

DIATONIC Modulation

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Modulation is the name given to the process of changing from one key to another. There are many subtle variations of this process but the most common way is called diatonic modulation. This means: to modulate to a key whose home chord is diatonic to the key you are leaving. Example: A modulation from A to Bm or C#m or D or E or F#m is a diatonic modulation.

A diatonic modulation is almost always accomplished in the same way: Some variation of the I or V7 of the new key is introduced before the ear accepts the fact that the new key has been entered (this is where secondary dominants come in). For instance: A C#7 F#m could be said to be a modulation from A to F#m. However, because of the brevity of such a chord progression, the ear doesn't really accept this fact as much as if a final cadence progression is played in the new key → A C#7 F#m Bm F#m(5) C#7 F#m. So, the process of preceding a diatonic chord with its V7 is often called a temporary modulation if there is no cadence in the new key. Example:

A C#7 F#m Bm D E7 A. Often the I (7) of the new key is prepared by iim7(b5) or IV of the new key as well (actually, any chord of the new key might precede the V7 but ii + IV are the most common). Also, quite frequently the ii I of different keys are strung together without resolving to their respective Is. Example: A G#m7(b5) C#7 F#7 Bm7 E7 F#m7 A7 D. Notice that because this whole phrase ends on a ii I of D, the ear can accept this as a modulation even though no cadence follows.

Sometimes a key is entered by its home chord and then a cadence is used which contains the V7 of the new key. Example: A F#m Bm C#7 F#m. You might say that the F#m + Bm were still in the key of A but they are also in the key of F#m. This is one reason why diatonic modulation sounds so smooth — that is because these are chords that are common to both keys that are usually involved. These are called PIVOT CHORDS.

By the way, while it is wise to know about this ii I business in the diatonic keys, it is also important to know how they relate to the home key so that you always know where you are in relation to it in case you want to get back to it smoothly (most pieces of music start & end in the same key — seems to make for good sense of proportion, balance, unity & all that good stuff). Example: A G#m7(b5) C#7 F#m could be called I iim7(b5) V7 i or I viim7(b5) III VI. Know it both ways & you will get the most out of it.

Another common device in diatonic modulation is that of modulation at the end of a phrase or by direct skip. Example: A F#m Bm D A E7 A | E A E B7 E. Because of the pause in the phrase, the ear readily accepts the modulation. Sometimes the exact same idea will be repeated at a different pitch level (this is known as a sequence.) Example:

A series of guitar chord diagrams for the following chords: A, D, E7, A, Bm, E, F#7, Bm, D, G, A7, D, Bm, E7, A. The diagrams are arranged in a sequence and labeled "PHRASE IN A", "IN Bm", "in D", and "modulation back to A". A "pause" is indicated above the Bm E7 A sequence.

The important thing in all these thoughts expressed on this page is not to argue over whether this or that is a temporary modulation or a real modulation or such, but to learn to hear these type of progressions in songs, to learn to use them, and to understand what and why you or others are doing certain chord changes no matter what you call them.