

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. Common harmonic patterns include root motion by descending fifths (e.g., vi – ii – V – I) and root motion by descending thirds (e.g., I – vi – IV – ii). Because it is 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 some examples of good harmonic progressions incorporating the submediant chord; you should also refer back to the examples illustrating the supertonic chord. It is most typical (and smoothest) to send it to V by way of a stronger pre-dominant (a-c), although direct motion to V is possible (d). Notice that in most circumstances it is best to double the root of the submediant, and that we usually take advantage of the common tones.

a) d: i VI ii°⁶ V $\frac{6}{4} - \frac{5}{3}$ i b) d: i VI iv V

c) D I vi ii V I d) D: I vi V I

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 a point where we expect an authentic cadence, 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 (e and f) and one bad example (g) 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.

Parallel fifths and octaves!

e) D: V vi f) d: V VI g) D: V vi

After a deceptive cadence, it is typical to progress to a strong pre-dominant (just as one might from any submediant) and lead into an authentic cadence. This is illustrated in example h.

h) D: I vii^{°6} I⁶ ii⁶ V⁶₄ — ⁵₃ vi ii⁶ V⁶₄ — ⁵₃ I

Because the submediant is a relatively weak chord, it is almost invariably used in root position. When placed in first inversion (vi⁶), it sounds very much like a tonic triad with a wrong note and tends to lose its sense of function.