

# HARMONIC PRACTICE

## I N T O N A L M U S I C



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# The Neapolitan Chord

**P**LAY AND CONTRAST the pair of pre-dominant–dominant–tonic progressions in Example 1. What is the only note that is changed?

## Example 1

A.



B.



Despite this minimal alteration in the pre-dominant harmony of the second passage, the musical effect is altogether different. The  $\text{Db}$  ( $\flat 2$ ) engenders an altered triad that we call a **Neapolitan sixth** chord. We will examine the properties and uses of this chord in this chapter.

The Neapolitan sixth is a major triad built on the lowered supertonic ( $\text{Db}$  F  $\text{Ab}$  in C minor). Its half-step relation to the tonic gives it a peculiarly dark quality that is unique among chromatic chords.<sup>1</sup> Because of its

1. If we progress downward by perfect 5ths from the tonic in minor ( $\hat{1}$ ,  $\hat{4}$ ,  $\flat\hat{7}$ ,  $\flat\hat{3}$ ,  $\flat\hat{6}$ ,  $\flat\hat{2}$ ,  $\flat\hat{5}$ ), the Neapolitan  $\flat\hat{2}$  is the most distant relation before the tritone ( $\flat\hat{5}$ ) is reached.



geographical designation, the Neapolitan sixth has acquired a fame that is disproportionate to its actual use in tonal music. The origin of the term is obscure. While “sixth” refers to the fact that the chord is ordinarily found in first inversion ( $^6$ ), “Neapolitan” probably alludes to its use in the operas composed in the Italian city of Naples in the seventeenth century.

## THE $\flat\text{II}^6$ AS A CADENTIAL PRE-DOMINANT CHORD

We typically find the Neapolitan sixth in the minor mode, where it usually substitutes for a diatonic pre-dominant ( $\text{iv}$  or  $\text{ii}^{\flat 6}_5$ ) in authentic cadences. When partwriting with the Neapolitan sixth in this type of cadential progression, we should double the bass ( $\hat{4}$ ) rather than the more active  $\flat\hat{6}$  or  $\flat\hat{2}$  scale degree. In addition, we should never move from  $\flat\hat{2}$  (of the Neapolitan) to  $\sharp\hat{2}$  (of the  $\text{V}$  chord) in the same voice part (Example 2).<sup>2</sup>

### Example 2

c:  $\text{i}^6$   $\flat\text{II}^6$  V i

The soprano line often bridges the melodic diminished 3rd between the lowered supertonic and leading tone with stepwise motion:  $\flat\hat{2} - (\hat{8}) - \sharp\hat{7}$ . The tonic scale degree may be harmonically supported by either a cadential  $\frac{6}{4}$  or an applied chord, usually  $\text{vii}^{\circ 7}/\text{V}$ , as in Example 3.

### Example 3

A.

c:  $\text{i}^6$   $\flat\text{II}^6$  V i

B.

c:  $\text{i}^6$   $\flat\text{II}^6$  ( $\text{vii}^{\circ 7}/\text{V}$ ) V i

2. Composers did not consider the cross-relation between  $\flat\hat{2}$  and  $\sharp\hat{2}$ , in different voices a problem, however.

This passing motion is often missing, as the excerpt in Example 4 from the "Moonlight" Sonata demonstrates.

**Example 4** BEETHOVEN: PIANO SONATA IN C $\sharp$  MINOR, OP. 27, No. 2 ("MOONLIGHT"), I

48

c $\sharp$ : (V $\frac{6}{5}$ )      i      bII $\frac{6}{6}$       V $\frac{7}{7}$       i

When harmonizing an upper-voice descent of  $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$  that incorporates a bII $\frac{6}{6}$  chord, we should avoid the troublesome similar 5ths that could occur between the vii $\frac{7}{7}$ /V and V by doubling the chordal 5th in the dominant triad (Example 5).

