

Using the Modes and Applying Them

Here we have an example of a solo in the first mode of the C major scale:

Moderate ♩ = 100

Since the first mode of the C major scale is C, the goal is to **emphasize** that first note in the solo. In this instance (and normally in any key), the first note (root) is often the most important note. Since this passage is a solo intended to be played over a C major chord, C is the main pitch.

We start out exploring the concept of modes by first trying to understand what's happening in the first mode of the key. Since C is the first note of the key of C major, then the first mode starts in C. This mode is called **Ionian**.

Another thing we have to understand that in any major diatonic scale, the I, IV and V chords are major, the ii, iii and vi chords are minor, and the vii_o is diminished. It is important to note this as it would determine the quality or tonality of the mode we are exploring. It would be easier for us to understand modes when we start with major keys. Even if we are in a minor key, if we can figure out this particular minor key's relative major, we can easily set up our playing to fit the key perfectly.

We can now try to explore more modes by placing emphasis on other chords or notes. It's good to start next with emphasizing the vi chord. Remember that placing emphasis on a note or chord will determine how a song is going to sound like. In this case, placing emphasis on the vi chord (Am in the key of C), we still remain to be in the key of C but it now has a more serious or somber quality.

To take note of the difference, let's play first this I-IV-V chord progression in the key of C:

Fast ♩ = 180

I **C** **F** **G** **C**

Tablature (T, A, B strings):

Measure	T	A	B
1	0	0	3
2	1	2	3
3	1	2	3
4	1	2	3
5	1	2	3
6	1	2	3
7	1	2	3
8	1	2	3
9	1	2	3
10	1	2	3
11	1	2	3
12	1	2	3
13	1	2	3
14	1	2	3
15	1	2	3
16	1	2	3
17	1	2	3
18	1	2	3
19	1	2	3
20	1	2	3
21	1	2	3
22	1	2	3
23	1	2	3
24	1	2	3
25	1	2	3
26	1	2	3
27	1	2	3
28	1	2	3
29	1	2	3
30	1	2	3
31	1	2	3
32	1	2	3
33	1	2	3
34	1	2	3
35	1	2	3
36	1	2	3
37	1	2	3
38	1	2	3
39	1	2	3
40	1	2	3
41	1	2	3
42	1	2	3
43	1	2	3
44	1	2	3
45	1	2	3
46	1	2	3
47	1	2	3
48	1	2	3
49	1	2	3
50	1	2	3
51	1	2	3
52	1	2	3
53	1	2	3
54	1	2	3
55	1	2	3
56	1	2	3
57	1	2	3
58	1	2	3
59	1	2	3
60	1	2	3

Compare the previous chord progression to this vi-IV-V chord progression:

Slow ♩ = 65

Am **F** **G** **Am**

Tablature (T, A, B strings):

Measure	T	A	B
1	0	0	0
2	1	2	0
3	1	2	0
4	1	2	0
5	1	2	0
6	1	2	0
7	1	2	0
8	1	2	0
9	1	2	0
10	1	2	0
11	1	2	0
12	1	2	0
13	1	2	0
14	1	2	0
15	1	2	0
16	1	2	0
17	1	2	0
18	1	2	0
19	1	2	0
20	1	2	0
21	1	2	0
22	1	2	0
23	1	2	0
24	1	2	0
25	1	2	0
26	1	2	0
27	1	2	0
28	1	2	0
29	1	2	0
30	1	2	0
31	1	2	0
32	1	2	0
33	1	2	0
34	1	2	0
35	1	2	0
36	1	2	0
37	1	2	0
38	1	2	0
39	1	2	0
40	1	2	0
41	1	2	0
42	1	2	0
43	1	2	0
44	1	2	0
45	1	2	0
46	1	2	0
47	1	2	0
48	1	2	0
49	1	2	0
50	1	2	0
51	1	2	0
52	1	2	0
53	1	2	0
54	1	2	0
55	1	2	0
56	1	2	0
57	1	2	0
58	1	2	0
59	1	2	0
60	1	2	0

Other than the change in tempo, were you able to notice how much of a difference replacing the I with the vi chord? The vi-IV-V chord progression has a remarkably darker sound than the happy and bright I-IV-V chord progression.

