

**The Supertonic Chord (ii or ii°)**

The supertonic is the strongest diatonic pre-dominant. It should therefore progress immediately to V and not move to a weaker pre-dominant such as IV or vi. It is common for the tonic to lead directly to the supertonic, but beware of parallel fifths and octaves! Inverting one of the chords but not the other (i.e., I<sup>6</sup> to ii, or I to ii<sup>6</sup>) greatly reduces the danger of forbidden parallels and also improves the sound. Contrary motion in the outer voices is helpful, although not necessary. Placing an intermediate chord (most notably vi) between the tonic and the supertonic avoids the problems associated with stepwise root motion.

Because its root lies a fifth above (or a fourth below) the dominant, the supertonic resolves to the dominant very easily. Root motion by descending fifths, as you will see, produces a very strong sense of progression in most cases — including the exceedingly common ii - V - I (often extended to vi - ii - V - I), a typical way to approach a cadence. Another very common type of root motion is by descending thirds. Because triads whose roots are a third apart share two common tones, such progressions are relatively simple to write. One very common example is I - vi - IV - ii (using all three of the most common pre-dominant chords).

The supertonic chord occurs far more often in first inversion (ii<sup>6</sup>) than in root position. Indeed, in minor keys, ii<sup>o</sup> *cannot* be used in root position because, as a general principle, we dislike the sound of root-position diminished triads. The ii<sup>6</sup> chord looks and acts almost exactly like the IV chord: both have  $\hat{4}$  in the bass, both contain  $\hat{6}$  in an upper voice, and both progress to V. The biggest difference is that you are much less likely write parallel fifths when using ii<sup>6</sup>, because ii shares a common tone with V (whereas IV does not).

When ii is in root position, expect to double the root. When it is in first inversion, doubling either the root or the bass (i.e., the third) is very common. Doubling the fifth of the ii chord, regardless of its inversion, is very unusual.

Some common progressions incorporating the supertonic triad are shown below. Notice that in minor keys you should avoid writing an augmented second from  $\hat{6} - \# \hat{7}$ . Also notice that it is very unusual to place  $\hat{6}$  in the soprano when writing a ii chord. If you really want  $\hat{6}$  in the melody, harmonize it with IV instead.

a) G: I vi ii V I

b) G: I vi IV ii V I

c) g: i ii<sup>o6</sup> V i

d) G: I I<sup>6</sup> ii V I

e) g: i VI ii<sup>°6</sup> V i

f) G: I IV ii V I

Both examples below contain serious part-writing errors. Notice that the undesirable augmented second is often associated with other mistakes (parallel octaves in example g, and atypical doubling of the V chord in example h).

g) g: i ii<sup>°6</sup> V i

h) g: i ii<sup>°6</sup> V i

## The Submediant Chord (vi or VI)

The submediant chord functions as a weak pre-dominant. Its most typical role is leading from the tonic to a strong pre-dominant (such as IV or ii). The common tones between the submediant and all of these chords allow for smooth and easy voice-leading; leaping is atypical, and repeated notes — even in the soprano — should not cause alarm.

In order to convey a sense of forward motion, we prefer to move from weak to strong pre-dominants as we progress from the tonic to the dominant. The submediant therefore progresses well either to IV (iv) or to ii (ii°), but it does not ordinarily follow them. As a pre-dominant, vi can progress directly to V, but this is much less common and the voice-leading is unusually hazardous (especially in a minor key), necessitating contrary motion in the outer voices.

Below are two examples of good harmonic progressions incorporating the submediant chord; you should also refer back to the examples illustrating the supertonic chord. It is best (and smoothest) to send it to V by way of a stronger pre-dominant (a), although direct motion to V is possible (b). Notice that in most circumstances is best to double the root of the submediant, and that we usually take advantage of the common tones.

a) d: i VI iv V

b) D: I vi V

## The Deceptive Cadence

Because the submediant chord shares the tonic triad's two most important tones ( $\hat{1}$  and  $\hat{3}$ ), it can follow a dominant (V) chord, substituting for the tonic triad. The effect of this resolution is surprising: we expect the tonic, but instead we hear the submediant. The motion from V - vi (or V - VI in minor) is therefore described as "deceptive." When the progression occurs at the end of a phrase, it is called a deceptive cadence. When writing deceptive motions (and all other progressions involving root motion by step), be alert for parallel fifths and octaves! Below are two good examples (c and d) and one bad example (e) of a deceptive motion. Notice that it is normal to double the third of the submediant when it follows V because it is important to resolve the leading-tone.

Notice parallel fifths and octaves!

c) D: V vi

d) d: V VI

e) D: V vi

Because it is a relatively weak chord, the submediant is almost invariably used in root position. When placed in first inversion ( $vi^6$ ), it sounds very much like a tonic triad with a wrong note and tends to lose its sense of function.

