IONIAN

This is a regular, major scale. Nothing has been altered. "Ionian" is the term you use for this scale if you're either (1) teaching the modes portion of a music theory class or (2) if you're really insecure about some other aspect of your life and need to feel superior to the tiny fraction of humanity that knows about music modes but doesn't know the official names.
...or (3) both 1 and 2.



The vast majority of pop music (95% or higher...?) from the western hemisphere uses this mode. Some of the millions of examples include:

["American Pie" by Don McClean \(G Ionian\)](#)

["Brown Eyed Girl" by Van Morrison \(G Ionian\)](#)

["Free Falling" by Tom Petty \(F Ionian\)](#)

["Good Riddance \(Time of Your Life\)" by Green Day \(G Ionian\)](#)

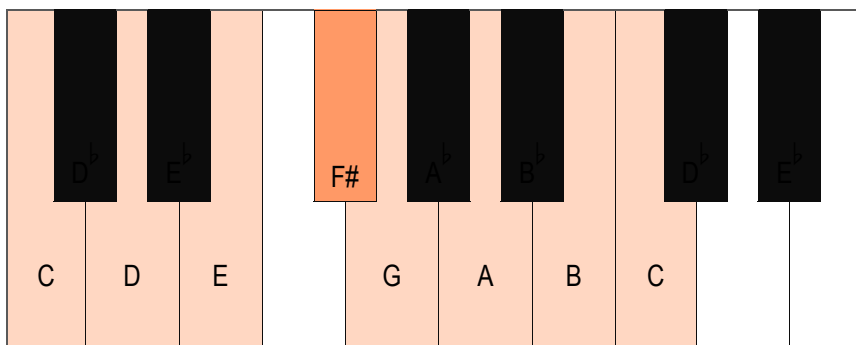
["Heaven" by Los Lonely Boys \(F# Ionian\)](#)

["Hey Jude" by the Beatles \(F Ionian\)](#)

LYDIAN: #4

Lydian is special because it's not really related to any of the other modes in the same way. It just has the sharp 4. That's it. Lydian has an ethereal, heavenly, uplifting feel to it. Almost like the whole tone scale, but without the trippy, outer-space, no definitely place to land feeling.

It also features the rare major 2 chord (D major, in this case).



Entire songs in a lydian mode are going to be very rare. Some examples may be:

["Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac \(arguably F Lydian\)](#)

["Hey Jealousy" by the Gin Blossoms \(D Lydian\)](#)

["Flying in a Blue Dream" by Joe Satriani \(arguably C Lydian\)](#)

["Jane Says" by Jane's Addiction, \(arguably G Lydian\)](#)

["Just Remember I Love You" by Firefall, \(arguably F Lydian\)](#)

More commonly, portions of a song will use the lydian mode to create an unstable or ethereal atmosphere:

["The Jetsons" show theme \(E Lydian\)](#)

["Maria" from West Side Story \(D flat Lydian\)](#)

["Oceans" by Pearl Jam \(C Lydian\)](#)

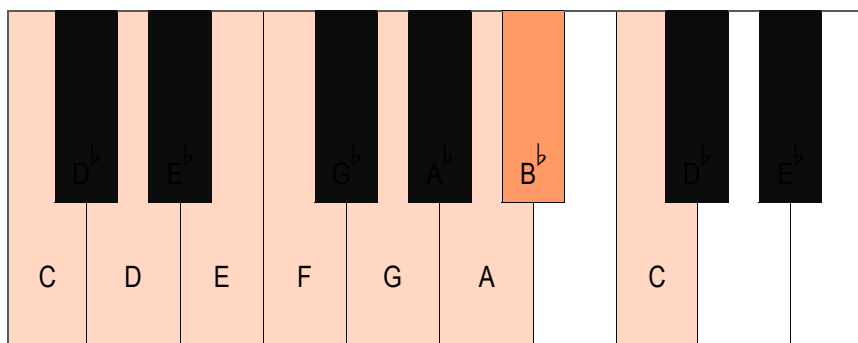




UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

MIXOLYDIAN: b7

We flattened the 7th note of the scale. That gives it kind of a bluesy flavor without the dirty, grimy feeling of the flat 3 or the flat 5. It's especially useful for short periods, during dominant (7) chords. This would go great during a C7.



