Modulation to Any Key

by James M. Stevens

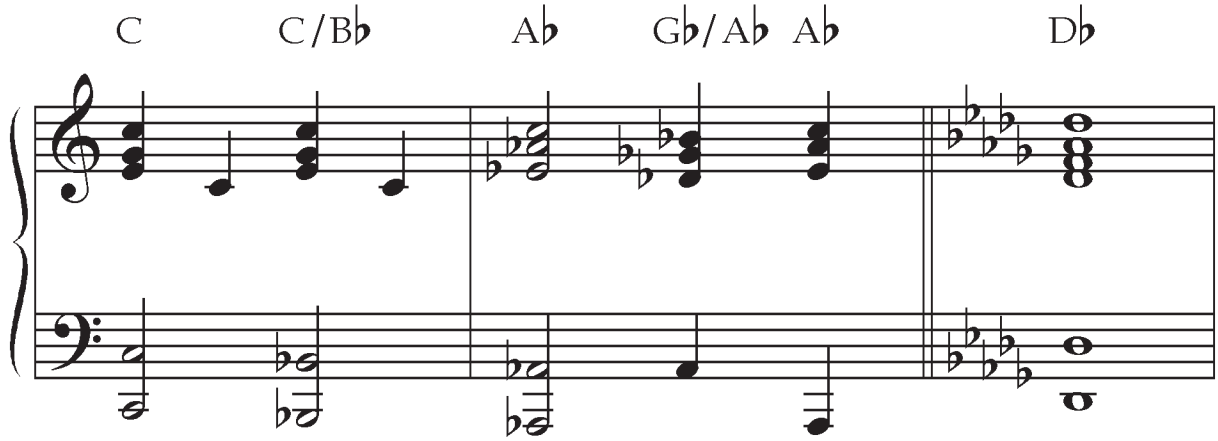
In this exercise, I am demonstrating how to modulate from the key of C to any key. Most pianists are comfortable changing keys that move up a half step, whole step, or perfect fourth. Other keys are sometimes avoided. However, you can modulate to any key. The trick is to make it sound smooth.

Look for things that the two keys have in common. Do they share common notes or chords? Whenever possible, emphasize the shared notes between keys. This will add a clear connection

Of course, the most obvious way to transpose is to get to the dominant seventh chord of the new key. Yet, to my ears, the pure dominant seventh chord can sound very abrupt and ugly and I try to avoid it. Instead, I substitute variations of it such as a Vsus7. You will notice that in many of these modulations, I wait until the last moment to resolve the suspension before hitting the tonic of the key. The ii-V chord progression of the new key can be important as there is a strong tendency for the ii chord to move to the V chord. Therefore, many times, I will first go to ii chord of the new key in the beginning of the transistion. It all depends on the individual keys and the notes that they share

Examine each of these modulations. Learn to create your own. Make it a challenge for you to develop your own confidence in moving from any key to any other.

Modulation Up a Half Step



In this example, the “C” is the root of the first chord and the third of the A flat dominant chord of D flat Major. Although I do not usually go straight to the dominant of the new key, because of the shared common note, it works well.