## The Mediant Chord (iii or III)

The mediant chord is the least used of the seven standard diatonic chords; it is more common in minor keys than it is in major keys. The mediant chord functions as a very weak pre-dominant — so weak that it almost always leads to stronger pre-dominant chords, rarely progressing directly to V. One of its most important uses is to harmonize  $\hat{7}$  as it descends in the melody. (If  $\hat{7}$  ascended to  $\hat{1}$ , of course, we could simply harmonize it with some kind of dominant chord and resolve to the tonic.)

There are two typical ways to progress from a mediant chord: either by root motion of descending fifths (e.g., iii – vi – ii – V) or by bass motion of ascending steps (e.g., iii – IV – V or iii – ii<sup>6</sup> – V). The circle-of-fifths option is quite easy to part-write and should cause no problems. The rising bass option presents a risk of forbidden parallels, but writing the outer voices in contrary motion usually prevents serious voice-leading errors. In those relatively rare cases where the mediant progresses directly to V, the dominant is almost always in a weak inversion.

Below are several examples of good harmonic progressions incorporating the mediant chord. Notice that it is almost invariably best to double the root, and that we usually take advantage of the common tones.

a) D: I iii IV V

b) d: i III ii<sup>°6</sup> V<sub>4</sub><sup>6</sup> — 5/3 i

c) d: i III VI ii<sup>°6</sup> V<sub>4</sub><sup>6</sup> — 5/3 i

Because it is a relatively weak chord, the mediant is almost invariably used in root position. When placed in first inversion (iii<sup>6</sup>), it sounds very much like a dominant triad with a non-harmonic tone. Indeed, should you come across a chord that looks like iii<sup>6</sup>, consider the possibility that it is really V (especially if it resolves to the tonic)! It is under these circumstances that we are most likely to find the rare III<sup>+</sup> in minor keys — except that, again, this chord almost surely a dominant with a non-harmonic tone (why else would the chord include a leading-tone?).

## The Leading-Tone Chord (vii<sup>o</sup>)

By its very nature, the leading-tone triad exhibits some unusual characteristics. First, its root should never be doubled because it is, of course, the leading-tone — an inherently unstable note. Instead, we almost always double the third of the chord because this is the only chord member that is consonant with both of the other chord members. Second, the leading-tone triad is rarely found in root position because, as a general rule, we dislike the sound of root-position diminished triads. Instead, the chord is almost invariably used in first inversion. Placing the third in the bass softens the chord's dissonance because each upper voice will be consonant with the bass.

The vii<sup>o6</sup> chord is used frequently, often as a passing chord. Its weak dominant function makes it ideal for leading to the tonic chord (either in root position or in first inversion) in the middle of a phrase, but inappropriate for a strong cadence. The leading-tone triad is strongly associated with smooth bass lines (although small leaps are not impossible), and it is most likely to be found between two tonic chords. Like the passing V<sub>4</sub><sup>6</sup>, its most common role is leading between I and I<sup>6</sup>; notice that vii<sup>o6</sup> and V<sub>4</sub><sup>6</sup> differ by only one note. It is likely to fall on a metrically weak beat, and it is often found in the middle of a voice exchange.

Below are several examples of good harmonic progressions incorporating the leading-tone triad. Example a demonstrates the chord's most typical use, passing between different inversions of the tonic triad. Example b demonstrates the chord's use as a weak dominant. (Notice that using V rather than vii<sup>o6</sup> here would cause serious voice-leading problems!) As shown in example c, vii<sup>o6</sup> can also occur between two identical (or virtually identical) tonic chords. (This role is often described as a "neighboring chord" because the pattern involves voices that step away and step back again.) Finally, example d demonstrates a small voice-leading concern associated with vii<sup>o6</sup>: the motion from a diminished fifth to a perfect fifth between two upper voices (in this case, the alto and tenor). When the voices creating a P5 with one another also create a perfect interval with the bass, the perfect interval stands out more, and composers tend to avoid this effect. Many composers would rather double the third of a tonic triad than write d5-P5 under these circumstances. Fortunately, you don't have to make this choice: by using a passing V<sub>4</sub><sup>6</sup> chord instead, the situation is avoided entirely.

No parallel fifths in the inner voices: G<sup>#</sup>-D is a diminished fifth!

a) A: I vii<sup>o6</sup> I<sup>6</sup> vii<sup>o6</sup> I

IV-V would be very difficult to part-write with this melody!

b) A: i IV vii<sup>o6</sup> I<sup>6</sup>

Parallel motion into P4 is never a problem.

c) a: i vii<sup>o6</sup> i

Inner voice motion from d5-P5 is undesirable.

Resolving d5 leads to doubled third (acceptable).

Using an equivalent chord avoids the problem.

d) a: i<sup>6</sup> vii<sup>o6</sup> i i<sup>6</sup> vii<sup>o6</sup> i i<sup>6</sup> (V<sub>4</sub><sup>6</sup>) i