Hear this fun-loving mode in these songs:

["Sweet Home Alabama" by Lynyrd Skynyrd \(D mixolydian\)](#)

["On Broadway" by George Benson \(A flat mixolydian\)](#)

["Cinnamon Girl" by Neil Young \(D mixolydian\)](#)

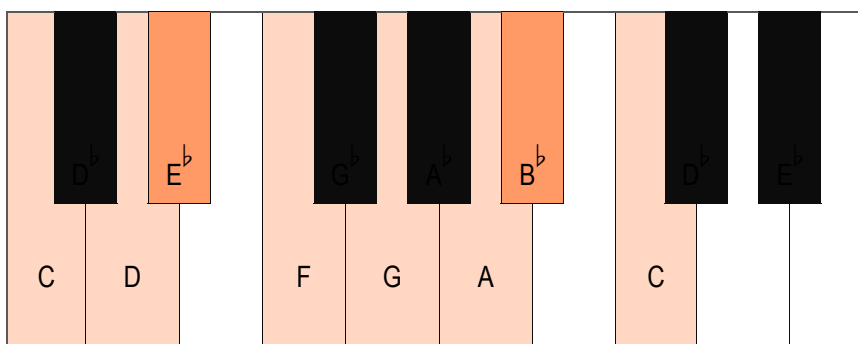
["I'm So Glad" by Cream \(E mixolydian\)](#)

["Get Down Tonight" by KC and the Sunshine Band \(F mixolydian\)](#)

["Norwegian Wood" by The Beatles \(E mixolydian\)](#)

DORIAN: b7 b3

We also flattened the 3rd note now. Now it's starting to feel more blues-y, but until we flat the 5, it's also just kind of dark and minor, but in a hip way and not so much depressed. This would go great during a Cm7.



Check out this too-cool-for-school, laid-back, minor-ish mode in these songs:

["Radioactive" by Imagine Dragons \(B dorian\)](#)

["Oye Como Va" by Santana \(A dorian\)](#)

["So What" by Miles Davis \(D dorian\)](#)

["Horse With No Name" by America \(E dorian\)](#)

["Scarborough Fair" by Simon and Garfunkel \(E dorian\)](#)

["Godzilla" by Blue Oyster Cult \(F# dorian\)](#)

["Boulevard of Broken Dreams" by Green Day \(F dorian\)](#)

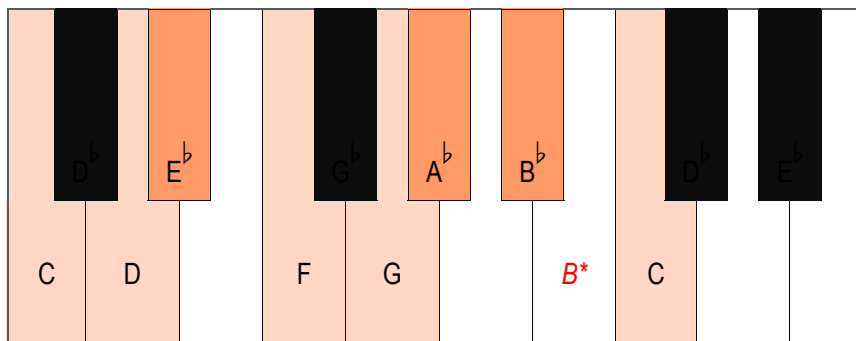




UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

AEOLIAN: b7 b3 b6

We finally flatted the 3rd note! Now piano students can call this “minor”. Theory students will call this “natural minor”. Europeans will call this “sad”. Japanese will call this “beautiful”. Jews and Russians will call this “fun”. Everyone is right. This is the most common mode next to Ionian.