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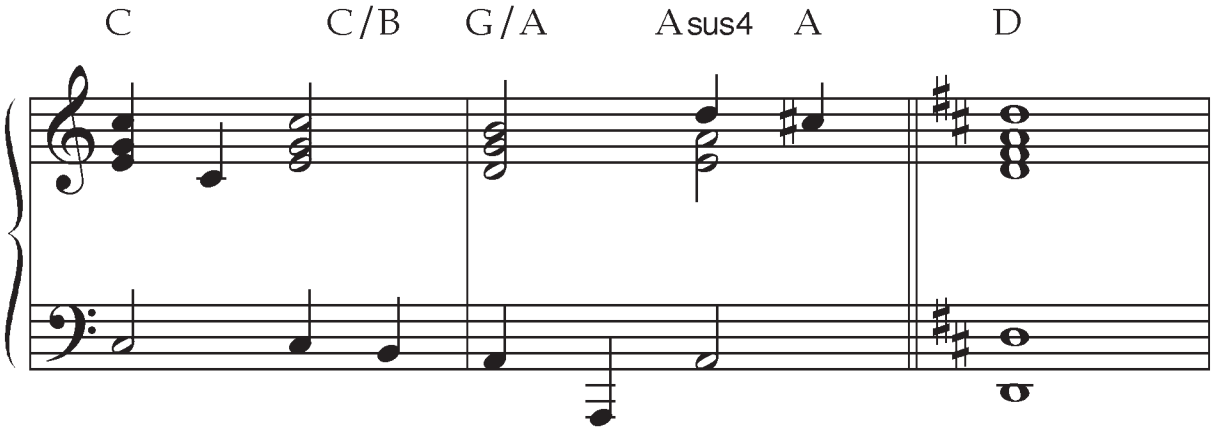
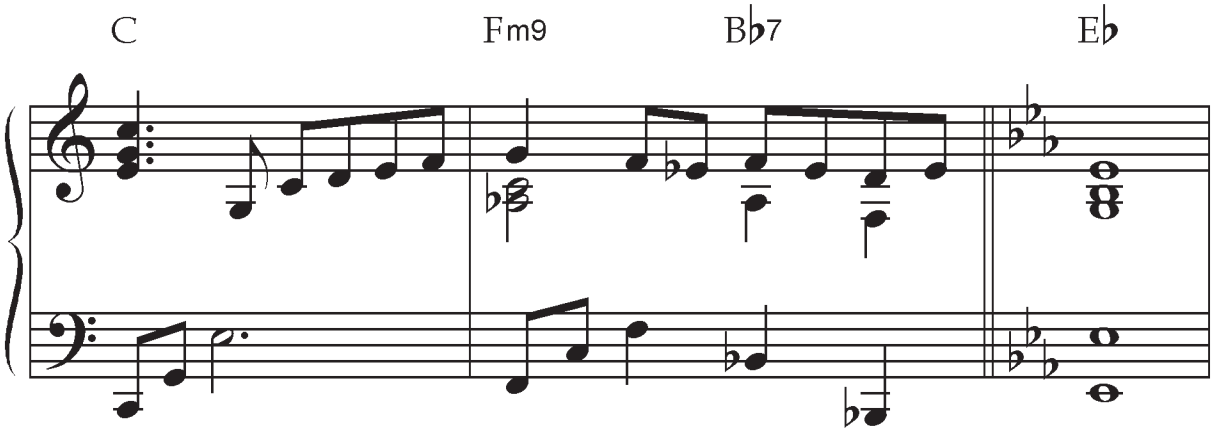
Modulation Up a Whole Step



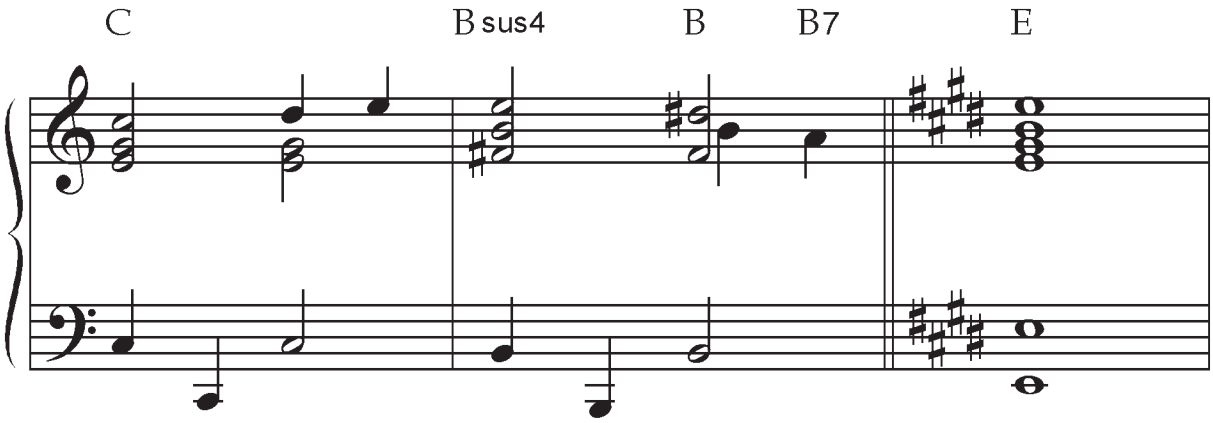
Look at the G/A chord or the 4/5 chord as written above. This chord is a good substitute for the dominant seventh. You hear this chord in many pop arrangements. It works particularly well here because every note is shared by both keys. Notice how I avoid the C sharp leading tone of D Major until the last moment.

