

## *P Tagg — Entry on MODALITY for EPMOW*

**modality**, from Latin *modus* (= measure, manner, mode): term mainly used to denote certain types of tonal vocabulary which diverge from that predominant within Central European art music (c. 1730-1910) and tonally related forms of popular music (e.g. popular hymns, marches, waltzes, polkas, evergreens).

1. General.
2. Church modes.
3. Non-diatonic modes.
5. Perceived character

### *1. General*

Current usage of ‘mode’ and ‘modality’ derives from two main sources: (i) attempts by medieval European theorists to systematise the tonal vocabulary of liturgical music according to Ancient Greek and Arab concepts — the ‘church modes’; (ii) ethnomusicological classification of tonal vocabulary used in folk and non-European musics.

Modes are distinct from melody types, such as the Hindu *raga* or Arab *maqam*, which contain not only modal templates but also basic formulae for the improvised performance of melodic contour, mood and direction. Nor are modes mere scales: they are reductions of particular tonal practices to single occurrences of recurrent pitch used within those practices. Such sets of single occurrences are usually presented in scalar form spanning one octave (ex. 1).

### *2. Church modes*

*Church modes* presuppose: (i) the diatonic division of the octave into seven constituent pitches, five separated by a whole tone, two by a semitone; (ii) a tonal centre or ‘tonic’, which may sometimes be identified as a (real or potential) drone or as the final, or most frequently recurring, melodic note. The seven heptatonic church modes appear as example 1. The left column shows each mode, its tonic as n°s 1 and 8, using only the white notes of a keyboard instrument. The right column shows each mode transposed to E, this highlighting each mode’s configuration of intervals. Three interrelated factors determine each mode’s unique sonic character: (i) the position of the two semitone steps (bracketed in the left column, shown as numbers in the right); (ii) the one tritone interval (marked with a slur in the right column); (iii) the relation of these two phenomena to the tonic. Thus, only the ionian mode has its tritone between perfect fourth and major seventh (4–#7), only the dorian between minor third and major sixth (b3–#6), only the phrygian between minor second and perfect fifth (b2–5) etc. More general distinctions are often drawn (i) between major and minor modes, i.e. those containing a major or minor third in their tonic triad and (ii) between those including major and minor sevenths.

### *3. Non-diatonic modes*

Many popular tonal practices cannot be categorised according to the diatonic framework of heptatonic church modes. For example, *pentatonic modes* are widespread throughout the world, the most common types being *anhemitonic* (without semitones) and qualifiable as either major — ‘doh-pentatonic’ (ex. 2a) — or minor — ‘la-pentatonic’ (ex. 2b). Popular melody from such widely flung areas as Eastern Asia, the Andes, Subsaharan Africa and the Celtic fringe of Europe makes extensive use of such anhemitonic pentatonicism, the latter two exerting particularly strong influence on the development of popular music in North America. Other globally circulated non-diatonic modes include: [i] the hexatonic whole-tone scale, used copiously by Hollywood as a mystery cue and by jazz musicians as improvisation material to fit chords containing an augmented fifth; [ii] variants of the *Hijaz* (or *Hejjaz*) mode (a.k.a. *Hicaz*, *Bhairavi*), widespread throughout the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, Southern Spain, the entire Arab world and parts of the Indian subcontinent.

Many non-diatonic modes enjoy considerable popularity on a less global scale, e.g. the hemi-

tonic Japanese penta-scale *zokugaku-sempô*, based on common koto tuning patterns (descends 8 ♭6 5 4 ♭2 1). Other well-known, non-diatonic modes, such as the heptatonic ‘Gypsy’ mode (ascends 1 2 ♭3 #4 5 ♭6 #7) and the related ‘harmonic minor’ (1 2 ♭3 4 5 ♭6 #7), recur frequently in popular melody from the Balkans, while much popular melody (e.g. Javanese, Arabic) uses modes incompatible with the Western division of the octave into twelve equal semitones.

#### 4. Modal harmony (see HARMONY §3)

Harmonic practices derived from use of church modes are as important as melodic vocabulary in determining modal character. For example, the melodies of both *Da-Doo-Ron-Ron* (Crystals 1963) and *Sweet Home Alabama* (Lynyrd Skynyrd 1974) are basically major tritonic (#3 2 1) and thereby potentially ionian, mixolydian or major pentatonic. However, harmonisation of the Crystals song is unequivocally ionian (I–IV–V–I), that of Lynyrd Skynyrd mixolydian (I–♭VII–IV), this discrepancy contributing as much as timbre, rhythm or sound treatment to radical differences in character between the two recordings.

#### 5. Perceived characteristics of modality

Mode nomenclature often reflects hegemonic identification of tonal vocabulary in ethnic terms, e.g. the ‘Gypsy’ mode and the church modes named after areas of Greece, perceived as marginal from the power centre of ancient Athens. Similarly, from a contemporary Northern European or North American viewpoint, the phrygian mode is often thought to sound Spanish, while other modes, already mentioned, are heard as Arab, Balkan, Japanese etc. US film music frequently uses such hegemonic perception of modality to transmit cultural stereotypes of place.

Different modes are also perceived as connoting different moods. (‘Mood’ and ‘mode’ are etymologically related.) Such connotations are culturally specific, the equation of minor modes with ‘sad’ and major with ‘happy’ being largely valid within the Central European tonal system of art music and related styles but inapplicable to the music of most other cultures. Similarly, rock and pop music using aeolian harmony in a certain way has a tendency to be associated with alienation and the ominous while mixolydian rock and pop veers more towards a mood of wide open spaces. Within African American music, descending minor pentatonic modes with ‘blue’ fifths are more likely to connect with blues, old times and oppression while melismatic major pentatonic melodies link with the positive ecstasy of gospel music.

During the hegemony of Central European major-minor tonality, music from the continent’s ‘fringe areas’ (Spain, Russia, Scandinavia, the Balkans and British Isles) was often characterised by the musicological establishment as ‘modal’, because, although much music produced in those areas conformed to the central (ionian) norms of tonality, some — usually older forms of rural popular music — did not: it conformed to modes abandoned and regarded as archaic by the European bourgeoisie during the ascendancy of that class (see harmony 2-3). Some of these modes, notably those containing a flat seventh (dorian, mixolydian, aeolian) and the two anhemitonic pentatonic modes are regarded (rightly or wrongly) as typical of rural music from the British Isles. These modes blended with compatible tonal systems of West African origin to contribute to the establishment of North American popular styles challenging the global hegemony of Central European major-minor tonality to the extent that the latter is now more likely than the former to own connotations of ‘the old order’.

Table 1: 'church' modes















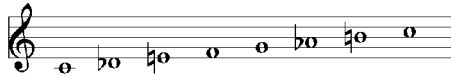
<p>Ionian</p> 	
<p>Dorian</p> 	
<p>Phrygian</p> 	
<p>Lydian</p> 	
<p>Mixolydian</p> 	
<p>Aeolian</p> 	
<p>Locrian</p> 	

Table 2: Examples of common non-diatonic modes

(a) Hijaz (Hicaz/Hitzazkiar/Bhairavi)



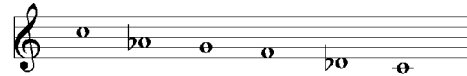
(b) major (doh) pentatonic (anhemitonic)



(c) minor (la) pentatonic (anhemitonic)



(d) Zokugaku-sempô (hemitonic)



(e) blues major pentatonic



(f) blues minor pentatonic



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## Discography

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