**If the entire song is actually in this mode, you will often see the regular seven making brief appearances.*

Almost every song that is not in the Ionian mode is in this mode, so you can hear this mode all over the place, like:

[“Stairway To Heaven” by Led Zeppelin \(A aeolian\)](#)

[“All Along the Watchtower” by Bob Dylan \(A aeolian\)](#)

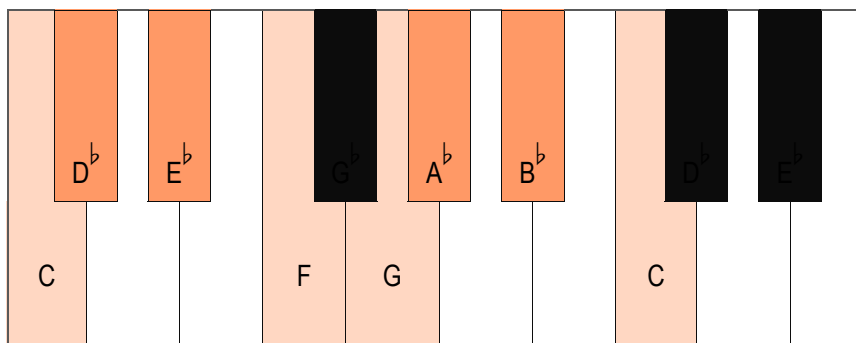
[“You Give Love a Bad Name” by Bon Jovi \(C aeolian\)](#)

[“Two Step” by the Dave Matthews Band \(D aeolian\)](#)

[“Crazy Train” by Ozzy Osbourne \(F# aeolian\)](#)

PHRYGIAN: b7 b3 b6 b2

We flatted the 2 and now the whole thing starts off weird since the first move is a half step. It's often described as having a Spanish or Gypsy feel.



Notice the Spanish Gypsy phrygian feel in these songs:

[“White Rabbit” by Jefferson Airplane \(F# phrygian\)](#)

[Original “Doctor Who Theme” \(E phrygian\)](#)

[“Misirlou” by Dick Dale \(E phrygian\)](#)

White Rabbit, Do

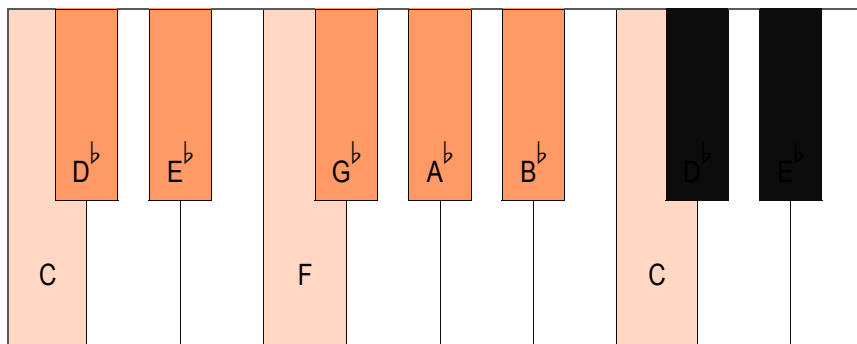




UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

LOCRIAN: b7 b3 b6 b2 b5

It is going to be difficult to describe the feeling of this mode or find a song in it, since there is now no perfect fifth between the 1 and the 5. In other words, the 5 chord of this scale does not naturally lead to the 1.



While the mode gets used during parts of songs, the only example we can find is:

["March from Three Fantastic Dances" by Dimitri Shostakovich \(locrian\)](#)





Mode Alterations

What happens if you take a weird scale and

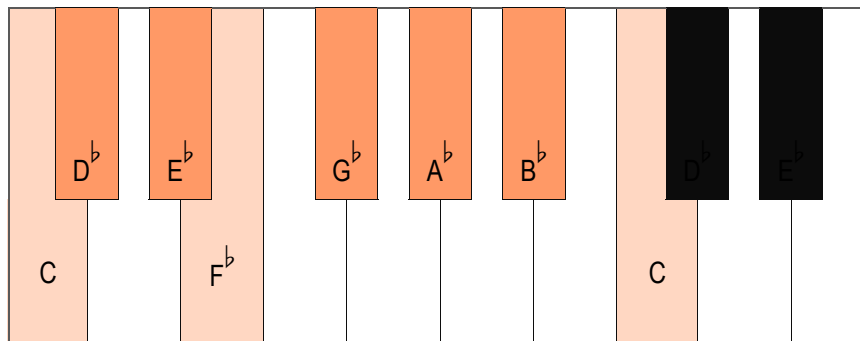




UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

DIMINISHED WHOLE TONE (ALSO KNOWN AS THE “ALT” SCALE)

I know on the Phrygian mode you were thinking “but what if we flatted the 4 also? Well then you just land on the 3, but yes—you can do it. And...it...sounds...AWESOME! This would sound super hip on a C7 chord, especially if the next chord was going to be an F minor chord!



