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Practical Modes

Ionian

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Roman Numerals

Let's start by tackling the functionality of Roman numerals. As we discovered in lesson 1 of unit 1, the Ionian formula consists of TTSTTTS starting on the root note. This combination of 7 notes is what makes the Ionian the Ionian. Below is how we would number these notes (1 will always be the root note)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Tone Tone Semitone Tone Tone Tone Semitone

Each note in this scale can be translated into its own particular chord. In this case, the notes making up each chord will also be from the Ionian. When referring to these chords, whilst verbally we may still refer to them as "one chord, two-chord" etc, they will actually be written in Roman numerals (as shown below in red).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Tone Tone Semitone Tone Tone Tone Semitone
I ii iii IV V vi vii

As you can see, some of these numerals are in lower case and some are upper case. **Upper case means**

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Now that we've covered the scale aspect of Ionian, let's take a look at how to create chords within the Ionian mode. This is the often forgotten step when we first start looking at modes, and honestly, should be the most important!

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major and lower case means minor (or anything else).

Major or Minor?

Each triad consists of three notes, using every other note of the scale from the note you are starting on. This means whether each chord is major, minor (or anything else) is already determined. In other words, **each numeral has already been assigned its own function within the Ionian.** For example – chord ii (two) of the Ionian is always minor. This means that the seven Ionian chords will always go like this:

T	T	S	T	T	S	T
Major	Minor	Minor	Major	Major	Minor	Dim
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii

Let's take that concept and apply it to a particular key, for example:

C IONIAN

C	D	E	F	G	A	G#
Major	Minor	Minor	Major	Major	Minor	Dim
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii

E IONIAN

E	F#	G#	A	B	C#	D#
Major	Minor	Minor	Major	Major	Minor	Dim
I	ii	iii	IV	V	vi	vii

As you can see, using the Ionian in any key always plays the same role. It will treat whatever key you choose with the same harmonic structure.

Each Roman numeral will have a particular feel to it in the context of the Ionian. For example – If we have a sequence that goes ii, V, I, it doesn't matter what key we are in, I will always feel satisfied as it is our home chord. Equally, if we progressed to an IV, that will feel like it's leading somewhere, regardless of whether IV is an F or a B. **The combination of chords and notes in the Ionian is what allows us to identify with a key and a feeling. NOT the specific chord letter.**

How Do I Use This To Compose?

The Ionian has a satisfying feel to it and plays a huge role in popular music. When it comes to Pop, Rock, Motown, Dance, etc, most of what we hear will be based on the Ionian or the Aeolian (another mode which we will be covering). It certainly has a likability and a sensibility to it and it plays a very important role in composing the music everyone loves.

Try writing a few sequences and have fun with it! **Try to really think about how each chord feels based on its relationship to the other chords.** Does it feel like it's leading somewhere? Does it feel sad? Does it feel unresolved? Try your sequence in different keys and ask yourself if it still has a similar effect as the key you originally tried it in.

Top tips

🔥 As an exercise, try composing your own chord sequence based on the Ionian, using Roman numerals. Try writing down a sequence of Roman numerals first, then choose a key and try playing through your sequence.

🔥 For example - let's try I - V - vi - IV. If we chose to play our sequence in the key of C Ionian (C Major) this sequence would go C - G - A minor - F.

🔥 If we tried that same sequence of chords but this time in the key of F Ionian, we would get F - C - D minor - Bb.

🔥 Importantly, even though the keys are different, the progression would have the same sound and feel - test it for yourself!



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