

## 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.)

In a functional context, 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.

The mediant chord may also progression to a non-functional IV chord, which proceeds to tonic (either I or I<sup>6</sup>). When this happens, the entire I-iii-(IV)-I pattern will be understood as a tonic expansion. This pattern is likely to include an  $\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$  melody (or at least a melody that reduces to  $\hat{8}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$ ).

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<sup>6</sup><sub>4</sub> – <sup>5</sup><sub>3</sub> i

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