If you're thinking “but what if we flatted the 1?” Sorry—no luck. If we flat the 1, it's a C flat, and while that's allowed, it's no longer a C scale of any kind. It's a C flat scale if that's where we start. And to further bum you out, it's not even a cool C flat scale. It's just a regular, boring old C flat major scale.

As an irrelevant, boring, teacher-ly tangent, I should point out that this mode no longer shares a key signature with any major scale, so it's not a “mode” of any major scale. It does, however, share all the same notes as a D flat melodic minor scale, so this is the 7th mode of the melodic minor scale.

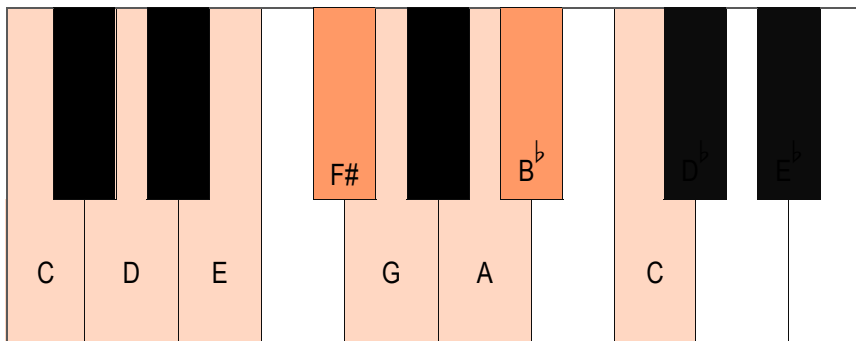
Also, this scale gets called the Diminished Whole Tone Scale because the lower part is a diminished scale, while the top part is a whole tone scale.

The other name “Alt” Scale is given because it is often used on “Alt” or “Altered Dominant” chords, where all the possible alterations to the dominant chord are made. This scale uses all the alterations: b7 (Bb), b9 (Db), #9 (D#/Eb), #11 (F#/Gb), and b13 (Ab)

LYDIAN DOMINANT

Here's the Lydian mode if you lowered the 7th. This is not as uncommon as you would think.

Since it's almost the first notes in the natural overtone series, it's is also sometimes called the overtone scale



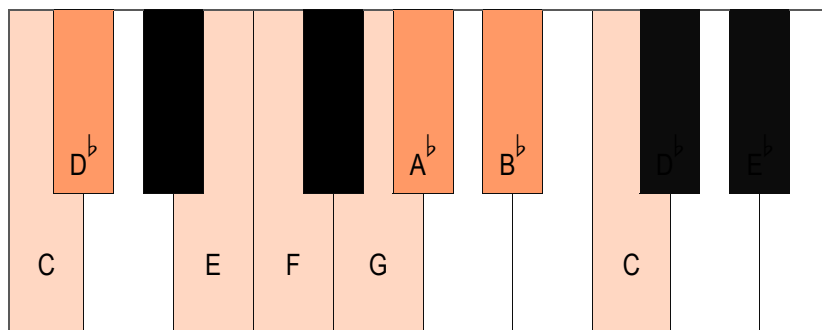


UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

PHRYGIAN DOMINANT

This one will feel minor, but without the tell-tale flat 3 that all the other minor scales have. So the 1 chord will sound major, but the melodies will sound minor. Notice: this is the 5th mode of harmonic minor, so this one has the same notes as F harmonic minor.

