

The Not-Lydian Lydian Modes: Loss of Meaning in Subjective Notational Systems

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How can the meaning of a word change so drastically? What is the effect of separating a word from its origin? How did the Lydian mode go from being a style of music associated with the ancient kingdom of Lydia to a scale with no relation to its original definition? In Western music theory, the modal system is considered one of the earliest systems of organizing music into ordered collections of pitches (also known as modes). The modal theory of the middle ages and the Renaissance serves as a starting point for discussing modern musical systems. Though the modal system had been intuitively used long before the middle ages, the tenth-century treatise *Alia musica* is considered to be one of “the first known attempts to define the modal system,” and it is from there most scholarly conversations of modal theory begin.¹ Yet *Alia musica* and the medieval modal system were themselves based on interpretations of the modal system of Ancient Greece, which used modes to categorize certain regions of voice and their associated emotional characteristics. The Ancient Greek modal system is a niche topic in music theory, as the general scholarly conversation only briefly acknowledges it as the origin for the names of the medieval modes. What discussion there is about the Ancient Greek modal system is nebulous and inconclusive, drawing from fragmentary theses and contradictory definitions. The medieval modes (and the Ancient Greek modes they derive from) are named after regions of Ancient Greece and its neighbors, such as Ionia, Phrygia, and Lydia, yet very rarely do scholarly discussions (even those focusing on Ancient Greek modes) go into detail about this point of origin - perhaps because of the disassociation between the names’ origin and their meanings.

¹ Robert Cogan and Pozzi Escot, *Sonic Design: The Nature of Sound and Music* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 103.

The lydion was a style of vase that originated in the Anatolian kingdom of Lydia and later was adopted in Ancient Greece.² Its name derives directly from its place of origin. Unlike the lydion, the modern Lydian mode, as well as the Mixolydian and Hypolydian modes, share no such connection. In music theory, the term ‘Lydian’ is completely arbitrary, removed from the context it may have once had by centuries of reinterpretation and reanalysis. Though these modes are ‘Lydian’ by name, they are not ‘from Lydia’. Taken from their original meaning, which Plato’s *The Republic* briefly described, they are stripped of their emotional and ethnic associations by the categorization of Aristoxenus and Ptolemy. From there, any remaining connections the modes may have had are lost with the fundamental alteration of their content in *Alia musica*. By the time the Renaissance reapplies Plato’s definitions to the Lydian modes, those modes have been fully separated from their original meaning, rendering such reapplications moot. It is in these changes that one can understand how meaning is altered and lost through revolutions in notational systems.

The earliest recorded instance of the Lydian modes comes from a conversation in Plato’s *The Republic* between Plato and the musician Glaucon. Their discussion on mode is brief, barely lasting a page, but it is one of the few remaining examples that can be used to understand what the original modes were. Through reinterpretations of music theory, the definition of ‘mode’ will vary and at times be nebulous, but in *The Republic* the original definition of mode is clear. Mode referred to the *harmoniai*, an Ancient Greek term which most scholars interpret as being both the emotional characteristics of a style of music (its mode) and the pattern of intervals between “the

² The lydion (<https://hum.davidson.edu/uncategorized/benton-revolutionary-artifact/>) is the physical artifact which served as a catalyst for this research paper’s topic.

stops on the fingerboard of a stringed instrument, or the lateral holes in a pipe” (its scale).³ In this initial explanation, Lydian mode can be taken to mean ‘style of music from Lydia and Lydian culture.’ Also clear from the conversation is Plato’s opinions on the Lydian modes: he asserts that “modes like the mixed and sharp Lydian” are unsuitable for decent men and women and other “loose” Lydian modes have the effects of “drunkenness, idleness, softness...unsuited to guardians.”⁴ The connection between the Lydian modes Plato speaks of and the ancient kingdom of Lydia is direct. Even in Ancient Greece, “the term ‘Lydian’ was used as a label, normally with the association of luxury or sumptuous living.”⁵ Lydia is credited as the place of origin of coins as currency, and Ancient Greek historians took special interest of Lydia’s great wealth. These accounts of Lydia portray its culture as lavish and materialistic to the point of debauchery. It is little wonder, then, that as Plato was searching for a style of music for soldiers, he would shun the modes associated with Lydia.⁶ Yet while the relation between Plato’s Lydian modes and Lydia deserve merit, in scholarly conversation the Platonic definition is only mentioned as the origin of the Lydian mode. The real focus in the conversation on the Lydian mode is as it relates to the formal modal systems of Ancient Greece.