**Example 5**

$\hat{5}$        $\hat{4}$        $\hat{3}$        $\hat{2}$        $\hat{1}$

c: i $\frac{6}{6}$       bII $\frac{6}{6}$       (vii $\frac{7}{7}$ /V)      V      7      i

## THE bII $\frac{6}{6}$ AS AN EMBELLISHING PRE-DOMINANT CHORD

Although the Neapolitan normally occurs at cadences, it may assume an embellishing role within the phrase. In this capacity the dominant harmony normally resolves to a weaker form of tonic, such as a i $\frac{6}{6}$  (Example 6). What is the function of the circled tones in the upper voice of this excerpt?

**Example 6** SCHUMANN: *PAPILLONS*, OP. 2, NO. 10

45

C: ( $\flat\text{II}^6$ )       $\text{vii}^\circ\frac{4}{3}$        $i^6$       ( $\text{V}\frac{4}{3}$ )

An embellishing  $\flat\text{II}^6$  may also move directly to  $i^6$ , as in Mozart's stepwise sequence of sixth chords in Example 7.

**Example 7** MOZART: PIANO SONATA IN D MAJOR, K.284, III

10

d: 6 6  $\flat 6$  6  $\emptyset$

In order to emphasize its particularly dark quality, composers will sometimes elaborate the Neapolitan chord with some kind of melodic flourish or gesture, as in the excerpt from Mozart's *Fantasia* (Example 8a), or extend it through several beats or even measures, as in the passage from Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata (Example 8b).



## Example 8

A. MOZART: PIANO FANTASIA IN D MINOR, K.397

49 *f* *p* 3

d: VI  $\flat\text{II}^6$

B. BEETHOVEN: PIANO SONATA IN C# MINOR, OP. 27, No. 2 ("MOONLIGHT"), III

131 *p* *ff* *p*

c#:  $\frac{6}{4}$  V VI  $\flat\text{II}^6$   $\rightarrow$

*cresc.*

$\flat\text{II}^6$   $\rightarrow$

$\flat\text{II}^6$   $\text{vii}^\circ 7/\text{V}$   $\frac{6}{4}$   $\frac{7}{3}$  V i

They may also consciously exploit the foreboding or sinister nature of the tritone relation between  $\flat\text{II}$  and V. In the excerpt in Example 9, Saint-Saëns employs a tritone leap in the top voice ( $\text{C}^6\text{--F}\sharp^5$ ) that reinforces the demonic character of his *Danse macabre*.

**Example 9** SAINT-SAËNS: *DANSE MACABRE*

416

*ff*

tritone

g: i (iv VII III VI  $\flat\text{II}$ )  $\flat\text{II}^6$  V i

The Neapolitan harmony is also employed in the crucial Curse motive of Wagner's *Ring* cycle, where  $\flat\text{II}\text{--V}^7$  is set over a dominant pedal in B minor, producing a tritone relation between the sustained  $\text{F}\sharp$  and the C Neapolitan triad; see Example 4c in Chapter 28 of the Workbook.

Examine the excerpts in Example 10 and identify the Neapolitan harmony in each. Observe the prevailing use of the minor mode; the  $\flat\text{II}$  in major is less common.

**Example 10**

A. "ACH GOTT, VOM HIMMEL SIEH' DAREIN" (BACH CHORALE HARMONIZATION)

g:

B. BACH: PASSACAGLIA AND FUGUE IN C MINOR, BWV 582

281

c:



C. BRAHMS: *TRAGIC OVERTURE*, OP. 81 (REDUCTION OF MM. 126–30)

f:

## D. HAYDN: PIANO SONATA IN C# MINOR, HOB. XVI:36, I

c#:

The first passage is the only instance of a  $\flat\text{II}^6$  in all of Bach's chorale harmonizations. In Example 10b, the  $\flat\text{II}^6$  serves as the climax of a triple fugue; how does Bach emphasize this chord? Do these first two passages by Bach exemplify cadential or embellishing functions? What is peculiar about the Neapolitan and its voice leading in the Brahms reduction given in Example 10c? Explain what happens in the first two beats of the second measure of the Haydn passage.

