

The Neapolitan Sixth Chord

Jason Thorpe Buchanan

The Neapolitan Sixth chord is a major triad based on the lowered second degree of the major or minor scale. It is sometimes referred to as the Phrygian II, and is considered a chromatic chord because the altered supertonic does not result from either tonicization or typical mode mixture.

C Major: ii N N⁶ A minor: ii[°] N N⁶

The chord is generally found in first inversion, thus the name "Neapolitan Sixth", but the term is also applied when the chord is in root position. Although it was already an established feature in music (not only Italian) of the second-half of the 17th-century (it was used by Carassimi, Corelli, and Purcell), it is associated with the 'Neapolitan' school of 18th-century Italian composers such as Scarlatti, Porpora, Leo, Jommelli and Pergolesi.

F Major: I vii[°]7 I V V₂⁴ V_{5/iv}⁶ N⁶ I₄⁶ V I

The Neapolitan Sixth generally resolves to a dominant chord (or tonic six-four) and will often precede an Authentic cadence, but there are numerous examples where other chords (such as vii[°]) are interpolated between the N6 and the V. In this way its function is similar to that of a subdominant. In regards to approach, typically any chord which precedes the diatonic ii may precede the N6. By lowering the root, harmonic tension is increased and its subdominant function is strengthened. The altered tone resolves by a descending diminished 3rd to the leading tone, the third of the dominant chord.

D minor: i N⁶ V i i N⁶ i_{6/4}⁶ V i i N⁶ vii[°]7/V V i

Because the Neapolitan tends to "embellish" the dominant, it is frequently used at cadential points in music of the Baroque and Classical periods. Like most chromatic chords, its use became more liberal in the Romantic and generally faded away during the Post-Romantic and Impressionistic eras. The Neapolitan can also be used to achieve chromatic modulation, either as a diatonic triad in the first key and an N6 in the second, or vice-versa.

Analyze the following examples with Roman numerals and identify the Neapolitan Sixth chords with the symbol N6.

Vivaldi-Bach - Concerto in D minor for Organ (2nd Mvt.)