In the scholarly discussion of Ancient Greek musical theory, the main systems which tend to come up are the modal system of Aristoxenus and the Greater Perfect System of Ptolemy. These sought to condense the *harmoniai* into a single organized system, and in them the term ‘mode’ transitioned from a description of a musical piece’s emotional associations to a term

³ A. J. Hipkins, "Dorian and Phrygian," *Sammelbände Der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft* 4, no. 3 (1903): 371, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/929209>.

⁴ Platón, *The Republic* (Somerset: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 1979), 68.

⁵ Annick Payne and Jorit Wintjes, *Lords of Asia Minor: An Introduction to the Lydians* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016), 176.

⁶ Platón, *The Republic*, 68.

categorizing the nature of inner relationships in octave species.⁷ These octave species took on the ethnic names of the ‘musical style’ modes, including the Lydian modes: Lydian, Mixolydian, and Hypolydian all appear as categories in both the thirteen *tonoi* of Aristoxenus and the Greater Perfect System.⁸ However, while we do know the original modes had “considerable diversity, and it may not have been easy to combine them in a logical scale-system, or possible without sacrifice of their individualities,” exactly how much of the Lydian modes’ characteristics were lost as they were organized into these systems is difficult to say.⁹

In attempting to examine the actual content of Ancient Greek music prior to Aristoxenus’ system, the scholarly conversation tends to hit a wall, as few examples of actual specimens of Ancient Greek music still exist.¹⁰ Scholars attempting to link the original Lydian modes to the Lydian octave species must draw their conclusions with only fragmentary evidence of the original modes and the incomplete explanation of Aristoxenus’ musical system. Some scholars assert that there is “no need to twist our theory of the old Greek modes into line with the statements of Aristoxenus, since the two clearly belong to different stages of development.”¹¹ As there is no conclusive evidence of the old modes complying to Aristoxenus’ system, and as “Aristoxenus lived in an age of pure keys, when the word *harmonia* was an archaic term requiring explanation,” the connection between the original modes and the modes of Aristoxenus and Ptolemy is one of name alone.¹² Other scholars agree that while the content of Aristoxenus’

⁷ Octave Species: a term more or less equivalent to the modern-day concept of scales.

⁸ *Tonoi*: a term used comparably to octave species.

⁹ R. P. Winnington-Ingram, *Mode in Ancient Greek Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 81.

¹⁰ C. F. Abdy Williams, "Ancient Greek Music," *Proceedings of the Musical Association* 24 (1897): 125, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/765274>.

¹¹ J. D. Denniston, "Some Recent Theories of the Greek Modes," *The Classical Quarterly* 7, no. 2 (1913): 92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/635606>.

¹² Denniston, "Some Recent Theories," 92.

modes certainly differed from the original modes, with at least “the rich emotional associations of a less sophisticated music [having] been lost,” they claim what evidence there is of early scales, in addition to the octave species’ retainment of their ethnic names, proves “they were to some degree the heirs of the *harmoniai*.”¹³ However, the scholarly conversion is consistent in concluding that, without further evidence of the old modes, determining how much of the original Lydian modes were lost by Aristoxenus’ categorization is inconclusive. Was the ‘Lydian’ in the Lydian modes already arbitrary by the time of Aristoxenus and Ptolemy? Regardless of what conclusions any further evidence would bring up, any “unbroken tradition between the *harmoniai* and Ptolemy’s *tonoi*” was certainly lost as the modal system continued to be analyzed and reinterpreted.¹⁴

The introductory level of discussion of modal theory begins with the treatise *Alia musica*, and scholarly discussion about the medieval and modern Lydian modes base themselves on *Alia musica*’s modal system. However, not only are the Lydian modes of *Alia musica* removed from their ethnic context by categorization into a single organized system, but their content is entirely different from the Lydian modes of Aristoxenus and Ptolemy. The reason for this dramatic contrast is attributed to “the reception, interpretation, and misinterpretation of the Greek system” by early medieval scholars.¹⁵

The alterations begin with Boethius’ *De institutione musica*, a part of his works “treating arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy as disciplines that lead the soul to its first encounter

¹³ Winnington-Ingram, *Mode in Ancient Greek Music*, 82.