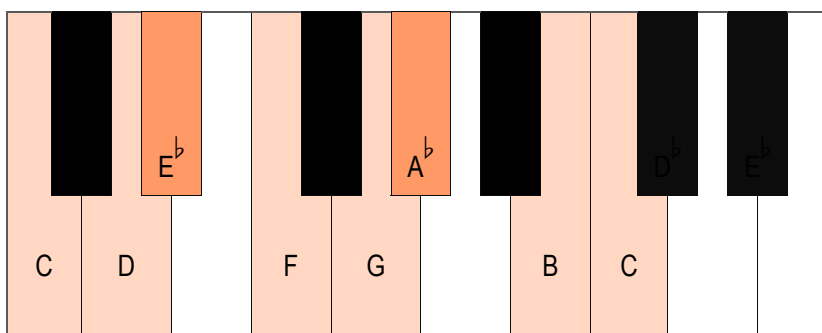
Hear it in: [Hava Nagila](#) & ["Forest" by System of A Down \(C Phrygian Dominant\)](#)



HARMONIC MINOR

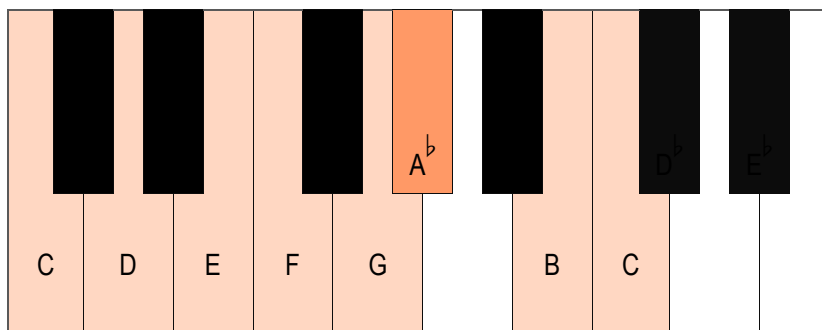
This is a variation on the Aeolian (minor) mode, where only the 3 and the 6 are flatted. The 3-half-step gap between the 6 and 7 gives this scale the unmistakable sound that is often called Arabian or Spanish or Egyptian or Middle Eastern.

Hear it in: [Greensleeves](#)



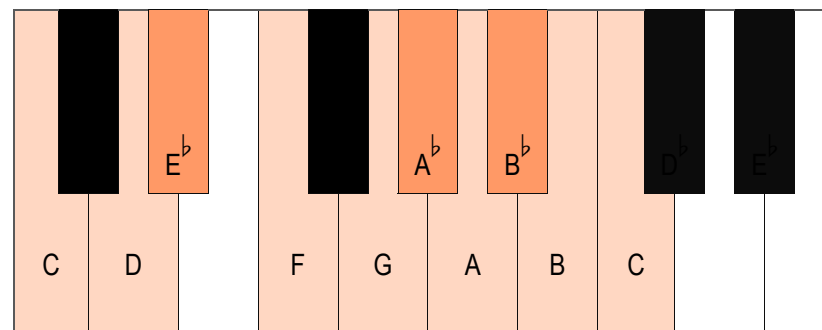
HARMONIC MAJOR

This one preserves the Arabian/Spanish feel of harmonic minor, but without the flat 3, it still feels major, especially toward the bottom.



MELODIC MINOR

Technically this one is supposed to contain the lowered 6 and 7 as well as the regular/raised/normal 6 and 7, but the real flavor of this scale is evident with the raised 6 and 7. The opposite feel of the harmonic major, this one feels major on top and minor on the bottom.





Other Scales

Technically this is off topic, but since when has that stopped us?





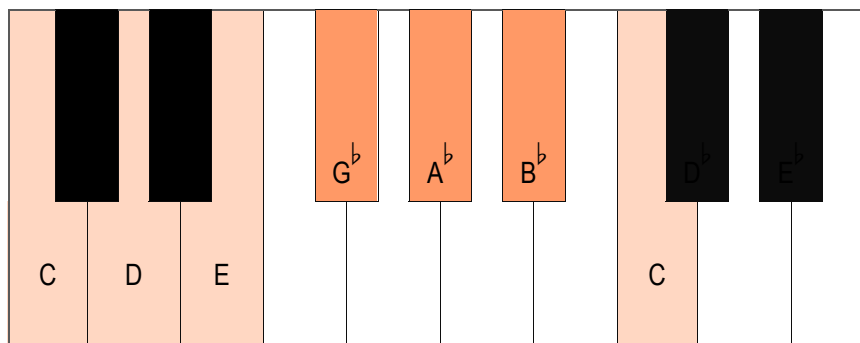
UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

OTHER APPROACHES TO SCALES

What if instead of altering the scales or modes, we just made up patterns and followed them?

