

# How Do I Mode? A Dead Simple Guide.

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## STEP 1: Understand The Twist

Modes are easy if you already know the major and natural-minor scales.

- Major: C D E F G A B C
- Natural Minor: C D E<sup>b</sup> F G A<sup>b</sup> B<sup>b</sup> C

You don't need to memorize a recipe of halfsteps and wholesteps for each mode. Because each mode is just like one of these scales, with one "twist" note (directed by M. Night Shyamalan)

- **Lydian:** major with #4
- **Mixolydian:** major with b7
- **Dorian:** natural-minor with b6
- **Phrygian:** natural-minor with b2
- **Locrian (rare):** natural-minor with b2 and b5

So if I'm called upon to play G Lydian, for instance, I know it's just a G major scale except I make the fourth sharp. That would be C#. Easy!

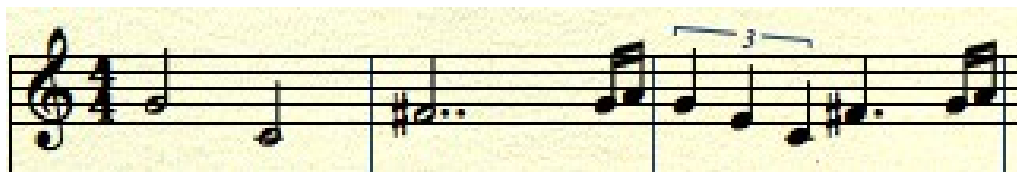
## STEP 2: Lean On That Note

How does a piece of music communicate that it is one of the modes as opposed to major or minor? The answer is by **emphasizing** the twist note. Consider the following tools we can use to create emphasis.

- **prominence**, such as putting the twist note in the melody
- **accentuation**, such as by putting the twist note on a downbeat or giving it a long duration
- **repetition**, such as by repeating figures that include the twist note

### #1: Modes And Melody

Here is the main melodic theme from the movie "Back To The Future" by Alan Silvestri.



Even with no accompanying harmony, we are unmistakably in C Lydian. The twist note (#4, or F#) is prominent, accented, and repeated.

## #2: Modes And Harmony

If we want to have the harmony emphasize our mode, we have to think what chords we can create that use the twist note. Continuing our example in Lydian, we can quickly sketch out the possibilities for "**twist chords**." The #4 note in C Lydian can be used as:

- the root of a  $iv^{\circ}$  diminished chord: F# A C
- the third of a  $II$  major chord: D F# A
- the fifth of a  $vii$  minor chord: B D F#
- the major seventh of a  $VM7$  chord: G B D F#

This is Yoda's Theme from "The Empire Strikes Back" composed by John Williams:



You can see that  $II^7$  is a very effective choice. Williams doesn't need to repeat the F# the second time. Instead he can organically grow the melody and allow the harmony underneath to maintain the Lydian feeling.

## #3 Modes And Progression

Harmony works differently in the modes than in the major/minor system. In major and minor it's all about tonic, predominant, dominant. For example if I play  $i, iv$ , you naturally hear it as a "question" and want to hear  $V, i$  as a "reply." (in C minor: Cm, Fm, GM, Cm).

The special colors of the "twist chords" puts them pretty much outside this scheme. You should think of twist chords as adding color rather than fulfilling a tonal role. Just as a quick example, compare the  $i, iv$  progression above with an alternative  $i, IV$ . The  $\flat 6$  immediately communicates the Dorian mode, and the  $IV$  chord doesn't have as much of an urgent need to move to  $V$ . In fact it can return right back to  $i$ .

## #4: Static Harmony From Parent Keys

Every mode, if you wrote out all the notes, would imply a particular major-key signature. For example if we take G Lydian, remembering our #4:

G B A C# D E F# G

The key signature here, with two sharps, tells us the key is really D Major. That's the "parent key" of G Lydian.

A basic rule is that **IV** and **V** of the parent key (which I'll call **[IV]** and **[V]** to avoid confusion) are going to be good chords to use to help communicate our mode.

Let's sketch out a chart for all the C modes.

- **C Lydian** is in G major. **[IV]** and **[V]** in G major are **C** and **D**.

(notice how this fits with our discussion about Yoda's Theme)

**C Mixolydian** is in F major. **[IV]** and **[V]** are **Bb** and **C**.

- **C Dorian** is in Bb major. **[IV]** and **[V]** are **Eb** and **F**.

- **C Phrygian** is in Ab major. **[IV]** and **[V]** are **Db** and **Eb**.

Be careful about this, however. It works best in the modes where your mode's tonic chord is **[IV]** or **[V]** (that is, Lydian and Mixolydian). In the other modes, you should take care to emphasize your mode's tonic chord as much or more than the **[IV]** and **[V]**, otherwise you will sound like you are playing in your parent key rather than your mode.

### **STEP 3: There Is No Step 3**

You now know everything you need to start composing with modes. Good luck!