## OTHER USES OF THE NEAPOLITAN CHORD

The Neapolitan harmony may appear in other settings. In a few instances we find it in root position rather than its customary first inversion, so that  $\flat^2$  rather than  $\hat{4}$  occurs in the bass. The final cadence of Chopin's funeral C-minor Prelude is frequently cited as an instance of  $\flat\text{II}$  in  $\frac{5}{3}$  position (Example 11b).

## FOR FURTHER STUDY

An interesting use of the Neapolitan as an initial harmony occurs in the first three measures of Chopin's G-minor Ballade, Op. 23. At the other extreme, the B-major conclusion of Strauss's *Also*

*sprach Zarathustra* continually reiterates a  $\flat^2$  (C) in the bass, harking back to the "Nature" motive— $\text{C}^4\text{--C}^4\text{--C}^5$  in the trumpet—that opens the work.



**Example 11** CHOPIN: PRELUDE IN C MINOR, OP. 28, NO. 20

A.

1

*ff*

c: i iv<sup>7</sup> V<sup>7</sup> i I IV V<sup>7</sup> I

B.

11

*cresc.*

i iv V<sup>6</sup> i VI  $\flat$ II V<sup>7</sup> i

The opening two measures of the piece (Example 11a) reveal its origin. After the initial  $i$ - $iv^7$ - $V$ - $i$ , the same progression is repeated in  $\text{VI}$  ( $A\flat$  major), where the  $D\flat$  triad functions as IV. The return of this material in the last measures (Example 11b) sets up the expectation that a cadence in the submediant area will again follow the cadence in  $i$ , but the dominant of  $i$  substitutes for  $V/\text{VI}$ , instead directing us back to the tonic.

A poignant instance of the root-position  $\flat\text{II}$  may also be found in Wotan's touching Farewell, where the Neapolitan extends the pre-dominant function:  $iv^6$ - $\flat\text{II}$ .

**Example 12** WAGNER: WOTAN'S FAREWELL FROM *DIE WALKÜRE*, ACT III (SIMPLIFIED)

3

Der Augen leuchtendes Paar, das oft ich lächelnd gekost

e: (VI) iv i iv<sup>6</sup>  $\flat$ II V

Der Augen leuchtendes Paar,  
das oft ich lächelnd gekost

The radiant pair of eyes,  
which I often caressed with a smile

The Neapolitan may also serve as a **neighbor to the tonic**, substituting for an embellishing subdominant, as demonstrated by the excerpts in Example 13.

## Example 13

A. BRAHMS: VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF HAYDN, OP. 56A (VAR. 6)

286

B. (REDUCTION)

Bb: I (bII<sup>6</sup>) I (iv<sup>6</sup>) I

C. WAGNER: IMMOLATION SCENE FROM GÖTTERDÄMMERUNG, ACT III (SIMPLIFIED)

345

D<sup>b</sup>: IV (iv bII<sup>6</sup>) I

D. SCHUBERT: "DER DOPPELGÄNGER" FROM SCHWANENGESANG

1

b: i (V<sup>6</sup>) i<sup>6</sup> (V<sup>4</sup><sub>3</sub>) i



E.

56

b: i (V<sup>6</sup>) i<sup>6</sup> (bII V<sup>7</sup>/iv iv) I

The major tonic of the Brahms passage is embellished first by a  $\flat\text{II}^6$  and then by a mixture  $\text{iv}^6$  (Example 13a and 13b). The conclusion of Wagner's *Ring* cycle features an extended plagal motion of  $\text{IV}-(\text{iv}-\flat\text{II}^6)-\text{I}$  (Example 13c). The quotations from "Der Doppelgänger" (Examples 13d and 13e) exemplify Schubert's sensitivity to harmonic color. The accompaniment to this haunting song is based on a two-voice motive doubled in octaves; this can be seen in the first measures of this excerpt. In the brief piano coda (mm. 56–63), a Neapolitan chord in root position is now exchanged for the  $\text{V}_3^4$  that was heard earlier and initiates a conclusion to the piece with a plagal gesture:  $(\flat\text{II}-\text{V}^7/\text{iv})-\text{iv}-\text{I}$ . How does the composer avoid parallel 5ths in the  $\text{i}^6-\flat\text{II}$  progression?