WHOLE TONE SCALE

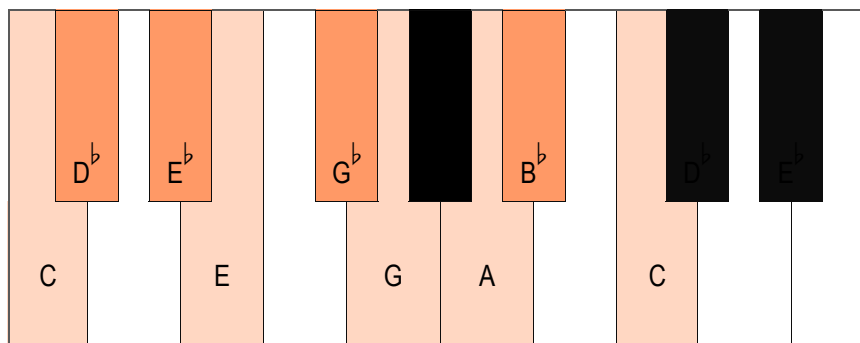
All whole steps! Super spacy feeling. No place feels like home. Think Wizard of Oz or Alice in Wonderland. But there are only 6 notes and scales are supposed to have 7! Is that even allowed? There aren't any rules out here, cowboy. We're just creating emotion landscapes.



Hear it in: Background of the Simpsons Theme

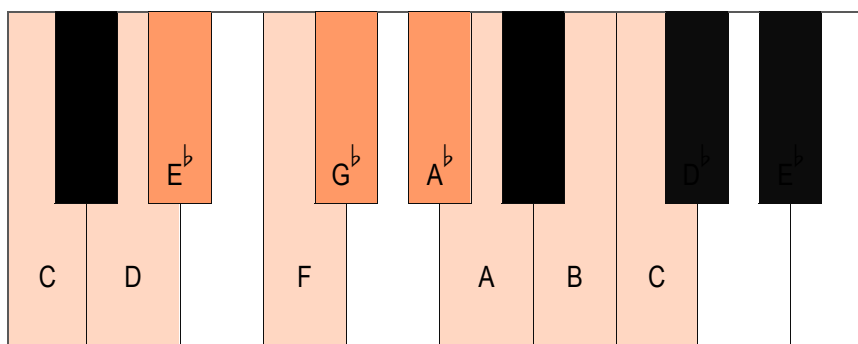
DIMINISHED HALF-WHOLE SCALE

Now we're just making up patterns. What if we go half step whole step, half step, whole step all the way up? Now you've got a great scale to play with a diminished chord!



DIMINISHED WHOLE-HALF SCALE (OCTATONIC SCALE)

You guessed it...

