

Secondary Dominant Chords

Chromaticism refers to the use of pitches that are foreign to the key of a particular passage.

When chromatic ("altered") tones are incorporated, new, chromatic chords are created. These chromatic chords are called **altered chords**.

The most common altered chord in tonal music is the **secondary chord**. We will initially focus on **secondary dominant** chords. These are chords that function (behave) like dominant (V) chords, but as if they were in another key, by **tonicizing** the chord that follows them.

Tonicization means to put special emphasis on a chord *other* than the I (or i) chord (such as the ii, iii, IV, or vi chords) by treating it *as if* it were a tonic chord in the key represented by the root of that chord. In the key of CM, the vi chord is an A minor chord; the vi chord could be tonicized by treating it as if it were momentarily a i (tonic) chord in the key of A minor. The typical way to tonicize a chord (the A minor in this case) is to approach it (precede it) with its dominant (V) chord. The dominant of A minor is an E major chord (an altered/chromatic chord in the key of C because it has a G# in it). So while still in the key of C, the vi chord (Am) could be approached (and emphasized/tonicized) by an E major chord.

A diatonic chord progression of: C→Em→Am→etc. (I→iii→vi→etc.) could be mildly changed to a chromatic progression: C→E(maj)→Am→etc. (where the E major chord is now considered chromatic)

The latter progression places more emphases on (tonicizes) the Am chord because that chord is immediately preceded by its dominant (E maj). This effect harnesses the typical driving function of the dominant chord, which likes to resolve up a 4th (or down a 5th). When we hear the E major chord, it stands out because it is chromatic (it has a G# in it); then that outstanding sound *resolves* (pushes forward) to the Am that it is tonicizing. We still will feel like the music is in the key of C, but there will be a moment where the E and Am are acting like the V and i of A minor. The G# in the E chord acts like the leading tone in A minor.

In this context, the E major chord is a **secondary dominant** chord in the key of C (as opposed to the primary dominant chord: G). It is functioning like the dominant of A minor, but at a secondary level. We say that the E major chord is the V of Am, or the V of vi. This is symbolized like so: "V/vi".

As mentioned above, secondary dominant chords are conspicuous because they will have one or two chromatic notes in them (these notes stand out). The chromatic note(s) in the secondary dominant create a kind of momentary tension or dissonance that needs to resolve. The typical resolution is for the chord to resolve the way a regular dominant chord resolves: to go up a 4th or down a 5th.

Because secondary dominant chords behave like dominant chords, their quality is *always* major (or if a 7th chord, a dominant 7th). Typically speaking, chords that are usually minor in a given key can be made into Major chords (or dominant 7th chords) and they will then take on a secondary dominant function. See the example above: the E minor chord (iii) was changed into an E major chord and it became the V/vi.