

Modulations for Congregational Worship Music

By Mark Hayes

This handout outlines the rudiments of modulation, which may serve you well in congregational playing. The first two half-step and whole-step examples can be used to modulate expediently between stanzas of a hymn or between hymns. There are other more complicated key relationships to consider, especially when working with a medley of praise and worship songs or hymns. This handout shows how to modulate between key signatures that are a minor third apart, a perfect fourth apart, a perfect fifth apart, a minor sixth apart, and a minor seventh apart.

A crucial element of modulation is the "pivot" or "transition" chord that leads the ear to the new key. In a conventional modulation, this will always be the V7 chord of the new key. For example, if we want to modulate from C to Db, then we will use an Ab7 (V7 of Db) as the transition chord as shown in Ex. 1.

Ex. 1 - Half-step modulation

Musical notation for Ex. 1: Half-step modulation. The piece is in 4/4 time. It starts with a C major chord in the right hand and a C major bass line in the left hand. After two measures, the right hand changes to an Ab7 chord, labeled "V7 of new key", while the left hand continues with a C major bass line. After two more measures, the right hand changes to a Db major chord, and the left hand changes to a Db major bass line. The key signature changes from C major to Db major.

Sometimes it doesn't sound good to go directly from the old key to the V7 chord of the new key. You may want to use a sequence of two chords - the iim7 and the V7 of the new key. If you're modulating from C to D, you would use an Em7 chord first and then an A7 to set up the key of D as shown in Ex. 2. Notice how the voice leading in the RH makes the transition sound smoother.

Ex. 2 - Whole-step modulation

Musical notation for Ex. 2: Whole-step modulation. The piece is in 4/4 time. It starts with a C major chord in the right hand and a C major bass line in the left hand. After two measures, the right hand changes to an Em7 chord, then to an A7 chord, while the left hand continues with a C major bass line. After two more measures, the right hand changes to a D major chord, and the left hand changes to a D major bass line. The key signature changes from C major to D major.

When modulating to keys a minor third away, you have more than one option. You can use the iim7 - V7 combination shown in Ex.3 or use no preparatory chord at all as in Ex. 4. Notice how I modulate from C to Eb with no advance warning in the middle of "Jesus Loves Me." The reason why this modulation works is because of the common tone between the two keys - the note "G". It helps to connect the two keys, even though they are unrelated. I think this kind of surprise modulation is fresh and has a lifting quality to it. However, I would caution against using this in congregational singing because it doesn't give the listener any advance warning. Use it in solo piano arrangements or when accompanying a solo singer or instrumentalist who is not unnerved by the inherent "surprise" element.

Ex. 3 - Minor third modulation with preparatory chords

Chords: C, Fm7, B \flat 7, E \flat

Ex. 4 - Minor third modulation with no preparatory chords

Chords: F, C/G, Am7, Dm9, G7, C, Emaj7, E \flat 9, E \flat 7, A \flat , Fm7

Modulating a perfect fourth up is a snap because the V7 of the new key is based on the I chord of the old key. For example, to go from the key of C to the key of F, all you do is play a C7 chord to prepare the new key. In this instance just remember to add a dominant 7th to the tonic chord of the old key and you're all set, as shown in Ex. 5.

Ex. 5 - Perfect fourth modulation

Chords: C, C7, F, Dm

While Ex. 5 is easy and straight-forward, you may want to be more creative and add the iim7 - V7 combination to this particular modulation as shown in Ex. 6. With the addition of just one extra chord, it gives the transition more substance and style.

Ex. 6 - Perfect fourth modulation with iim7 chord

Chords: C, Gm7, C7sus, C7, F

While we have used the V7 chord to prepare the new key so far, in the next modulation it's better to use the IV/V chord of the new key when modulating a perfect fifth higher. If we modulate from C to G, the IV/V chord would be a C/D chord. As you can see by the chord symbol, this chord has a lot of common tones with the first key, C major. Notice how smoothly this transition works in Ex. 7.

Ex. 7 - Perfect fifth modulation

When modulating up a perfect fifth, you can also use the IV/V by itself and not resolve to the V7 as shown in Ex. 8. Notice that the note "C" is in the RH top voice to connect the old key to the transition chord. However I like to finish the cadence by playing the "D" or "V note" in the top voice because it prepares the ear better for the new key.

Ex. 8 - Perfect fifth modulation using only IV/V

The iim7 - V7 combination works nicely when modulating up a minor sixth. In Ex. 9, notice the use of melodic sequence in the transition. This masks the abrupt change in harmonies, because the ear is drawn to the repetitive motive in the RH. Always try to incorporate a melodic fragment that leads the ear somewhere. Your modulation will sound more creative and artistic.

Ex. 9 - Minor sixth modulation

The iim7 - V7 progression also works well when modulating up a minor 7th. For instance, when going from the key of C to the key of Bb, there is not much commonality. However by using the iim7 chord in the key of Bb, which would be Cm7, there are at least 2 notes in common with the old key, those being C and G. They provide a link between the two keys. Add a little melody to mask the chord change and you can make a smooth transition as shown below in Ex. 10.

Ex. 10 - Minor seventh modulation

The musical notation for Ex. 10 is as follows:

- Measure 1:** Key of C major, C chord. Melody: C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, F4, E4, D4. Bass: C3, G2, F2, E2, D2, C2.
- Measure 2:** Key of Bb major, Cm7 chord. Melody: C4, Bb4, A4, G4. Bass: C3, Bb2, A2, G2.
- Measure 3:** Key of Bb major, F7sus chord. Melody: C4, Bb4, A4, G4. Bass: C3, Bb2, A2, G2.
- Measure 4:** Key of Bb major, F7 chord. Melody: C4, Bb4, A4, G4. Bass: C3, Bb2, A2, G2.
- Measure 5:** Key of Bb major, Bb chord. Melody: C4, Bb4, A4, G4. Bass: C3, Bb2, A2, G2.

The art of modulation need not be complex. A rule of thumb is to play the V7 of the new key to prepare the I chord of the new key signature. If this simple progression doesn't sound good, try using the iim7 of the new key and then the V7 of the new key. It helps to craft a melody in your RH which gives the chord progression a natural sense of direction. You can often blend the most unlikely chords together if you craft an interesting melody.

Each transition should be 2-4 measures long if you are accompanying congregational singing. If it gets much longer than that, people may not be able to follow you. Another important aspect of modulation is the need to know different chord inversions. Don't play every chord in root position unless it's the best choice for that transition.

In order to gain confidence, you might want to write out each modulation in a simple form using a lead line and chord symbols. That way you won't go blank in the middle of a service. It's happened to me!