

HARMONY 5 - Changing key painlessly

1) MODULATION

Only short pieces stay in one key, which can tire the ear. Even short pieces sometimes change key. But it must be done convincingly.

First point to learn is to change only to a "related" key. These are as follows:

Major key: relative minor, Dominant & Subdominant and their relative minors.

Minor Key: relative major, Dominant & Subdominant and their relative majors.

A far simpler way to put it is: any key whose signature differs by not more than one sharp or flat.

So for C major we have: Am G Em F Dm (5 keys)

and for A minor we have: C Em G Dm F (5 keys)

Notice anything?

Method: find a pivot chord, i.e. a chord which is common to both keys. Approach it as a chord in the first key, quit it as a chord in the second key.

Example:

(C major to G major)

Musical notation for C major to G major modulation. The score is in two staves (treble and bass clef). The key signature changes from C major (no sharps or flats) to G major (one sharp, F#). The progression of chords is: I (C major), VI=II (F major), V (D major), and I (G major). The F major chord (VI in C major, II in G major) serves as the pivot chord.

(A minor to G major)

Musical notation for A minor to G major modulation. The score is in two staves (treble and bass clef). The key signature changes from A minor (no sharps or flats) to G major (one sharp, F#). The progression of chords is: I (A minor), Ib=IIb (F major), V (D major), and I (G major). The F major chord (Ib in A minor, IIb in G major) serves as the pivot chord.

Practice some exercises till you are happy with this method.

2) TRANSITION

Where there is no pivot chord we must find a pivot NOTE. This method is called a *transient modulation* or *transition*. (Doesn't sound so "permanent" as modulation so is useful during a phrase - DON'T end a phrase with one.)

The pivot note is often retained in the same voice though it doesn't have to be. There is also a note which will get chromatically altered; this should preferably be kept in the same voice.

Example:

(C major to E minor)



Study the hymn-tune Melita ("Eternal Father, strong to save") Starting in C, the music modulates to G, modulates back to C, then has transitions through Dm (with Tierce de Picardie - have you learnt that? It's NOT D major, which is unrelated) and Em staying in Em to end of phrase. Then transitions through F and G before modulating back to C. (The chord with an F# bass near the end does not modulate, thus it is called a chromatic chord. Chromatic chords are defined as those which contain one or more notes foreign to the key and yet do not modulate. More later.) All pretty smoothly done, though so many moves in a short space nicely create the mood of rough seas. The main thing to notice is that all the transitions are done with Domth 7th -> Tonic, so brushing aside all our carefully studied secondary triads! But in another, broader sense they ARE secondary triads, chromatically altered, so we still get the variety.

3) ORDER OF KEYS

The usual advice is to modulate to the sharp side in the first half of a piece, and to the flat side in the second half. You can even include all 5 related keys thus: C Am G :: G Em (C) F Dm C but this is not a hard and fast rule by any means.

In the minor we are told to go first to the relative major. Most classical composers did this rather than go to the dominant which is also minor (and has only one pivot chord possible). Then more or less do what you like..