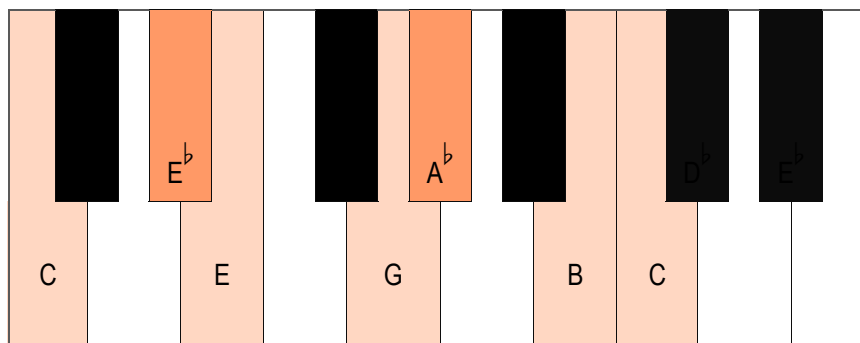




UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

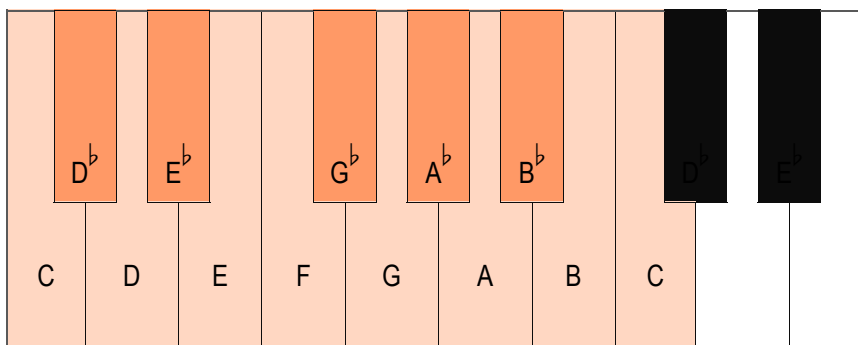
HEXATONIC SCALE

This one is like the whole-half diminished scale, but goes step-and-a-half, then a half step.



CHROMATIC SCALE

If all-whole-steps is allowed as a scale, then all-half-steps should be allowed too. But you're right: this is getting crazy now. It's just every note out there. What's holding this world together now? If this is a scale, any random noises can be a scale! Actually...that's a good point...



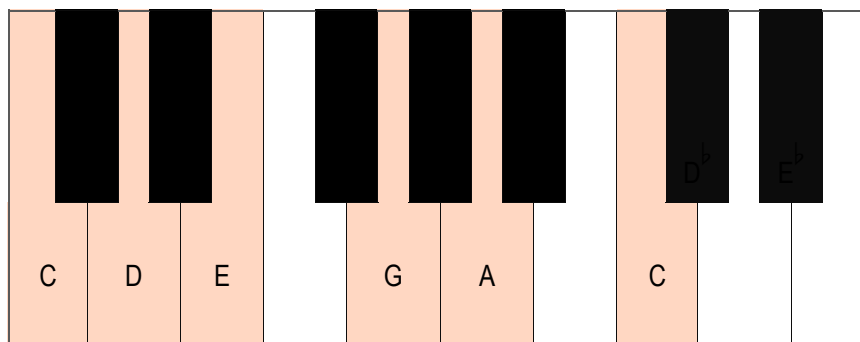
STILL MORE APPROACHES TO SCALES

What if instead of altering the scales or using patterns we just started leaving notes out?

PENTATONIC SCALE

This is just the major scale without the 4 or the 7, and it is extremely common! The 4 and 7 of a scale are the least likely notes to sound good, so when improvising, this is almost always a really safe scale to use. Guitarists especially like this one because not only is it safe and sounds good, but it also requires minimum hand movement because of the way it is played on guitar.

And yes, it's "pent"-atonic because it has 5 tones, or notes.

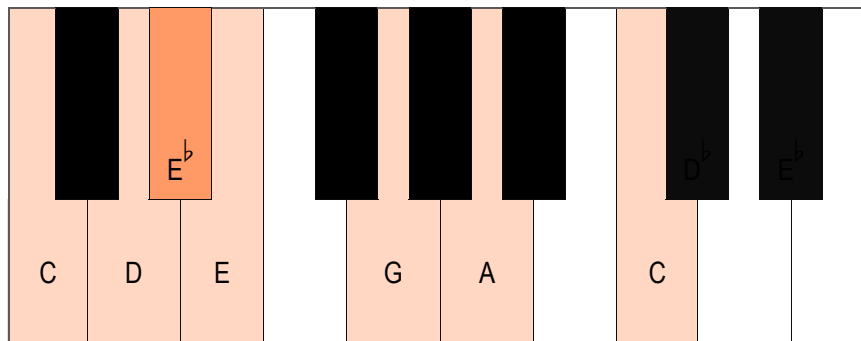




UNDERSTANDING AND USING MODES

KANSAS CITY BLUES SCALE

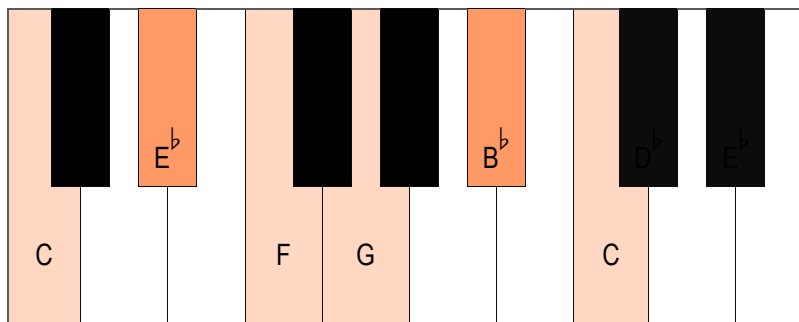
This is the pentatonic scale, but with the added flat 3—the blues note—the minor note—the gutsy note. So this scale is still safe, like the pentatonic scale, but it's got just a little more soul to it.



