

IMPROVISATION

Lesson 2

Improvisation: From Minor Pentatonic Scale to Aeolian Mode

In our last lesson, we created a minor pentatonic tune through visual-auditory associations. This lesson allows your students to explore their musical creativity through improvisation by developing ideas for melodic lines using the Aeolian mode. Students will gain an aural and theoretical understanding of the Aeolian mode through improvisation and analysis of a minor key Reggae groove in our [Notation Mixer](#).

The clip link to this lesson features Berklee College of Music students as they talk about what improvisation means to them. For additional resources on improvisation, check out our [Improvisation Unit](#) in our PULSE Study Room by requesting a [demo account](#).

Core Arts Standards:

CREATING

Common Anchor #1 – Imagine – Generate musical ideas for various purposes and contexts

- **MU:Cr1.1.C.1a** - Describe how sounds and short musical ideas can be used to represent personal experiences, moods, visual images, and/or storylines.

Common Anchor #2 – Plan and Make – Select and develop musical ideas for defined purposes and contexts

- **MU:Cr2.1.C.1a** – Assemble and organize sounds or short musical ideas to create initial expressions of selected experiences, moods, images, or storylines
- **MU:Cr2.1.C.1b** – Identify and describe the development of sounds or short musical ideas in drafts of music within simple forms (such as one-part, cyclical, or binary).

Common Anchor #3 – Evaluate and Refine – Evaluate and refine selected musical ideas to create musical work that meets appropriate criteria

- **MU:Cr3.1.C.1a** – Identify, describe, and apply teacher-provided criteria to assess and refine the technical and expressive aspects of evolving drafts leading to final versions.

Present – Share creative musical work that conveys intent, demonstrates craftsmanship, and exhibits originality

- **MU:Cr3.2.C.1a** – Share music through the use of notation, performance, or technology, and demonstrate how the elements of music have been employed to realize expressive intent.

**Composition/Theory Strand*

<http://www.nafme.org/wp-content/files/2014/11/2014-Music-Standards-Composition-Theory-Strand.pdf>

Objective:

Students will gain an aural and theoretical understanding of the Aeolian mode through improvisation and analysis.

Materials:

- PULSE improvisation video
- PULSE [minor pentatonic](#) and Aeolian scale material
- Preferred instrument

Classroom/rehearsal room settings:

- Students working alone or in pairs
- Students in small groups using classroom instruments
- Students in a variety of ensemble settings (traditional or jazz band; choral; orchestra; string ensemble; modern band — guitar, piano, bass, drums; etc.)
- Students working with a private instructor

Instructional Activity Objectives:**1. Review Lesson 1**

After watching the improvisation video above students will:

- Reflect upon their composition process in [Lesson 1](#) and discuss how their perception of improvisation and musical expression has progressed.
- Review the minor pentatonic scale.

2. Review "Mode"

What is a mode?

- Modes have seven notes, and are built using a pattern of half steps and whole steps, just like the major and minor scales. Each mode has a "characteristic note," a note which sets it apart from the other modes. Musicians often use the major scale as the starting point when talking about a mode, because each mode starts on one of the scale degrees of the major scale. We will use the C major scale (key of C) as the starting point for each mode, but you can build modes in any major scale.

C MAJOR SCALE



3. Introduce the Aeolian Mode

The Aeolian mode, or natural minor scale, is used in various styles of music and is a great way to introduce modal improvisation and tonality. Let's take a look at what makes the Aeolian mode so unique.

The Aeolian mode starts on the sixth scale degree of the major scale, and is also known as the natural minor scale. The Aeolian mode is built using the following pattern of steps: W H W W H W W (whole step, half step, whole step, whole step, half step, whole step, whole step).

