

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., I⁶ to ii, or I to ii⁶) 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 (ii⁶) than in root position. Indeed, in minor keys, ii° cannot be used in root position because, as a general principle, we dislike the sound of root-position diminished triads. The ii⁶ chord looks, sounds, 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 ii⁶ 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 ii⁶ V i

d) G: I I⁶ ii V I

e) g: i VI ii^{°6} V i

f) G: I IV ii V I

Both examples below contain serious part-writing errors. Notice that in minor keys the leading-tone should be approached from above (as it was in the previous correct examples); when it is approached from below, an undesirable augmented second is often produced. Also observe that the augmented second is often associated with other mistakes (such as forbidden parallels and poor doubling).

Parallel octaves between bass and tenor,
augmented second in alto

g) g: i ii^{°6} V i

Augmented second in alto, poor doubling
on V chord

h) g: i ii^{°6} V i