

The Melodic Mode

David McCarthy

This mode could be seen as an amplification of the "melodic minor": scale degrees 6 and 7 are changeable, and so are 2, 3, and 4 (1 and 5 are fixed). Scale degrees are high or low depending on the note that comes after them. So, in C melodic, for example, the F is sharp if the next new note is higher, and natural if the next new note is lower.

If played as a scale, the ascending form of the melodic mode is the Lydian mode, the descending is the Phrygian.



You can apply it to printed music; it sounds terrible, but it's great for improving sight-reading, because your hands can't do familiar patterns, and you can't play any note without already knowing the next note in the line (forcing you to look ahead). This really only works with contrapuntal music, where it's clear what the next note after any note is. Also make sure to change tonics if the music modulates.

Here's a bit of Bach, as twisted by the melodic mode:



In improvisation, the mode works well against a drone, to keep the tonic clear. It often sounds a little bluesy or Bartokian. I try to avoid having the notes that make up the diminished 3rd around scale degrees 1 or 5 close together.



I think it's good to see melodies as something more dynamic than just an expression of a background set of pitches - so each note has tendencies, of which the performer/improviser should be aware, and is not neutral. Another possibility is to reverse it, so notes that go up will be lowered, and ones that go down will be raised.