

The Church Modes

Mode, or modality, is a collection of pitch relationships exhibiting certain characteristic melodic and chordal configurations that confirm and establish the key of a musical work. Our present-day concept of mode is the result of centuries of evolution and practice. Out of this evolution, the major-minor tonal system emerged as the most widely used system of pitch organization in the Western world. But long before the development of this system in the late-seventeenth century, other modes existed.

Known as the church modes, or ecclesiastical modes, they were used for hundreds of years, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Thereafter, the church modes receded from view for about two hundred years but then recaptured the imagination of composers during the second half of the nineteenth century. Before we consider the modal system in its current state, let us take a brief excursion into the early history of this system.

The church modes were developed during the eighth and ninth centuries of the Common Era as a means for analyzing and classifying the monophonic music of the Roman Catholic Church. Monophony is a type of musical texture that consists of a single melodic line. The music of the Roman Church is referred to generally as plainchant (*cantus planus*) and more specifically as Gregorian chant. The latter reference is an attribution to the charismatic pope St. Gregory I (540?–604), who traditionally receives credit for composing the chant for the services of the Roman Church during his papacy. St. Gregory is a central figure in the history of the Roman Church, one of the four Doctors (teachers) of the Church, along with St. Ambrose (340?–397), St. Augustine (354–430), and St. Jerome (340?–420?).

Although St. Gregory may have helped to bring the chant repertory of the Roman Church together through his extraordinary service as an administrator, it is unlikely that he composed any of the music himself. Still, given the magnitude of St. Gregory's role in establishing both the papacy as a world power and the independence of the Western Church, it is understandable that the surviving corpus of Western chant would bear his name.

The first discussions of the church modes began to appear in the treatises of the ninth century. Based upon certain references to the scale system of the ancient Greeks found in a sixth-century treatise called *De institutione musica* (The Fundamentals of Music), some writers concluded that the modes were of Greek origin. The treatise was written by the Roman statesman Boethius (ca. 480–ca. 524), the most widely read authority on the music theory of antiquity.

Misinterpreting Boethius's account of the Greek scales, medieval theoreticians improperly assigned the Greek names associated with these scales to the modes of the Roman Church. Although the musical scales of ancient Greece had nothing in common with the modal system of the Middle Ages, the church modes as we understand them today retain their Hellenistic names.

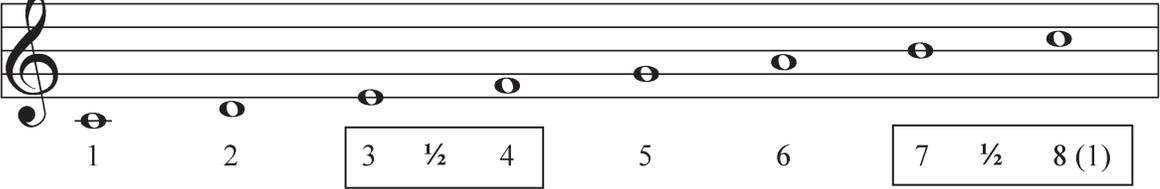
The history of the church modes is one in which the usage differs from one era to another, from the Middle Ages through the second half of the nineteenth century. The treatment of the church modes during the last hundred and fifty years or so, however, constitutes a relatively consistent practice.

The example below illustrates the seven church modes as we understand them today, with their Greek names and half-step profiles. All of the modes shown appear as diatonic scales, each with five whole steps and two half steps. The placement of the half steps, however, is different for each of the seven modes. Two modes should be recognized immediately, the Ionian mode and the Aeolian mode. The half-step profile of the Ionian mode is identical to that of the major mode, whereas the half-step profile of the Aeolian mode is identical to that of the natural minor.

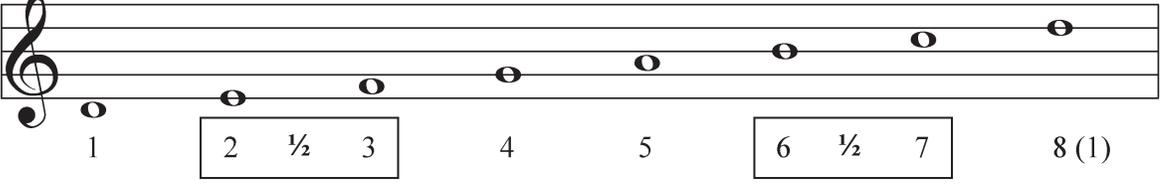
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Example: the seven church modes with their Greek names and half-step profiles

