

UNIT VI : MODULATION (via pivot-chords)

A modulation is a change of key – that is, a change of pitch-repertory and therefore of the implied tonic. This key-change is necessarily *temporary*, since almost all tonal pieces in the classical repertory return to their home key at or near the end of the piece – but what “temporary” means depends entirely upon the context: it could be a few chords, a few measures, or the whole long second-theme-complex-plus-development of a Bruckner symphonic movement.

There are, that is, *degrees* of modulation; one can employ the pitches of a secondary tonality for a few chords, or for pages. This fact of varying degrees of “tonicization” – the process of creating subsidiary tonics within a larger tonal framework – has been the occasion for considerable controversy among theorists, as so often somewhat pointless, about the word “modulation”. At one extreme are musicians, much influenced by the work of the German theorist Heinrich Schenker, who emphasize the tonal unity of a work, and therefore claim that there exist no true modulations, only ephemeral “tonicizations”. This is largely just a change of terminology, of course, but it was a reaction against the older chord-by-chord Roman numeral analysis, which insisted on showing a modulation nearly every time an accidental occurred in the music – that is, every time the prevailing pitch-repertory changed even slightly. We will simply note here that the degree to which a new key is “tonicized” depends in complicated ways on many factors: what chords occur in the new key, whether any extended themes or melodies arrive in the new key, etc. The question really comes up more in the formal analysis of large instrumental forms in the Classic-Romantic era.

The simplest and clearest way to modulate is by pivot-chord. That is, a chord which is common to both the new and the old receives a double interpretation: [EX 1](#). Notice the notation in the analysis: when space permits, this seems to be the clearest way to indicate modulations. Naturally the pivot-chord has a different position in each key, and so a different Roman numeral in each. The new pitch-repertory here is quickly established in a cadence; this is usually the way the new key is confirmed. It needn't be a full cadence, though; IV-V will do, since this progression includes most of the pitches in a given key. Particularly crucial are the “differentiating” pitches – those not common to both keys, i.e., accidentals. (One can, as an experiment, try to modulate without introducing these pitches. As one can see from [EX 2](#), modulation can almost be accomplished by melodic and rhythmic means alone, but it remains somewhat unconvincing.)

It is usually better not to make V in the new key the pivot chord, since it wants to cadence too soon. It can be done, but it usually sounds fairly abrupt: [EX 3](#).

Sometimes the new key will be such that enharmonic re-spelling is desirable; this happens most often when the parallel mode of a related key is used. If, for example, from B major we modulate to the major submediant, we would probably prefer to notate it in A \flat major, rather than in G \sharp major.

Closely-related keys to a given key are basically those which share relatively many pitches with it: two pitches, for example, separate C major from D major (namely, F \sharp and C \sharp), and from G minor (E \flat and B \flat), and so both are, in a rough sense, harmonically equidistant from C. The concept is not precise; in the nineteenth century especially the ready interchange between major and minor makes, say, E \flat quite close to C major (since it's III of C minor).

In 18th-century harmony, though, the more closely-related keys are those which require fewer accidental

changes, that is, those keys whose tonics are represented by the uninflected triads on the scale degrees. Thus, keys closely-related to a major key are those major keys with tonics on IV and V, and minor keys with tonics on ii, iii, and vi. Similarly in minor, the closely-related keys are III, VI, and ♭VII major, iv minor, and V either major or minor. This was the great discovery of the Corelli-Lully generation, and one reason why their works are just about the earliest to sound like “common-practice” music: if Corelli is in G major, for example, and he moves to the key of E, it’s E minor, not E major.

Examples, Chapter VI

EX 1

G: I vii^6 I⁶ ii⁶ vi | D: ii V⁶ I I⁶ ii⁶ V I

EX 2: from I to IV, without using $\flat 7$

etc.

EX 2, continued: from I to V, with using $\sharp 4$

EX 3

D: I V I IV | C: I⁶ IV V I

EX 3, continued

Chord symbols for EX 3, continued:

$\boxed{c:}$ ${}_oii^6$ V VI $\boxed{D\flat:}$ \boxed{V} IV^6 V^6 V^7 I V_4^6 I^6 iii $\boxed{C:}$ N^6 iv V I_4^6 V^{4-3} I