Here is a place where I use the ii-V progression to transistion between keys. Notice on the Fm9 chord that with the inclusion of the 9 there are three common notes that are used between the two keys: C, F, and G. We would actually refer to the Fm9 in this context as a chromatic pivot chord because with the exception of one altered note, the A flat, all the notes of the chord are shared by both keys.

Modulation Up a Minor Third



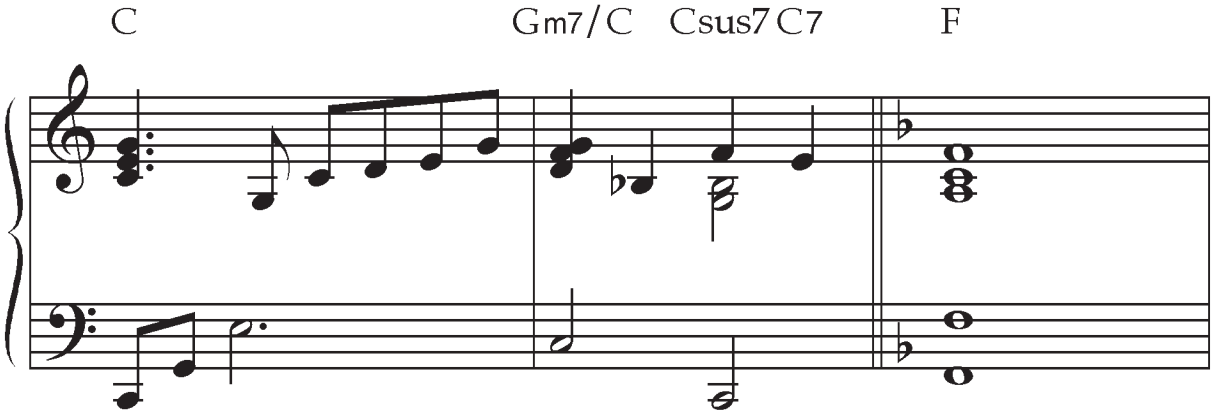
Modulation Up a Major Third



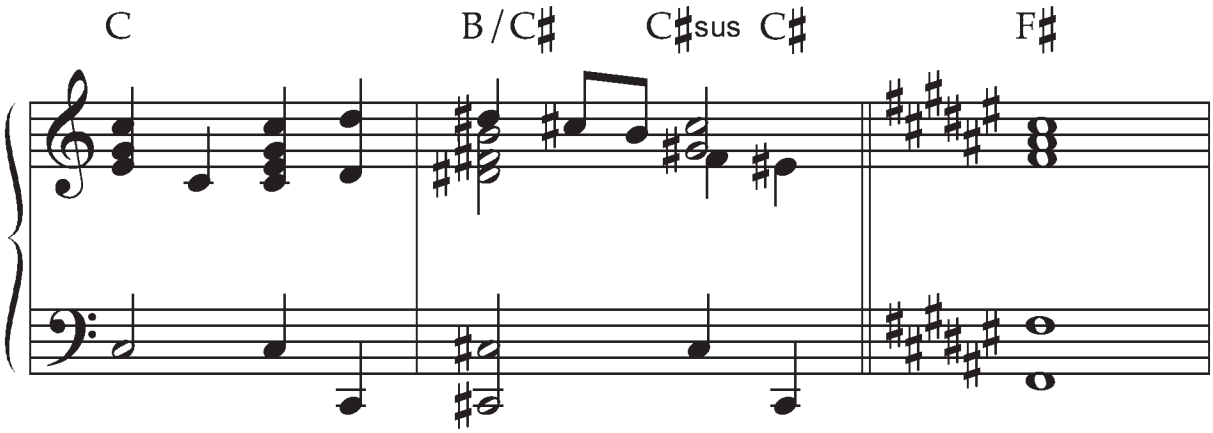
Above, the “E” in the melody of the second measure is shared in both keys, is the suspended note of the dominant chord, and is the tonic of the new key. The “B” is also shared by both keys as well as the “A” which is the seventh of the dominant in the new key.