We can then try soloing over that chord progression and see how that looks like and hear how that sounds like:

Slow ♩ = 65

Am F G Am

1 3

5-8-7-5 8 6 5 6 5 7-5-7-5-4 7 4-5

7 5 4 7 5 8 7 5 7

As you would be able to observe from the solo, the note A is emphasized because of the Am chord being the most important chord in the passage. From a modal perspective, our starting note is the 6th note of the diatonic major scale in the key of C which is A. This mode is what is referred to in music theory as the **Aeolian** mode (the 6th mode in which the key of C starts with an A). This mode is also what's known as the relative minor.

An even more drastic one to start out with would be the iii chord in the key of C (or any key for that matter). The iii chord in C major is E minor. Try to figure out the kind of character the sound of a repetitive iii-IV chord progression by playing the example below:

Moderately Fast ♩ = 110

1

Em F

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

3

Em F

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2

2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 2 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3 3

0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 0 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 1

We can then try working on a solo for the same chord progression such as this example below:

Moderately Fast ♩ = 110

The image displays a musical score for the song "The Sound of Silence" by Simon & Garfunkel. It includes guitar and bass parts with tablature and chord diagrams.

Chord Diagrams:

- Em (E minor):** A diagram showing the E minor chord shape on the guitar fretboard, with fingers on the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th strings at the 2nd fret.
- F (F major):** A diagram showing the F major chord shape on the guitar fretboard, with fingers on the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd strings at the 1st fret.

Section 1 (Measures 1-4):

- Guitar:** Starts with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody consists of eighth notes: B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The bass line consists of eighth notes: B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The guitar part is marked with a "6" (sixteenth notes) and a "3" (triplets).
- Bass:** Starts with a bass clef. The bass line consists of eighth notes: B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The guitar part is marked with a "6" (sixteenth notes) and a "3" (triplets).

Section 2 (Measures 5-8):

- Guitar:** Continues the melody with eighth notes: B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The bass line consists of eighth notes: B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The guitar part is marked with a "6" (sixteenth notes) and a "3" (triplets).
- Bass:** Continues the bass line with eighth notes: B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The guitar part is marked with a "6" (sixteenth notes) and a "3" (triplets).

Section 3 (Measures 9-12):

- Guitar:** Continues the melody with eighth notes: B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The bass line consists of eighth notes: B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The guitar part is marked with a "6" (sixteenth notes) and a "3" (triplets).
- Bass:** Continues the bass line with eighth notes: B2, A2, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The guitar part is marked with a "6" (sixteenth notes) and a "3" (triplets).

We're emphasizing the note E and the chord Em in the key of C at this point. Because of the different sequence of intervals between the notes when you start the C major scale at E (3rd scale degree), it has an entirely different sound from that of the mode that starts in C (1st scale degree). When you start a major scale at the 3rd scale degree, that mode is called **Phrygian**. This particular mode has that Spanish kind of sound courtesy of the half step between E and F. If we didn't play that half step, it loses its distinct quality.

Even though we're playing all of the modes given above, you'll notice that as you go over these, we have been playing only in the key of C. Remember that in playing modes, the shift of emphasis from the root note (C) to another is what's important. We still remain in the same key yet we're coaxing out other kinds of sounds by using modes. We can apply modes in both a chord progression sense and in a melodic/improvisational sense.

Whenever we're writing or learning how to play a piece of music, always determine what is the key and then figure out what mode is in focus. In this way we can develop and play a fitting solo or melody line. If you get confused, remember to always refer back to the major key of the mode you are currently playing in order to figure things out easier.