

Mode is a Chord Symbol: An Alternate History of the Lydian Chromatic Concept

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Abstract:

In 1959, George Russell wrote, “The Lydian scale is the sound of its tonic major chord.” With this single gesture, he opened a potential to merge the concepts of mode, chord, and key. But rather than continue on to say, “this chord is a Lydian chord,” he left chord symbols untouched, kept his focus at the key level, and built a theory that subsumed tonal function into the sound of the Lydian mode. Russell, of course, had practical constraints—to tamper with chord symbols would be to alienate his theory from the repertoire and community it served. But what if he had indeed proposed a “Lydian” chord, and had gotten away with it? This paper sketches the history of that path not taken, from the infamous “diminished minor” versus “minor flat-5” debate, to the departure from a triadic construction of chords, to the adoption of a rootless “chromatic polymodality” as key and chord signatures. Russell’s is a theory of possibility and permission—it offers an improvisational freedom, while providing enough formal structure to satisfy our rational minds, and a convincing link to a tradition we trust. This is the creative spirit of theorizing, and Russell gave us mode as a way in.

Handouts:

From Mark Levine, *The Jazz Theory Book*, Sher Music Co., 1995:

1. **Major Scale Harmony Chart** (Fig. 3-3)

From Oliver Hedgerow, *Chromatic Polymodality*, Full Color Sound Publishing, 1995:

2. **Extended Triads and Parent Modes Chart** (Fig. 3-3)
3. **Polymodality Chart** (Fig 5-1)

From George Russell, *The Lydian Chromatic Concept of Tonal Organization*, Concept Publishing Co., 1959:

4. **Chord Categories and Scale Degrees Chart** (Insert)
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Figure 3-3

Major Scale Harmony

Figure 3-3 displays eight staves of music, each representing a different mode of the major scale. The staves are numbered I through VII, and the modes are labeled on the right. The chord symbols and annotations are as follows:

- Staff I (Ionian):** Chord symbol $C\Delta$. Annotation: "avoid" note (4th).
- Staff II (Dorian):** Chord symbol $D-7$.
- Staff III (Phrygian):** Chord symbol $E\text{sus}^b9$.
- Staff IV (Lydian):** Chord symbol $F\Delta^{\#4}$. Annotation: $\#4$.
- Staff V (Mixolydian):** Chord symbol $G7$. Annotation: "avoid" note (11th).
- Staff VI (Aeolian):** Chord symbol $A-^b6$.
- Staff VII (Locrian):** Chord symbol $B\emptyset$. Annotation: "avoid" note ($b9$, $b5$).
- Staff V (Mixolydian):** Chord symbol $G\text{sus}$. Annotation: no "avoid" note (11th).