The modulation of a perfect fourth above is the easiest of all because you are merely changing the I chord of the first key to the V chord of the second key. However, notice once again that I have delayed the resolution of the C7 chord until the last moment. This makes the sound less abrupt and solidifies the arrival of the new key.

Modulation Up a Perfect Fourth



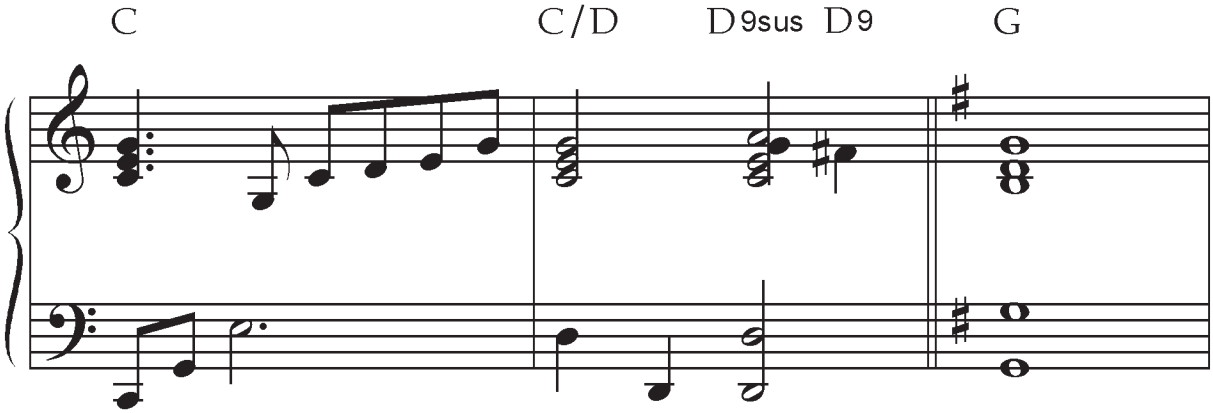
Modulation Up a Tritone



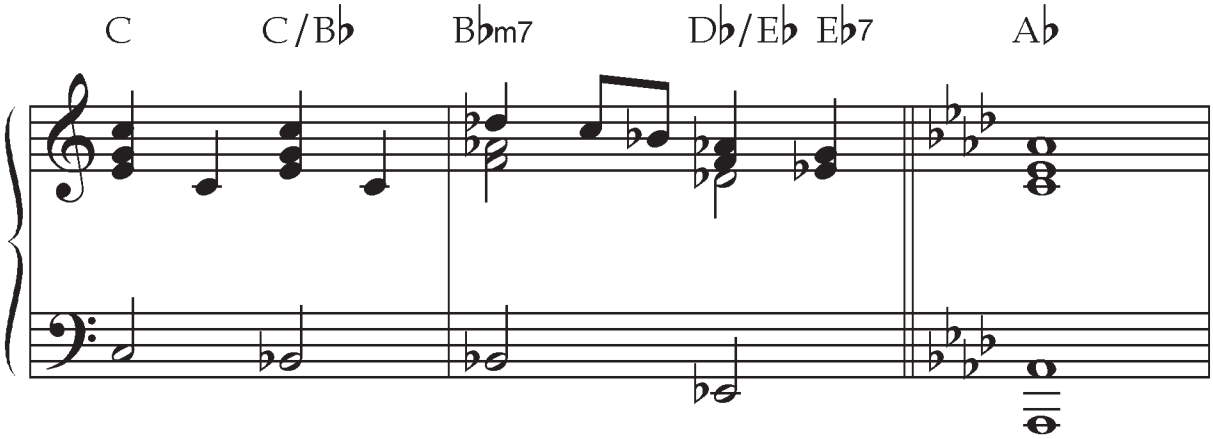
Transposing a tritone up is probably the most difficult because the relationship between the keys is the most distant. However, the “B” is shared by both keys and is included on the first beat of the transistion in the second measure. Notice how the melody in the first two measures begins in the key of C and shifts mid stream to the key of F sharp. Play this a few times and it may surprise you at how smooth it sounds, especially when you compare the sounds of the C Major and F sharp Major chords side by side.

In the example below, all of the notes in the transistion are shared by both keys with the exception of the F sharp which is play on the last beat. Here is another good use of the 4/5 chord since this allows you to use the I chord in the transistion by simply raising the bass note up by a whole step.