A careful study of Schubert's songs reveals how closely he associated the Neapolitan harmony with subjects of grief or death in the texts. For instance, the Neapolitan is tonicized in the closing measures of his "Erlkönig," when the child is found dead in his father's arms. This chord is especially prominent in the depiction of tragic wandering in Schubert's song cycle *Winterreise*.

## PROLONGED NEAPOLITAN HARMONY

Measures 75–88 of the sixth of Schumann's *Davidsbündlertänze* contain an interesting example of prolonged Neapolitan harmony; listen to the excerpt while following the reduction in Example 14.

Following the opening  $\flat\text{II}^6$ , a sequence of applied  $\frac{4}{2}$  dominants initiates a descending succession of sixth chords. This sequential motion continues through the passage, arriving at another  $\flat\text{II}^6$  preceded by its  $\text{V}_2^4$ . The octave span in the soprano (see the beamed  $\text{Eb}^5-\text{Eb}^4$ ) prolongs the Neapolitan, which then resolves in a typical  $\frac{6}{4}$  cadence.



**Example 14** SCHUMANN: *DAVIDSBÜNDLERTÄNZE*, No. 6

75 88

d:  $\flat\text{II}^6$   $(\text{V}^{\frac{4}{2}}/\text{i})$   $\text{i}^6$   $\text{V}^{\frac{4}{2}}/\text{vii}$   $\text{vii}^6$   $\text{vii}^{\circ\frac{4}{3}}/\text{VI}$   $\text{VI}^6$   $\text{V}^{\frac{4}{2}}/\text{iv}$   $\text{iv}$   $\text{V}^{\frac{4}{2}}/\flat\text{II}$   $\flat\text{II}^6$   $\text{V}$

**TONICIZATION OF THE NEAPOLITAN TRIAD**

When the Neapolitan chord is tonicized in the minor mode, it is preceded by its dominant, the VI chord (Examples 15 and 17, below). The association between VI and  $\flat\text{II}$  in minor may be summed up in the adage “The dominant of the Neapolitan is the Neapolitan of the dominant.”

**Example 15**

c:  $\text{i}$   $(\text{V}/\flat\text{II})$   $\flat\text{II}^6$   $(\text{vii}^{\circ 7}/\text{V})$   $\text{V}$

Neapolitan tonicizations are less common in major. The Mozart excerpt in Example 16 includes brief tonicizations of  $\text{ii}$ ,  $\text{I}$ , and  $\flat\text{II}^6$ . In this case, the dominant of the Neapolitan ( $\text{V}/\flat\text{II}$ ) is a  $\flat\text{VI}$  triad.



**Example 16** MOZART: CLARINET QUINTET IN A MAJOR, K.581, IV

13

A: (vii°<sup>7</sup>/ii) ii (vii°<sup>7</sup>) I (V/bII) bII<sup>6</sup> V<sup>7</sup> I

We may also encounter extended tonicizations of  $bII$ . In the Chopin passage in Example 17, the  $bII$  is tonicized and prolonged for several measures before it moves to  $I^6$  via a  $V_2^4$ . Study the approach to and departure from the Neapolitan in the voice-leading reduction, which shows that the whole passage is actually prolonging the tonic chord in a simple embellishing progression with a very slow harmonic rhythm.

**Example 17** CHOPIN: PRELUDE IN B MINOR, OP. 28, No. 6

A.

9

B. (REDUCTION)

b: i (V/bII) bII<sup>6</sup> V<sub>2</sub><sup>4</sup> i<sup>6</sup>