¹⁴ Winnington-Ingram, 82.

¹⁵ Edward Gollin, "From Tonoι to Modi: A Transformational Perspective," *Music Theory Spectrum* 26, no. 1 (2004): 122, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mts.2004.26.1.119>.

with incorporeal knowledge.”¹⁶ Its modal system was derived from Ptolemy’s Greater Perfect System, and its seven octave species share names and content with the Greater Perfect System’s seven *tonoi*. The Lydian modes of Boethius were identical to the ones of Ptolemy, with one notable discrepancy: their ordering. *De institutione musica* had reversed the order of the octave species: “in Mixolydian, Ptolemy’s species number 1 becomes Boethius’ number 7; in Lydian, Ptolemy’s number 2 becomes Boethius’ number 6.”¹⁷ In addition, Boethius added an eighth mode, the Hypomixolydian mode, as the plagal form of the Mixolydian mode.¹⁸ However, this new mode was identical in content to the Dorian mode, and could not share the emotional characteristics of Plato’s Lydian modes.

The Hypomixolydian mode may be the first definite example of the adjective ‘Lydian’ as an arbitrary term unrelated to Lydia, but Boethius’ alterations to the modal system would affect the octave species in ways far beyond just their ordering. When the treatise *Alia musica* illustrated its modal system, it began its ordering of the octave species with “the a-a’ octave as the first species,” just as Boethius did.¹⁹ At the same time, “following the earlier Greek tradition, [*Alia musica*] presumes the first species to be the lowest, and proceeds to derive the others in an ascending manner.”²⁰ Because of this alteration, the content of the Lydian modes noticeably changed. In the Greater Perfect System the Lydian mode was the name of the c-c’ octave species, but in *Alia musica* and beyond it is the name of the f-f’ octave species. The Mixolydian mode is

¹⁶ Thomas Christensen, *The Cambridge History of Western Music Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 141.

¹⁷ Gollin, “From Tonoι to Modi,” 124.

¹⁸ In the modal system, modes have a priority note known as a final. In authentic modes, the final is located at the end of the octave species, and in plagal modes (notated by the prefix of *hypo-*) the final is located in the middle of the octave species. Of the seven *tonoi* of Ptolemy, four were authentic (Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, and Mixolydian) and three were plagal (Hypodorian, Hypolydian, and Hypophrygian). Thus, Boethius likely added the Hypomixolydian mode to bring balance so every authentic mode could have a plagal equivalent.

¹⁹ Gollin, 124.

²⁰ Gollin, 124.

now the name of the g-g' octave species, which before had been known as the Hypophrygian mode. Most scholarly conversation about this drastic transformation attributes it to simple misinterpretation of either the Greater Perfect System or Boethius. Some scholars have pointed out that the old content of the ethnic names is linked to the new content by whether the folding pattern of the octave species is forward or backward, though this link is noted in the discussion to be “clearly ahistorical...but reaffirms the historical logic traced by [other scholars].”²¹ Whatever the reason, the end result remains the same: through all the changes applied by Aristoxenus, Ptolemy, Boethius, and *Alia musica*, the Lydian modes have been reinterpreted to the point where they are now completely disconnected from Plato’s description of the Lydian modes and the kingdom of Lydia. Yet while the modes in *Alia musica* are purely a technical organization, the association between modes and emotional characteristics remains a topic of scholarly discussion.

Despite the modes’ alterations into octave species which do not resemble the original modes of Plato, Platonic bigotry against the Lydian mode remained influential throughout the Renaissance.²² As such, the term ‘Lydian’ took on meaning beyond its technical description of an octave species, being seen as “the standard reproach for everything thought to be vicious in music.”²³ Because of Plato’s warnings against the soft and convivial Lydian mode, Lydian music in the Renaissance meant music that was sensual or passionate. Of particular note to scholars of this subject is John Milton’s *L’Allegro*, in which the poet stated that he wished to be lapped “in

²¹ David Clampitt, and Jennifer Shafer, “Greek Ethnic Modal Names vs. *Alia Musica*’s Nomenclature,” In *Mathematics and Computation in Music*, edited by Collins, T., D. Meredith, and A. Volk, 385-390, Springer, Cham, 2015.

