

The Modes

Before about 1600 the range of notes used in most European music was more limited than it is today. Nowadays we divide the octave into twelve semitones. If you look on a keyboard (or xylophone etc.) you notice that these are represented by seven white keys and five black keys. The black keys were necessary to develop the full range of major and minor music which came into being after 1600. The earlier you go before 1600, the less music used “black notes” and concentrated almost entirely on “white notes”. In medieval theory there were eight so-called modes, or “white-note scales” if you prefer. They are characterized by (a) having a specific final note (*finalis*); (b) using all the “white-notes” extending over a range of one octave upwards from the *finalis*. This range (or *ambitus*) might also be extended downwards by one note below the *finalis*; The four most important modes were:

1. The Dorian Mode: which finishes on the note D

FINALIS (OPTIONAL) MODE



3. The Phrygian Mode: which finishes on the note E

FINALIS (OPTIONAL) MODE



5. The Lydian Mode: which finishes on the note F

FINALIS (OPTIONAL) MODE



7. The Mixolydian Mode: which finishes on the note G

FINALIS (OPTIONAL) MODE



Each of these modes has a so-called “plagal” form in which the *finalis* remains the same, but the range of notes or *ambitus* is set a fourth (four notes) lower than in the *authentic* or original form of the mode. To show the relationship of the “plagal” form to the authentic form of the mode the prefix *Hypo-* is used. Compare carefully the modes shown below with those shown above.

2. The Hypodorian Mode: which finishes on the note D

FINALIS (OPTIONAL) MODE



4. The Hypophrygian Mode: which finishes on the note E

FINALIS (OPTIONAL) MODE



6. The Hypolydian Mode: which finishes on the note F

FINALIS (OPTIONAL) MODE



8. The Hypomixolydian Mode: which finishes on the note G

FINALIS (OPTIONAL) MODE