Modulation Up a Perfect Fifth



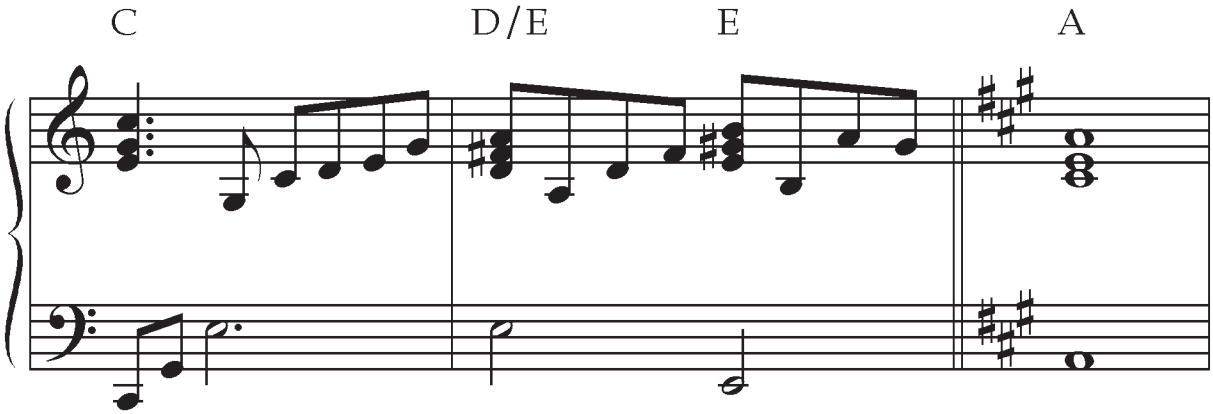
Modulation Up a Minor Sixth



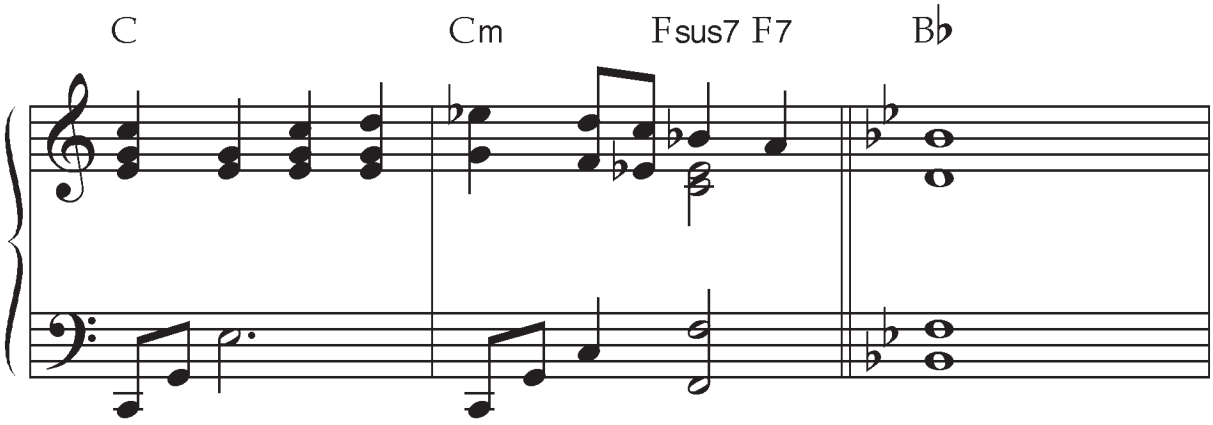
In the modulation above, I have once again used the ii-V progression of the new key in the transistion. However, another modulation that works well with this interval is the direct modulation where you would leave out the notes of the middle measure. You could turn each of the notes of the first measure into half notes and go straight to the key of A flat Major. This is because of the shared note of "C" which is the tonic of the first key and the mediant of the second.

The transistion below is accomplished by using two chromatic pivot chords, the D/E and the E. They both share notes of both keys with the exception of one note that is altered for the new key. It is the shared notes that ties the common thread in modulation that creates smooth transistions. Always ask yourself, "What do these two key have in common?"