²² Merritt Y. Hughes, "Lydian Airs," *Modern Language Notes* 40, no. 3 (1925): 129, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2914166>.

²³ Merritt Y. Hughes, "Lydian Airs," 129.

soft Lydian airs.” Most scholars agree that the soft Lydian airs Milton writes about is a reference to the soft, convivial Lydian modes mentioned in the *The Republic*. Others point out that it is only in the final movement of *L’Allegro* “that our experience in the poem is called Lydian and thus given the rather uncomfortable clarity of a modal category,” and was not directly referencing the Platonic Lydian modes but their effects.²⁴ Regardless of Milton’s intent, his reference to the Lydian mode demonstrates that the emotional associations between Lydian modes and the luxury of Lydia were brought back in the Renaissance.

Except, considering the dramatic changes in the modal systems between then and now, can it be said that the ‘Lydian’ music of the Renaissance was truly Lydian? The Lydian modes had been altered at a structural level, and it would be impossible for them to retain the exact emotional character as that of Lydia’s music. Alternatively, it might be that the Lydian airs referred to in the Renaissance were not a matter of music in the Lydian mode of *Alia musica*, and instead a separate term regarding sensual music; the scholarly conversation on the Lydian airs does not examine the technical side of the references. If this is the case, then term ‘Lydian’ existed in the Renaissance as two distinct expressions: one which encapsulates the spirit of Lydia’s music (or at least Plato’s definition of it) without considering its content, and one which may have once been related to the content of Lydia’s music, but certainly lost its emotional context. Either way, it cannot be said that the Lydian mode of the Renaissance and beyond is ‘from Lydia.’

One other subject to consider is a recent study examining the emotional connotations of modal music. Among the study’s findings was the discovery that music of the Lydian and Mixolydian modes were “judged as happier” than most other modes tested, including the Dorian

²⁴ Christopher Grose, "The Lydian Airs of "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso"," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 83, no. 2 (1984): 188, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27709311>.

and Phrygian modes.²⁵ While this study's primary focus is on modern modes, it still demonstrates that the emotional connotations of Lydian modes today are entirely separate from those of the Ancient Greek Lydian modes. After all, the mixed and sharp Lydian modes Plato described were modes for "dirges and laments," which certainly would not be judged as happy.²⁶

The original content of the Lydian modes are, of course, not the only example of a medium's original content being lost due to revolution within its systems. For example, much of the rhymes in the verses of Shakespeare and other Elizabethan poets have been lost by changes in the pronunciation, surviving only through some notes and scholarly intuition of how they may have rhymed in the past. Even "the words which rime now were quite possibly pronounced otherwise than as we pronounce them," and as such modern readings lose some of the original wordplay that may have lain within the rhymes.²⁷ Is it really the case that such loss is inevitable as systems of notation change over time? One could assert that if a system was organized in an objective method, such as geometry, math, or computation, then it would remain consistent through the ages. Yet as the scholarly analysis has shown, it was Aristoxenus and Boethius' attempts at categorizing the Lydian modes in the arguably objective system of pitch that caused them to lose their emotional connection to the original music of Lydia. In addition, there is the question of if it would even be worth preservation through objective systems if those systems would be overly complex and limiting to expression. And even if such a perfect objective system was established, how could one ensure the system was not lost as early scales and works of the original Lydian modes were? Ultimately, although the Lydian modes of today may not be

²⁵ David Temperley and Daphne Tan, "Emotional Connotations of Diatonic Modes," *Music Perception: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 30, no. 3 (2013): 249, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/mp.2012.30.3.237>.

²⁶ Platón, 68.

²⁷ Alrik T. Gustafson and Robert Withington, "Notes on Past Pronunciations," *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 31, no. 1 (1932): 132, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27703599>.

‘Lydian’, change in a system’s terms is inevitable between time and the revolution of the system itself, and so it is that the new music bases itself on the new non-Lydian Lydian modes.²⁸

²⁸ Relatively new, as the modal system is considered by today’s standard to be a bygone of the middle ages which, through advancements, has been revolutionized into even more complex and developed systems.

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