FIG. 3-3

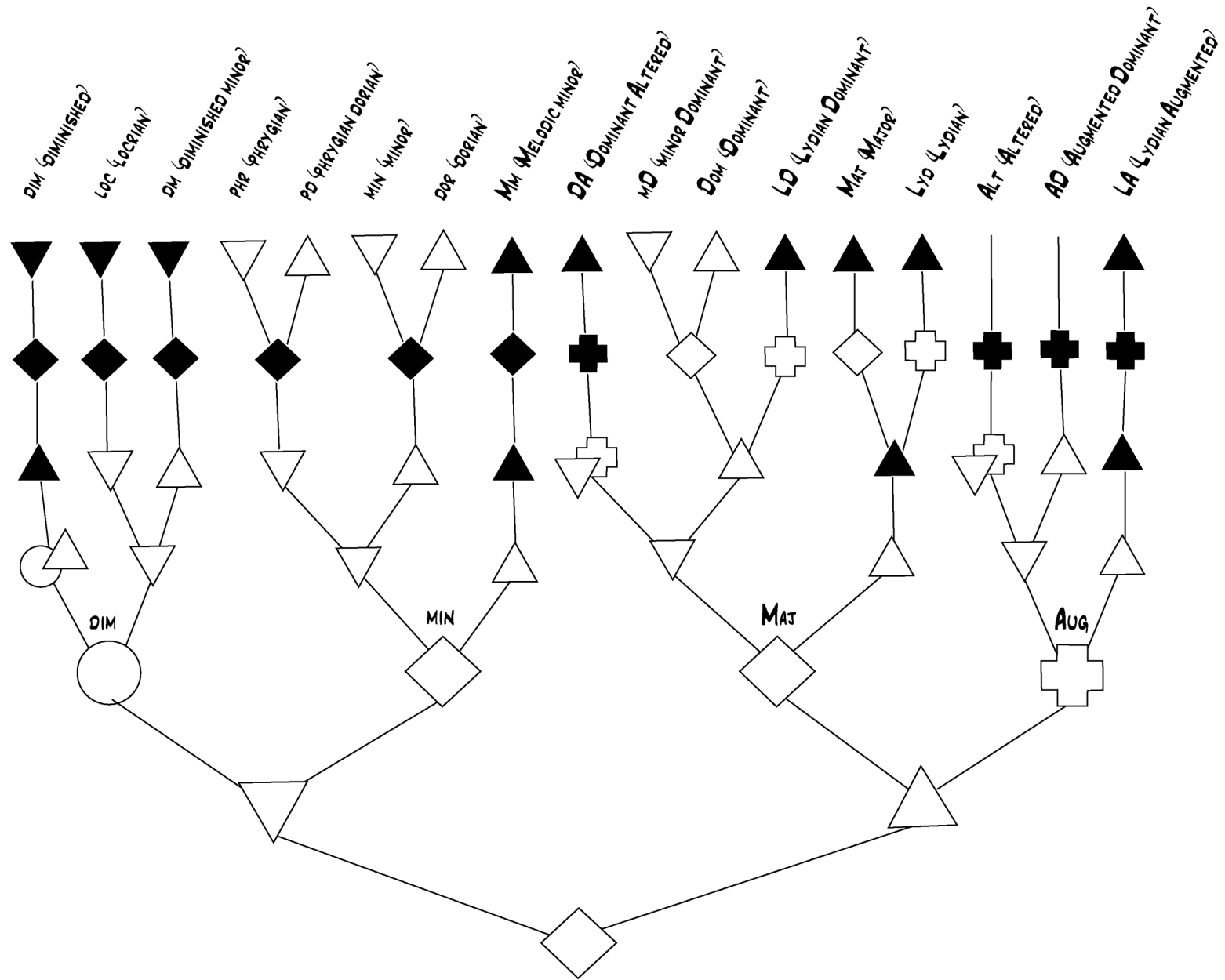
