



Medieval Modes & Movement for Recorders & Orff Instruments

TMEA Conference 2026 ~ Mary Knysh (www.rhythmicconnections.com)

Learn a sequential, easy and accessible approach for teaching Medieval modes which engages students in self-directed learning resulting in composition, choreography, documentation, reflection, revision, performance, and evaluation. Explore the unique, social, emotional, expressive aspects of medieval modes using barred instruments, small and large percussion, ukuleles, recorders, and boomwhackers.

Here is a mode acronym that my mother taught me: ***I Don't Particularly Like Many Arctic Lands***
(Ionian Dorian Phrygian Lydian Mixolydian Aeolian Locrian)

Learning Objectives:

- Explore Medieval modes through brain-based learning using movement, rhythm, and improvisation.
- Create I/V ostinato patterns and perform expressive sound stories (solos).
- Choreograph dances and reflect on each mode's unique mood.

Focus Area:

- **Mode and Mood Exploration:** Participants explore the emotional quality of each mode through sound, movement, and improvisation—deepening musical understanding and expressive connection.
- **Brain-Based, Whole-Body Learning:** The session engages body, mind, and emotion through active, playful learning—supporting cognitive development, coordination, and joyful participation.
- **Creative Form Building:** Participants create their own short pieces and dances, giving them ownership of the learning process and reinforcing musical structure and expression.

Teaching Process:

This process is based on sequential, student-centered activities developed from years of classroom experience as a teaching artist and Orff Schulwerk clinician. Activities are grounded in brain-based learning, improvisation, and whole-group collaboration.

Introduction to Modes (as moods)

Explain how early instruments were limited to a C diatonic scale and how different modes were created by starting the scale on different notes.

Modes to explore

Ionian	(<u>C</u> D E F <u>G</u> A B C)
Dorian	(<u>D</u> E F G <u>A</u> B C D)
Phrygian	(<u>E</u> F G A <u>B</u> C D E)
Lydian	(<u>F</u> G A B <u>C</u> D E F)
Mixolydian	(<u>G</u> A B C <u>D</u> E F G)
Aeolian	(<u>A</u> B C D <u>E</u> F G A)
Locrian	(<u>B</u> C D E <u>F</u> G A B)



Early instruments often had a limited selection and range of notes that could be played, much like only playing the white keys of a piano (without any of the black, accidental keys). Early musicians created a variety of modes (I like to think of them as moods) by beginning a scale on different notes. The following activities grew out of many years working as a teaching artist in Orff music classrooms and as an Orff Schulwerk clinician. The Orff xylophones are perfectly suited for this activity. I use pianos, mbiras, and several other pitched percussion instruments that offer a basic C diatonic scale. (C D E F G A B C)

Activity Outline:

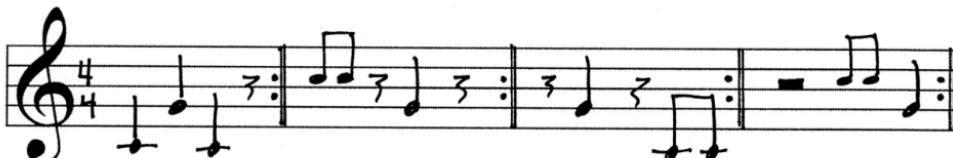
Choose a Mode - Create Ostinato with Root (I) and Fifth (V)

The leader chooses a mode to work with, for example Ionian mode. Each player around the circle will create an ostinato (short repeating pattern) out of only two notes, the Root of the mode (in this case C), and the Fifth of the mode (in this case G). To reach the Fifth of each mode you will count five steps from the Root or first note. I have underlined the Root and Fifth in the examples above.

Creating Ostinato with C and G (I & V)

The leader begins a short repeating pattern (ostinato) that includes *only* the notes C and G, making sure to leave rests, or moments of silence, in the pattern. It is important that all players lock into the steady pulse set by player 1.

Sample 1: one measure pattern (4 beats)



Sample 2: two measure pattern (8 beats)



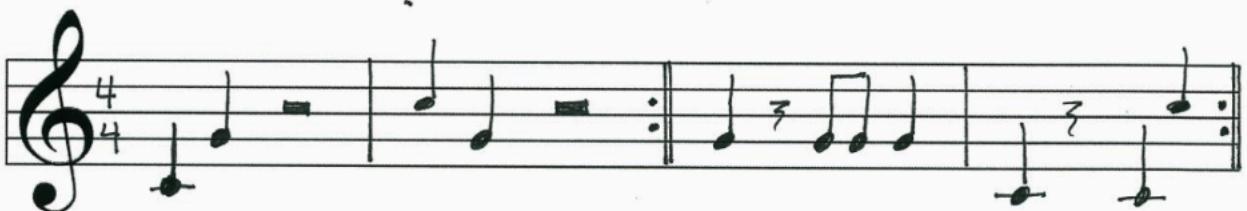
The next player creates an Ostinato

The leader looks at the person on their right and visually invites them to create their own ostinato using only the C and G notes. It works very well if each player allows a good balance of sound and silence in their patterns. Patterns interlock when one person plays in the silence of another person's pattern.

Interlocking ostinato patterns

Pattern 1

Pattern 2



Players add their own patterns

One by one, on cue, each player adds their own repeating pattern containing only the notes C and G.

All in, leader plays a solo

When each player in the circle has joined in with their repeating rhythmic part, the leader models a solo played in the Ionian mode (making use of ALL of the notes in the Ionian scale, (see above). It is a good idea to invite players to begin and end their solo on the first note of the scale.