Modulation Up a Major Sixth



Modulation Up a Minor Seventh



Notice again the use of the ii-V progression in this transposition as well as all of the shared notes we see in the second measure such as: C, D, F, G, and A.

I hope these examples of different modulations have been helpful to you. Good luck as you work on your transposition skills! James M. Stevens

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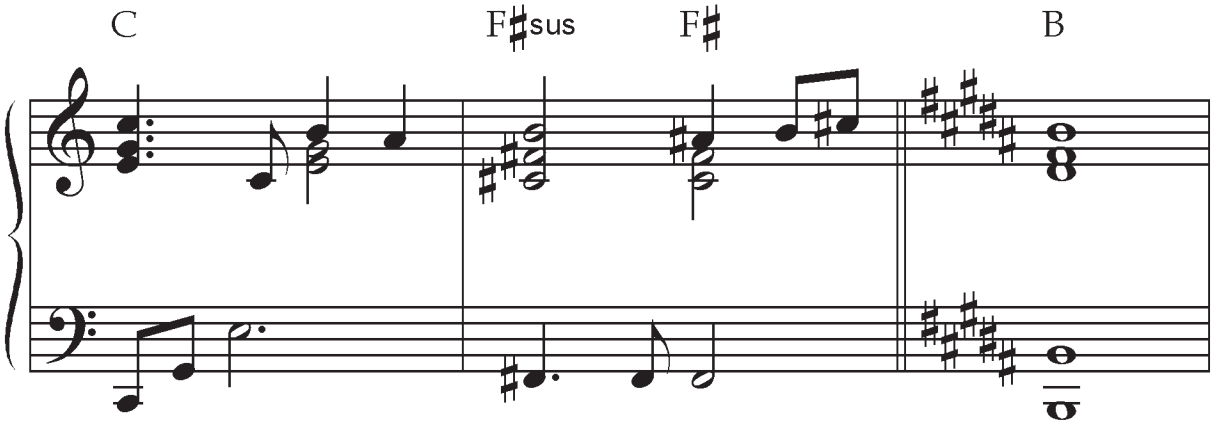
The Major seventh up or the Minor 2nd down is like the tritone, a difficult one to transpose because of the lack of common notes. However, the "B" is shared and I used it here as part of the suspension that prepares the listener for the new key.

Modulation Up a Major Seventh