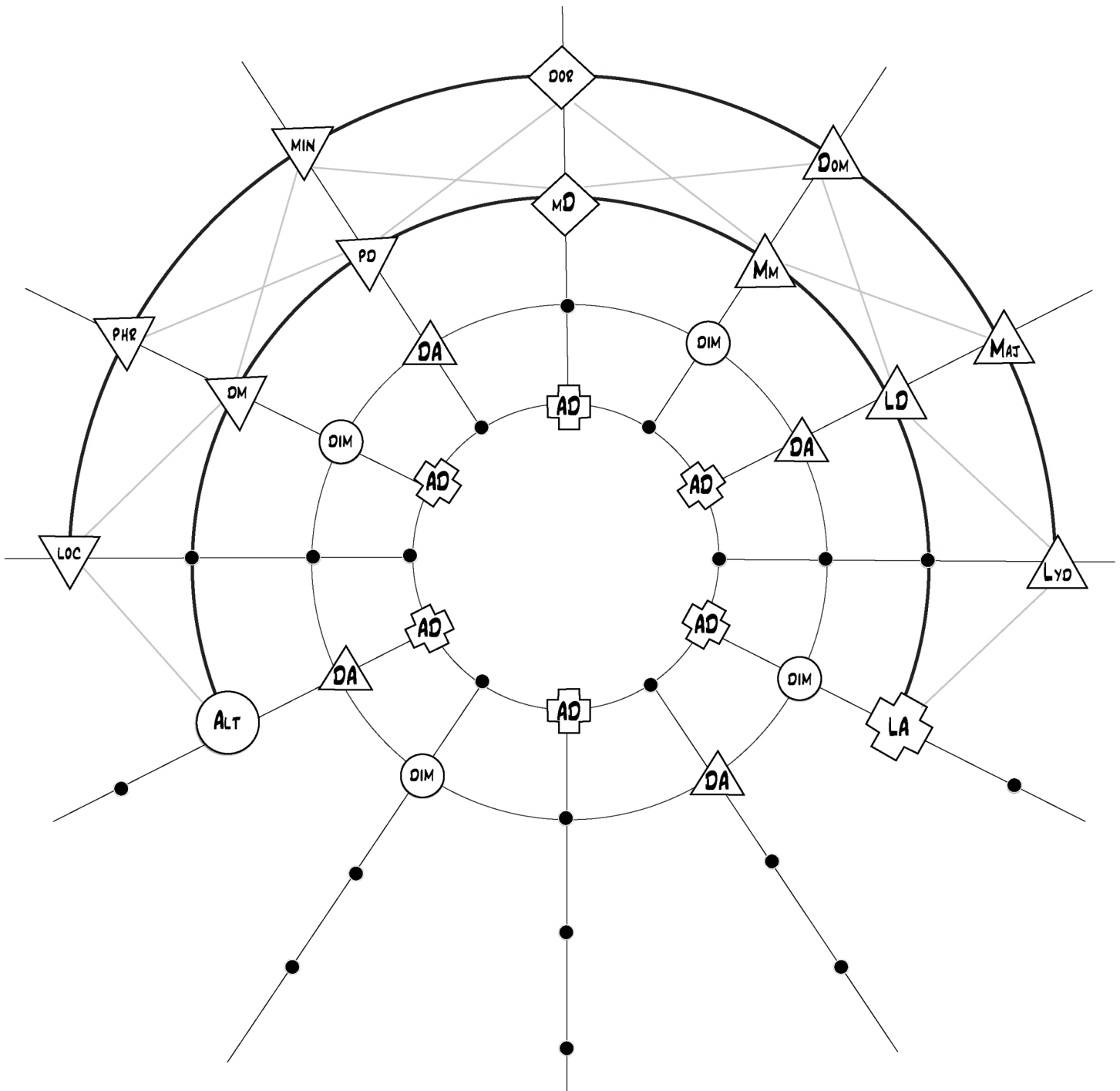


