

In the Mood for Modes

Using the modes working from improvisation to composition.

*You'll never plow a field by turning it over in your mind.
- Irish saying*

The Modes

Ionian - the equivalent of the diatonic major scale, by far the most used and most comfortable to our modern ears.

Dorian - Ritualistic, grave, pensive, mostly minor with a hopeful lilt. One of Plato's favorites, the notes of which, "fittingly imitate the utterances and accents of a brave man who is engaged in warfare."

Phrygian - Also a favorite of Plato suitable "for a man engaged in works of peace."

Lydian - a diatonic scale with the raised fourth, more major than major. It becomes impish, weird, eccentric and as Plato warned, "prone to sloth and drunkenness."

Mixolydian - a major scale with a flat tire (lowered seventh degree), this mode is happy, humorous, fun, and energetic. Old Time tunes and songs often use this mode.

Aeolian - a powerful, melancholic, poetic mode familiar to us as the natural minor scale.

Locrian - this unstable mode is rarely used... discussion may ensue.

The Basics... Question/Answer improvisation.

This basic creative tool is very effective with students of all ages as a composition tool. This session will take us from improvisation to composition using rhythm and melody, specifically the diatonic modes.

Introduce the Modes

- Find each mode on the Orff instruments or simply demonstrate each one from the piano.
- Discuss each mode, what it sounds like, what its distinct characteristics are.
- Let the class pick one.

Listen to the mode.

- Find the chosen mode on the instruments.
- Play one half note on each note, ascending.
- Play one half note on each note, descending.
- Change to quarter notes, then eighth notes.

Review Question/Answer.

Aim - Build confidence with rhythmic and melodic improvisation using the Question/Answer format.

- Give the class a question using body percussion; all answer.
 - » Make sure everyone ends at the strong beat of the last measure. "Final Point."
 - » Make sure the answers are not an exact imitation of the question.
 - » Make sure the answers are related to the question.
- Ask who wants to give the teacher a question?
- All get a partner, question answer with each other.
- Discover:
 - » The cadence point (The Final Point) on the last strong beat of the answer.
 - » The absence of a cadence point (Final Point) in the question (think CHA, CHA, CHA).
 - » The commonality or shared ideas between the question and answer. The answer should have common elements with the question.
 - » The question and answer phrases are the same length.
- Give the class a question using an Orff instrument (or the piano);
 - » Make sure everyone ends at the strong beat of the last measure *on THE TONIC*.
 - » Make sure the melodic answers are not an exact imitation of the question.
 - » Make sure the melodic answers are related to the question.
- All get a partner, question answer with each other.
- Discover:
 - » The cadence point (The Final Point) on the last strong beat of the answer on the Tonic note.
 - » The absence of a cadence point (Final Point) in the question. Discover the "tenor" note or "dominant," a great place to end the question (but not a requirement).
 - » The commonality or shared ideas between the question and answer. The answer should have common elements with the question.
 - » The question and answer phrases are the same length.

Compose!

- Establish 4/4 meter and phrase length. A good place to start is two measures of 4/4, a total of eight beats for the question (antecedent) phrase and the answer (consequent) phrase.
- Class gets to improvise the phrase length. Don't worry too much about endings, only phrase length.
- Ask students to share. Pick one phrase as the question. Fix and adjust it (aha! Composition!)
- Class gets to improvise the answer phrase. (Everyone plays the question in unison, then answers. Yep, it's pretty noisy.... Go as long as you can stand it. Make 'em play quietly or! Do this whole exercise with fingers only! Or the question with mallets, the answer with fingers.)
- Ask students to share.
- Pick one answer phrase that works.
- Play the new melody!

Extensions

- Orchestrate the new melody for the students. (Use those great new skills you learned in Level 2 Orff Basic!)
- Ask students to experiment with bordun accompaniments and various ostinatos, both rhythmic and melodic to create an accompaniment.
- Here's an example from Middle Schoolers in Dallas, Texas under the expert guidance of Chris Judah-Lauder

Dorian in Five

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Chris Judah-Lauder

The musical score is for 'Dorian in Five' in 5/4 time, composed by Chris Judah-Lauder. It is divided into four systems of staves. The first system (measures 1-8) includes staves for SX (Soprano Xylophone), AX (Alto Xylophone), BX (Bass Xylophone), Snare Drum, and CBB (Cymbal/Bell). A circled 'A' is above the first measure. The second system (measures 5-8) includes SX, AX, BX, Sn. Dr., and CBB, ending with a 'Fine' marking. The third system (measures 9-12) is an 'Interlude' for BX and Sn. Dr. The fourth system (measures 13-16) includes SG (Soprano Gong), SR (Soprano Rattles), BX, and Sn. Dr., ending with a 'D.C. al Fine' marking. A circled 'B' is above the first measure of this system.

Advantages to Composition

Students OWN this. They become an integral part of their own learning process. This activity was often the ONE thing they remembered about music class first, when asked.

I often recorded the final effort and passed out a copy on a 5-minute cassette tape as a souvenir. We would also talk about publishing, recording, copyrights, sharing, and whatever else came up in the group discussion.

Note to workshop participants:

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