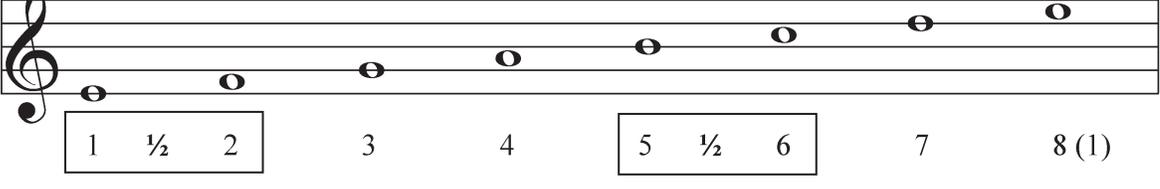
Ionian mode (major mode): half steps between scale degrees 3–4 and 7–8



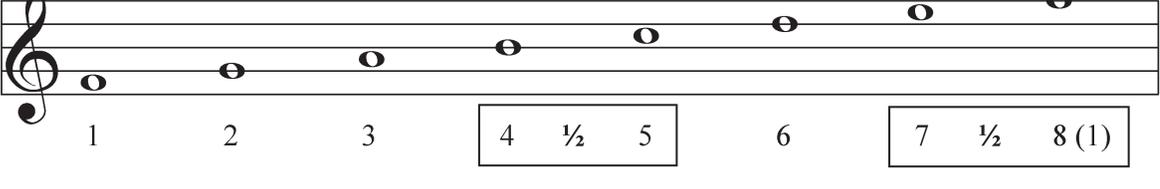
Dorian mode: half steps between scale degrees 2–3 and 6–7



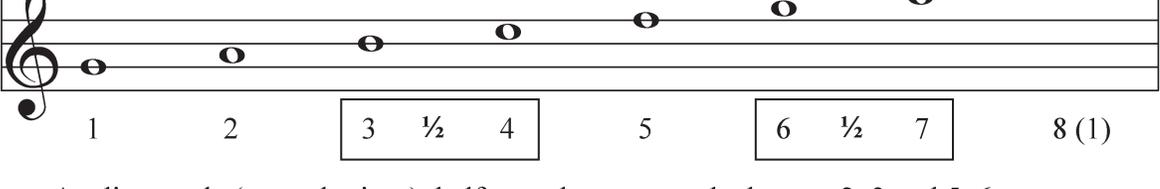
Phrygian mode: half steps between scale degrees 1–2 and 5–6



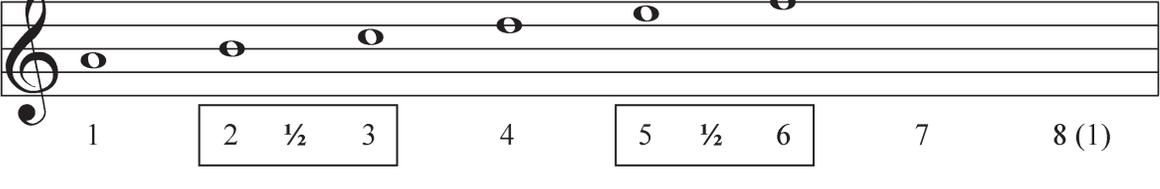
Lydian mode: half steps between scale degrees 4–5 and 7–8



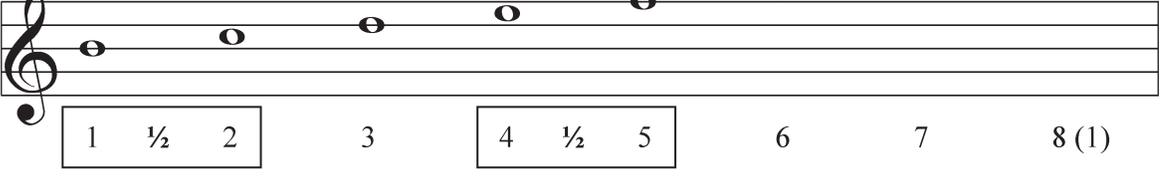
Mixolydian mode: half steps between scale degrees 3–4 and 6–7



Aeolian mode (natural minor): half steps between scale degrees 2–3 and 5–6



Locrian mode: half steps between scale degrees 1–2 and 4–5



The white keys of the piano keyboard contain all of the pitch content for each of the seven modes in their *untransposed* forms. As displayed in the example above, the untransposed Ionian mode (or major mode) spans the white keys of the C octave, the Dorian mode the D octave, the Phrygian mode the E octave, the Lydian mode the F octave, the Mixolydian mode the G octave, the Aeolian mode the A octave, and the Locrian mode the B octave. The Locrian and Lydian modes are not used with species counterpoint in the style of Palestrina.