Fig. 5-1



GEORGE RUSSELL'S LYDIAN CHROMATIC CONCEPT OF TONAL ORGANIZATION FOR IMPROVISATION

LYDIAN CHROMATIC SCALE DEGREES

I - II II - III III IV +IV V +V VI -VII VII

THE SIX SCALES OF THE LYDIAN CHROMATIC SCALE AND THE CHORDS THAT ARE PRODUCED ON THEIR SCALE DEGREES

LYDIAN SCALE AND CHORDS PRODUCED ON ITS SCALE DEGREES

MAJ. TRIAD	SEVENTH	MINOR +5	MIN. SEV. b5	INVERSIONS	MIN. TRIAD	ELEVENTH b9
MAJ. SIXTH	NINTH	(MAJ. 3B)	(MIN. 6B)	OF	MIN. SIXTH	(MIN. 9B)
MAJ. SEVENTH	ELEVENTH	INVERSIONS	SEV. b9 +11	MODAL TONIC	MIN. SEV.	
MAJ. SEV. +11	THIRTEENTH	MODAL TONIC	(MAJ. b5B)	I CHORDS	MIN. NINTH	SEV. b9th
		I CHORDS				
I	II	III	+IV	V	VI	VII

LYDIAN AUGMENTED SCALE AND CHORDS PRODUCED ON ITS SCALE DEGREES

AUG. MAJ. TRIAD	SEV. b5 OR +11	INVERSIONS	MIN. SEV. b5th	SEV. +5th	MIN. +7	ELEV. b9th
AUG. MAJ. SEV.	NINTH	"	(MIN. 6B)	SEV. +5th, b9th	MIN. 9th +7th	(MIN. +7B)
AUG. MAJ. NINTH	THIRTEENTH	"	MODAL TONIC	NINTH +11	SEV. +9th +5th	SEV. b9
		I CHORDS	THIRTEENTH +11	(MIN. +7B)	SEV. b9, b5th	SEV. +9
I	II	III	+IV	+V	VI	VII

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LYDIAN DIMINISHED SCALE AND CHORDS PRODUCED ON ITS SCALE DEGREES

DIM. MAJ. TRIAD	SEVENTH b9	INVERSIONS	DIMINISHED	DIM. MAJ.	MIN. SEV. b5	SEV. +9
DIM. MAJ. TETRACHORD	ELEVENTH b9	OF	TETRACHORD	(5B)	MIN. NINTH b5	SEV. +5
DIM. MAJ. SEVENTH	THIRTEENTH b9	MODAL TONIC				SEV. b9
DIM. MAJ. NINTH		I CHORDS				SEV. b9 +5
I	II	-III	+IV	V	VI	VII

AUXILIARY DIMINISHED SCALE AND CHORDS PRODUCED ON ITS SCALE DEGREES

DIM. MAJ. TRIAD	SEV. b9	INVERSIONS	SEV. b9	INVERSIONS	SEV. b9	MIN. SIXTH +5	SEV. b9
DIM. MAJ. TETRACHORD	SEV. +9	OF	SEV. +9	OF	SEV. +9	INVERSIONS	SEV. +9
DIM. MAJ. SEVENTH	SEV. b5	MODAL TONIC	SEV. b5	MODAL TONIC	SEV. b5	OF	SEV. b5
DIM. MAJ. NINTH	SEV. +11	I CHORDS	SEV. +11	I CHORDS	SEV. +11	MODAL TONIC	SEV. +11
DIM. MAJ. 9th, b13th	SEV. b9, b5				SEV. b9, b5	I CHORDS	SEV. b9, b5
I	II	-III	IV	+IV	+V	VI	VII

AUXILIARY AUGMENTED SCALE AND CHORDS PRODUCED ON ITS SCALE DEGREES

AUG. MAJ. TRIAD	SEVENTH +5	INVERSIONS	SEVENTH +5	INVERSIONS	SEVENTH +5
	NINTH +11	OF	NINTH +11	OF	NINTH +11
	SEVENTH b5	MODAL TONIC	SEVENTH b5	MODAL TONIC	SEVENTH b5
		I CHORDS		I CHORDS	
I	II	III	+IV	+V	-VII

AUXILIARY DIMINISHED BLUES SCALE AND CHORDS PRODUCED ON ITS SCALE DEGREES

MAJ. TRIAD	INVERSIONS	MIN. SEV. b5	INVERSIONS	MIN. TRIAD
MAJ. SIXTH	OF	SEV. b9 +11	OF	MIN. SIXTH
MAJ. 13th, b9	MODAL TONIC		MODAL TONIC	MIN. SEVENTH
	I CHORDS		I CHORDS	
I	-II -III	III	+IV	V
				VI
				-VII

CHORD CATEGORIES AND THE SCALE DEGREES UPON WHICH THEY RESIDE IN A LYDIAN CHROMATIC SCALE

CHORD CATEGORIES

SCALE DEGREES

MAJOR AND ALTERED MAJOR CHORDS

I

MINOR AND ALTERED MINOR CHORDS

VI, +IV

SEVENTH AND ALTERED SEV. CHORDS
(SEVENTH bNINTH CHORDS)

II, +V, VII
(II, +V, VII, +IV)

MINOR SEV. b5, (MIN. 6B) CHORD

+IV, VI

SEVENTH +5 (MINOR +7B) CHORD

+V, VII, II

ELEVENTH b9, (MINOR 9B) CHORD

VII, II

MINOR +5 (MAJOR 3B) CHORD

III