

Chromatic Chords and Secondary Dominants

Hi Máté, at last another lesson! After this you'll be on your way to writing some (simple but) real music!

As you know by now, the single most important relationship in tonal music is that between chords a fifth apart, tonics and their dominants. The popular ii-V-I progressions makes use of this relationship very well, by moving around in fourths/fifths in the bass.

However, every diatonic triad (except vii, because it is diminished) has its **own dominant chord**. **The dominant chord of each triad is always major**. That is why I have insisted that you use the harmonic minor scale. (When you use v, as a minor triad, it will suggest a change of key!) Look at ex. 1, here you can see these relationships more clearly. One way to notate *the dominant of a chord* (a *secondary dominant*) is with a slash: e.g. V/V is another term for II with a major third, V/iii in C major is a B major chord etc.

Ex. 1



These triads are all major, therefore they progress onto their tonics with a leading note. This is very important because it makes for far stronger and more satisfying progressions than without a leading note. Let's look at some examples.

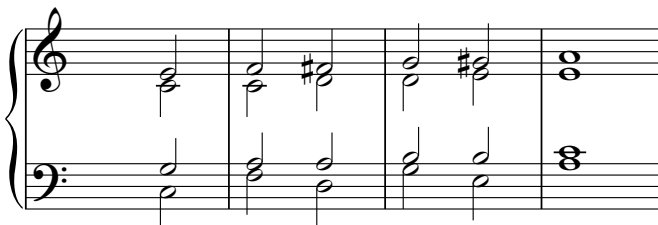
The following diatonic progression is somewhat weak and lacking in direction (ex. 2).

Ex. 2



However, if we sharpen the thirds of the minor triads, we transform them into the dominants of the following chord. The sense of progression from each chord to the next is now far stronger, and the top line is far smoother, moving chromatically up by step with each chord (ex. 3).

Ex. 3



There is a real sense of arrival on the A minor chord. Using the dominant of a key, therefore, is the most effective way to reach that key area. Here we have **modulated** to A minor, passing through G major.

Using secondary dominants or chromatic chords does not have to upset the sense of key however. It is also a way of making a diatonic progression (leading to a perfect cadence for example) far more interesting (ex. 4). You can also add a seventh to the dominants, making the progressions sound even stronger still.

Ex. 4

When used with first inversions, it be used to create smoother, chromatic basslines (ex. 5). To do this, start with a diatonic progression and then insert the first inversion of the dominant of the next chord in between, as shown.

Ex. 5

Let’s look at how it can be used to enhance real music. Bach frequently uses V/V (or II6/4/3) at perfect cadences to create a more chromatic bass. (ex. 6). Ex. 6b is a modification of ex. 6a to show that we can take the effect even further (Bach sometimes uses this progression in his most expressive chorales). Ex. 7 shows our earlier progression rendered more effective with inversions.

Ex. 6

Ex. 7

Feminine Endings

Although feminine endings occur in most styles of music, they are particularly common in the music of the Classical and Romantic eras, and will be extremely useful for our next projects: Mozart and Haydn String Quartet Minuets. A feminine ending is effectively a resolution of the dominant seventh, in which the upper parts are delayed (ex. 8). While the bass moves to the tonic , the upper parts (the third fifth and seventh of V) are held on and resolve on a weak beat. The bass sometimes drops down a fifth and back to the root below in the last bar of a piece.

Ex. 8

Homework

1. Write three progressions in C major, D minor and A major of not less than 12 chords. Write all the chords in root position and end with the progression II-V-I (or i). Make the most of the relationship between chords a fifth or fourth apart, and sharpen the thirds of some minor chords to create chromatic motion and interest.
2. Take the chromatic progressions you have written and now minimise the number of leaps in the bass by using first inversions.
3. Write feminine endings on perfect cadences in G major, E major and F minor. You may write a few chords leading up to the cadence if you wish.