4. Introduce the A Aeolian Mode as the relative minor of C Ionian

C MAJOR SCALE

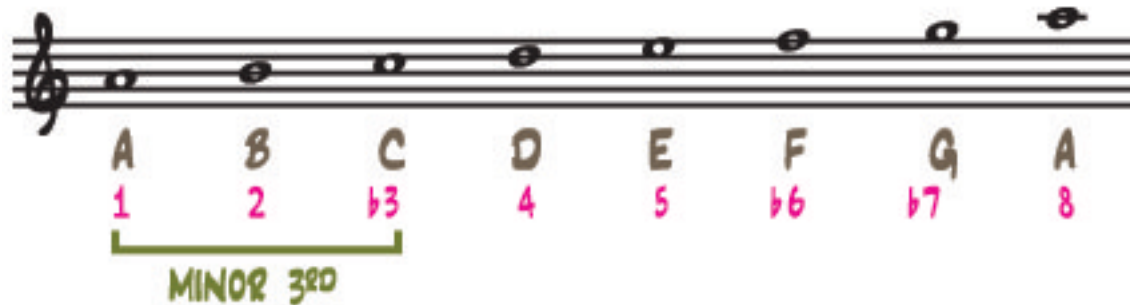


A Aeolian Mode



The Aeolian mode is a minor mode because it has a minor third between the first and the third degrees of the mode.

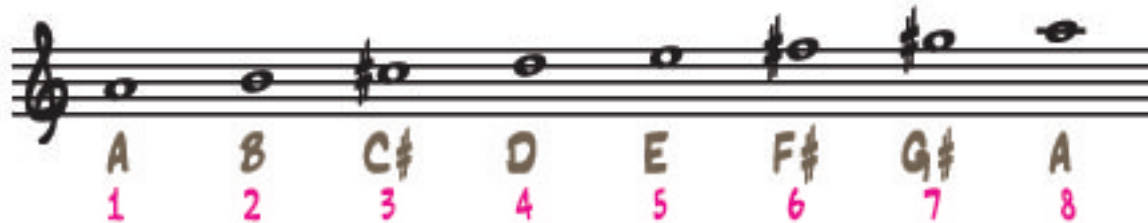
A Aeolian Mode



5. Introduce the A Aeolian Mode as the parallel minor of A Ionian

Compared to the major scale of the same key (parallel minor), the Aeolian mode has three notes lowered by a half step: the third, sixth, and seventh scale degrees (a number based on where the note falls in the scale) of the major scale or Ionian mode.

A Major Scale



A Aeolian Mode



6. Improvise over a G Aeolian Mode groove

View the [full recording](#) of the G Aeolian Reggae groove in our Notation Mixer to complete steps 1-4.

[Download](#) the sheet music to the G Aeolian Reggae groove.

In this exercise, your students will be improvising over a minor groove using the Aeolian mode! You will find that as long as you're playing in the right notes in the Aeolian mode, you don't need to worry about the chord changes. Instead you can focus on melodic ideas, articulation, technique, emotion/feel, dynamics, rhythm, tone, phrasing, space/rest, and listening.

Exercise: Use the chart and steps 1-4 below to tell you your key, tonic, and sharps/flats you need to play based on the instrument you are using.

1. Instrument	2. Key	3. Tonic	4. Sharps/Flats
C instruments	G Aeolian	G	Bb, Eb
Bb instruments	A Aeolian	A	none
Eb instruments	E Aeolian	E	F#

Step 1. Instrument– Choose which key to play in based on what instrument you play.

C instruments: bass, piano, guitar, violin, trombone, flute, voice

Bb instruments: trumpet, soprano sax, tenor sax

Eb instruments: alto sax, bari sax

Step 2. Key – This tells you what key you are in.

Step 3. Tonic – This tells you the note that sounds like “home base” when you are improvising. It is the first note of the mode, so the key you are in is named after the tonic.

Step 4. Sharps/Flats – This tells you which sharps or flats to play. Please note, in the context of modal improvisation, making something “flat” just means to bring it down a half step (ex. B becomes Bb).

For further study of improvisation on PULSE, check out these materials on the PULSE website:

- Improvisation [Level 1](#), [Level 2](#), and [Level 3](#)