Here is a sample

Here is a sample solo:



When solo is done, create a new I/V ostinato

When the leader's solo is finished, the leader creates a new pattern using only the I and V notes of the mode.

Moving Solos

One by one, each player in the circle has the opportunity to play a solo over the I - V group patterns. When player completes solo, he/she then creates a new ostinato and sends the solo to the next player. Solos should be kept short, perhaps one minute at most, so that all in the circle have the opportunity to solo. When each player has had the chance to solo, the leader cues the group to end.

Medieval Mode Dance

Movement Integration – Medieval Mode Dance

Room Setup:

Instruments in the center in a tight circle configuration, dancers in a circle around the musicians.

Teach Choreography:

- Part A: Half Grapevine R and L, flat hands connected and touching at shoulder height.
- Part B: Full Grapevine R for 8 counts.
- Part C: Step IN 4 counts (flutter hands/ scarves), Step OUT 4 counts (end with double clap to cue for the next solo/sound story to begin).

Part A

GRAPEVINE STEP R to side	2 L in front	3 R to side	4 L close	1 L to side	2 R in front	3 L to side	4 R close
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Part B

GRAPEVINE STEP to the right	2	3	4	5	6	7	8 CLOSE
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Part C

STEP IN	2	3	4 Flutter hands	STEP OUT	2	3	4 CLAP 2 X
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Part D – Group-Created Movement Phrase.

Each group creates their own Part D:

- Break into smaller groups of 4 to 8 participants.
- Each group creates a unique **8-count movement phrase**.
- Encourage a variety of expressive movement options.

Creative Prompts for Movement Creation:

- **Word Wall Inspiration:** Pick movement words like *sway, pop, glide, swirl*.
- **Mirror & Transform:** Copy a friend's move, then change level, speed, or shape.
- **Body Shapes:** Use straight, curved, twisted, or angular forms.
- **Sound-to-Movement:** Move in response to music; choose favorite motions.
- **Small Group Collaboration:** Duos or trios choreograph call-and-response or canon.
- **Props & Scarves:** Use materials to inspire flowing or sharp movement ideas.

Culminating Activity – Full Performance

Bring it all together with a complete performance combining **music and movement**:

- Dancers perform the full **ABCDA**BCD dance form
 - A = Half Grapevine
 - B = Full Grapevine
 - C = Step In/Out + Clap cue
 - D = Original student-created movement
- Musicians perform layered **I/V ostinati** in the chosen mode
- One by one, musicians take **modal solos/sound stories**, cued by the dancers' double clap
- Each section of the dance signals a new phase of music and movement

This joyful, participant-centered finale celebrates creativity, collaboration, and expressive learning through the integration of medieval modes, instrumental improvisation, and original movement composition.

As a lifelong teaching artist, Orff Schulwerk clinician, and founder of Rhythmic Connections, I bring decades of experience working across diverse communities, both nationally and internationally. My expertise lies in brain-based, whole-body music learning that emphasizes improvisation, inclusion, and cultural responsiveness. Through my work with Music for People, international residencies, and collaborations with educators and community groups, I have facilitated music-making that honors multiple traditions and perspectives.

My pedagogical approach is rooted in creating equitable access to music education by integrating movement, rhythm, voice, and instrumental play in ways that affirm different learning styles and cultural expressions. This session on Medieval Modes reflects that commitment by blending historical content with creative improvisation and participant ownership, allowing learners to experience cultural and musical traditions in ways that are inclusive, joyful, and deeply human.

Each student at an instrument plays a sound story in the mode- Beginning and ending on the home note (root) of the mode

- IONIAN mode: ostinato patterns are created with the I and V notes of the mode- C & G
- DORIAN mode: ostinato patterns with D & A (D is home base for solos)
- PHRYGIAN mode: ostinato patterns with E & B (E is home base for solos)
- LYDIAN mode: ostinato patterns with F & C (F is home base for solos)
- MIXOLYDIAN mode: ostinato patterns with G & D (G is home base for solos)
- AEOLIAN mode: ostinato patterns with A & E (A is home base for solos)
- LOCRIAN mode: ostinato patterns with B & F (B is home base for solos)

Generate movement words on a word wall with the group

- Break into four groups and each group creates a movement section
- Create a dance form that includes all four movement sequences A B C D
- Decide on a form for these parts
- Perhaps ~ A B A C A D

Ideas for Lesson Extensions

- Begin and end with the Root of the mode

Remind players that the effect of the modes (or the mood) can be much stronger if they begin and end with the Root note (first note) of the mode.

- Adjust Ostinato volume to support the solos

Some instruments are much quieter just as some player's solos may be much quieter. Remind the group to listen closely and to continually adjust their volume level in order to remain quieter than and in support of the various soloists.

- Notice the *color* notes

As players explore a variety of modes in this activity, invite them to notice the notes that have color or personality. As players explore the other modes, invite them to notice and *lean into* or pay attention to, the notes that are unexpected or surprising to them.

Color notes are underlined below:

Dorian (D E F G A B C D)

Mixolydian (G A B C D E F G)

Aeolian (A B C D E F G A)

- Talk about the mood of each mode after activity

Invite players to talk about what they noticed as they explored each new mode. They may notice that the Dorian mode has a darker feel to it, or they may describe it in another way. They may notice the happy and bright feel of the Ionian mode. These conversations will help to enhance the level of listening and learning that can take place in this activity.

QR Code for Slide Presentation:



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Includes: Lesson Plan Outlines, Music Scores, Play Along Tracks



Rhythmic Connections
color notes
G F C
color notes
Aeolian-color-C-G
Mixolydian-color-F
Dorian-color-F-C



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