

# The Modes of the Standard African 12/8 Bell

BY JERRY LEAKE

The standard 12/8 bell pattern of African music, heard predominantly with the Ewe people of Southern Ghana, is familiar to nearly every musician, and is one of the more researched subjects in African rhythm theory.<sup>1</sup> This article will compare the 12/8 bell and its subsequent transpositions to the modes of jazz music (a concept first introduced by Jeff Pressing<sup>2</sup>).

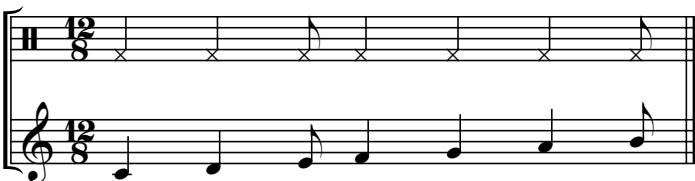
In jazz theory, a C to C major scale comprises eight notes divided into whole (W) and half (H) step intervals: two whole steps, one half step, three more whole steps, and one final half step to reach upper C, or W-W-H-W-W-W-H. If we substitute the term “long” (L) for each whole step and the term “short” (S) for each half step, with a “long” note being a quarter and a “short” note being an eighth, we would discover that the strokes of the standard 12/8 bell—L-L-S-L-L-S—are identical to the intervals of the major scale. This can be immediately realized by playing a major scale using the 12/8 bell pattern, or by playing the bell pattern while singing “do re me” solfege in unison with the 12/8 bell.

This coincidental relationship can be taken one step further by exploring the various modes (transpositions) of both the major scale and the African bell.<sup>3</sup> The essence of jazz improvisation encompasses the player’s knowledge and facility using the modes of each scale. These modes, which are assigned specific names, represent different moods and tonal colors from light to dark.

A major scale is a brightly colored major mode called “Ionian.” In African music, the standard 12/8 bell is the “Ionian” (major) mode of traditional music. Using the letters W and H to represent diatonic intervals, and L and S for bell strokes, we can realize the modes of both scale and rhythm.

## IONIAN MODE

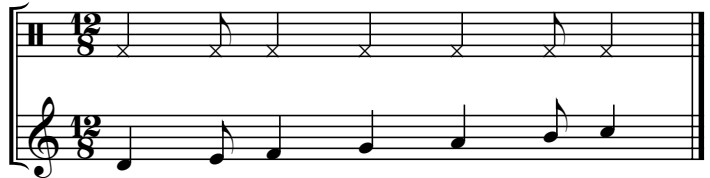
Bell: L L S L L L S (bell lands on beats 1, 4)  
Scale: W W H W W W H (major tonality)



By starting the C major scale from D and ending on high D, the Dorian mode is produced. Dorian, which is in a minor tonality, is slightly darker in color than Ionian. A Dorian mode of the African bell occurs by starting and ending the bell pattern from the second stroke. What results is a non-traditional phrase that produces a different rhythmic constellation of tension and resolution.

## DORIAN MODE

Bell: L S L L L S L (bell lands on beats 1, 2, 4)  
Scale: W H W W W H W (minor tonality)

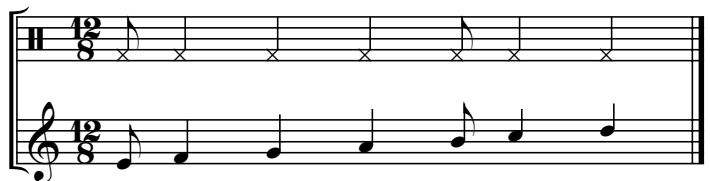


Whereas the standard Ionian bell lands on beats 1 and 4, the non-traditional Dorian bell lands on beats 1, 2, and 4. One might argue that since more strokes of the bell land on the beat, the Dorian bell has less tension than the Ionian bell. However, because this phrase is less familiar than the Ionian bell, it may present other musical challenges.

By continuing this paradigm of scale/bell transpositions we find the jazz modes Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, and Locrian.

## PHRYGIAN MODE

Bell: S L L L S L L (bell lands on beats 1, 2, 4)  
Scale: H W W W H W W (minor tonality)



## LYDIAN MODE

Bell: L L L S L L S (bell lands on beats 1, 3, 4)  
Scale: W W W H W W H (major tonality)





# CALL FOR APPLICANTS

- Robert Kauffman, Kobla Ladzekpo, David Locke, Alan Merriam, J.H. Kwabena Nketia, and Jeff Pressing, to name a few.
2. Although the concept of the modal bell occurred to me recently during my own teaching, the idea was first presented by Jeff Pressing in his paper "Cognitive Isomorphisms between Pitch and Rhythm in World Musics: West Africa, the Balkans and Western Tonality," *Studies in Music* 17 (1983); 38–61. A recent paper by Kofi Agawu in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society* further examines the 12/8 bell and its relevant potency. For amazing insights read "Structural Analysis or Cultural Analysis? Competing Perspectives on the 'Standard Pattern' of West African Rhythm."
  3. David Locke uses the concept "Modes of the African Bell" in his book *Kpegisu: A War Drum of the Ewe*.

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**Jerry Leake** is co-founder of the world-music ensemble Natraj, whose four recordings feature his diverse percussion talents. He also performs with Club d'Elf, R.A.R.E, Moksha, BodyGrooves, and the Agbekor Drum and Dance Society. He is featured on dozens of CDs and has released several CDs of his own music. He studies African music with Dolsi-Naa Abubakari Luna of the Dagomba tradition (northern Ghana) and has studied Ewe music (southern Ghana) with Godwin Agbeli and David Locke, and balafon/djembe with the Coulibaly family in Burkina Faso. He has written eight widely used texts on North Indian, West African, and Latin American percussion and rhythm theory ([www.Rhombus-publishing.com](http://www.Rhombus-publishing.com)). Jerry is on the faculty of the New England Conservatory of Music and Tufts University, and is substitute teacher for Jamey Haddad at the Berklee College of Music in Boston. He is former president of the Massachusetts PAS chapter and has been a composer and member of the Portland Symphony Kinder Konzert percussion ensemble since 1984. PN

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