MINOR PENTATONIC SCALE

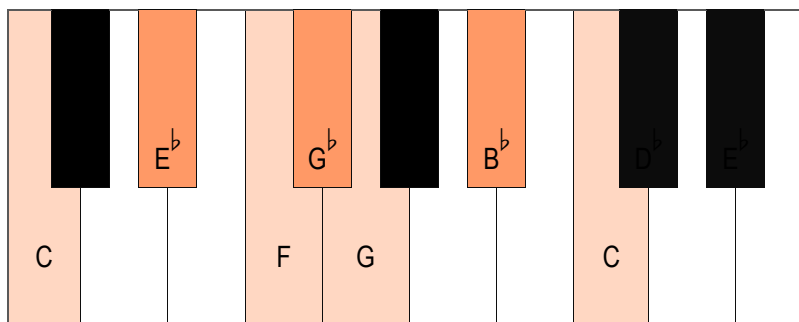
This scale would be recognized by some as a blues scale. While not technically correct, this would work over most blues.

It is also the relative (has the same notes) of the pentatonic scale 3 half steps higher, so this C minor pentatonic scale has the same notes as E flat pentatonic.



BLUES SCALE 1

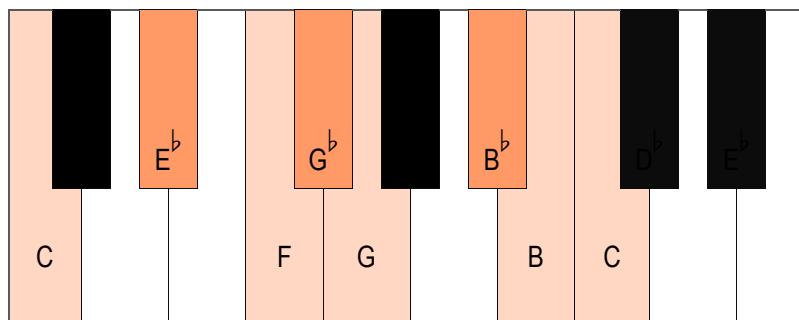
By taking the minor pentatonic and adding the flat 5 (or sharp 4), we've added a lot more flavor and have a note that is somehow even more blues-y than the flat 3.



BLUES SCALE 2

The blues scale is missing an important note: during one measure of a [12-bar blues](#) (the most common kind of blues), the regular 7 will be important, since it is the [3 of that chord](#).

Long story short, this version of the blues scale is less safe, but more complete.





Why This Is All A Lie

One final can of worms to unleash before the end...





CONCLUDING NOTES:

“What’s the point of modes?”

Modes are just a tiny subset of the possible note families we can use to create different feelings. They are related to other scales that have the same sharps and flats (“relative” scales), but more importantly, they are related to other scales that evoke similar emotions. Aeolian and Dorian share a lot of similar emotions, but are subtly different.

But one of the biggest uses of modes is in short, contextualized bursts. For example, if a D minor chord is being used as a 2 chord, we might play in D Dorian during that chord, but if it’s acting like a 6 chord, we might use Aeolian.

I know this is a bit of a game changer to say that a whole song won’t be in one mode, but the same is true for keys: even cheesy pop songs sometimes change keys mid-song. That doesn’t mean that there’s no point in learning keys—quite the opposite. It helps to be so familiar with multiple keys that you can switch between them smoothly. Likewise, once you are familiar with your modes and scales, they will be tools to switch between multiple times within a single song.

If you ask an interior designer “What’s the point of shades of colors?” the real answer is “There is no point in shades until you can tell the main ones apart. When shades are relevant to you, you’ll start to see them. But if you spend a lot of time looking at different shades, they will become relevant sooner.” The same is true for modes and special scales.

