

Composition Project, Step 6: Write a Version of Your Melody that Ends with a PAC in a Contrasting Key

In this step you write a phrase that, together with your first phrase, will form a modulating parallel period.

First, choose a contrasting key; for major-mode compositions it should be V, for minor-mode compositions it should be III or v.

Writing modulations is tricky, and students often find that pivot-chord modulations that look fine on paper sound quite awkward. Our approach of starting with the melody will be particularly helpful here, for if we can write melodies that modulate convincingly, it will usually not be so difficult to find good harmonizations.

As before we will improvise the modulating melodies, but we will have more constraints to work with. It will help to look at the phases in advance and figure out exactly what will be needed in each.

In the first phase, you will sing the beginning of your melody, starting to improvise at some point.

Skipping to the end, in the third phase, you will steer the phrase to an ending with a convincing melodic PAC in the new key. The most normal approach to a PAC is a gradual descent, so choose a register for your final note that isn't too high or too low, and which gives you a comfortable amount of space above it (probably a fourth to a sixth) that is still in a comfortable register, as your phrase will end by descending through these notes. If you run into problems with register, you may want to change the key of your composition.

Finally, consider the second phase, in which the modulation will take place. As you start to improvise, departing from the start of your original phrase, you will move to notes that belong to the scales both of the home key and of the new key. Figure out which notes these are, bearing in mind both changes of key signature and raised leading tones in the case of minor keys. Also identify those notes that will make smooth connections into the descent into the PAC in phase three.

Once you have figured out which notes are available for each phase, improvise the phrase, starting with the beginning of your original phrase, starting to improvise and moving to notes that are shared between both keys, and finally descending to a clear melodic PAC. You may need to do this a few times until you have improvised a satisfying melody that modulates convincingly.

(Note that this formula is quite prescriptive. If you are able to write a convincing modulation that departs from the formula, go ahead, but if not, you will probably find the formula very helpful.)

Examples:

Major key:

Because the melody sat in the upper part of the staff, we can use D4 for the PAC in the dominant without going too low. All notes except C/C# are shared between both keys, so music that goes no higher than a B will set up the descent to D well.

A musical score for a major key example, consisting of two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in the treble clef. The first measure contains a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, a quarter note B4, and an eighth note A4. The second measure contains a quarter note G4, an eighth note F#4, and a quarter note G4. The third measure contains a quarter note G4, an eighth note F#4, a quarter note E4, and an eighth note D4. The fourth measure contains a quarter note D4, an eighth note C#4, a quarter note B4, and an eighth note A4. The bass clef staff is empty.

Minor key:

For this melody, I think the major mode would make a nice contrast, so I will use III as my contrasting key, and C5 seems the obvious register for the PAC. All notes except G/G# are shared between the two keys, so the second phase should use F and below before descending to the PAC.

A musical score for a minor key example, consisting of two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The melody is written in the treble clef. The first measure contains a quarter note G4, an eighth note A4, a quarter note B4, and an eighth note A4. The second measure contains a quarter note G4, an eighth note F#4, and a quarter note G4. The third measure contains a quarter note G4, an eighth note F#4, a quarter note E4, and an eighth note D4. The fourth measure contains a quarter note D4, an eighth note C#4, a quarter note B4, and an eighth note A4. The bass clef staff is empty.