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## Writing retransitions

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**The journey is long by rules, but short and efficient by examples.**

*The Baroque composer and music theorist Johann Mattheson used the above quote from Seneca as the epigraph for his 1719 treatise, Exemplarische Organisten-Probe.*

*This handout is a little different from previous handouts. Our previous handouts have mostly been about “knowledge that,” that is, declarative knowledge that I expect you to know and upon which I might later quiz you. (E.g., “what is a real answer?”) This handout is more of an attempt to demonstrate “knowledge how” through examples. I will not quiz you on the examples below, but to those of you who wish to write retransitions, I hope they will prove useful models.*

## Retransitions

As we have already seen, a *retransition* is a passage of freely composed music in a fugue exposition that connects the answer back to the subject.

It is not possible to give any firm rules about how to write retransitions, because they are free passages of counterpoint and so the possibilities are endless. Nevertheless, below I attempt to provide a few reliable strategies for composing retransitions, and illustrate them with examples.

In this class, we are focusing on writing fugues with eliding tonal answers. In such a fugue,

- the end of the answer will be on V, as I of the key of the dominant.
- the start of the subject will be on V, as V of the key of the tonic.

Thus **the beginning of the retransition is “I of V”, and the destination is “V of I.”** Our challenge in writing the retransition will be to write music that leads convincingly from the beginning harmony to the destination harmony.

*Below, I provide 3 retransitions for expositions using each of the two subjects from last week’s assignment. (This supplies both major and minor key examples.) I have also provided a blank staff below each retransition; I suggest that you use this space to analyze the underlying counterpoint of the retransition.*

Most often, retransitions will immediately move away from the dominant key, by introducing  $\hat{4}$  (rather than sharp  $\hat{4}$ ).

One common way of doing this is just to set a descending scale beginning on  $\hat{5}$ , which we can embellish as we see fit. (It is especially idiomatic to use many suspensions in such a descending scale passage, resulting in a chain of 7–6 or 2–3 suspensions.) At some point, we will have to break the scale off, either on the dominant harmony, or on a harmony that can lead smoothly to the dominant. The following example illustrates.

The first system of the musical score for 'The Rose Tree' consists of two staves, treble and bass. The treble staff begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The melody starts on a whole rest, followed by a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The bass staff remains on whole rests throughout this system.

The image shows a musical score for two sections: 'Retransition' and 'Subject'. The 'Retransition' section is written for a single melodic line in treble clef, starting with a half note G4, followed by quarter notes A4, B4, and C5, then a half note B4, and finally a half note A4. The 'Subject' section is written for a single melodic line in treble clef, starting with a quarter rest, followed by quarter notes G4, A4, B4, and C5. The score is presented on a grand staff with two systems of staves.

Another way of introducing  $\hat{4}$  is to tonicize IV with an applied dominant chord. (In general, the use of applied dominant chords is quite characteristic of retransitions.) Often, tonicizing IV is done by sequencing the resolution to V at the end of the answer down a whole step, as in the next example. IV is a primary harmony in the tonic key, so from there we can proceed smoothly to our destination.



A musical score for a retransition and subject. It consists of two staves, treble and bass. The treble staff contains three measures of music. The first measure is labeled "Retransition" and contains a half note G4, a half note F4, and a half note E4. The second measure contains a half note D4, a half note C4, and a half note B3. The third measure contains a half note A3, a half note G3, and a half note F3. The bass staff has whole rests in all three measures. Below the first staff, there is a section labeled "Subject" which consists of two staves, treble and bass, each containing three measures of whole rests.

One special technique that is especially useful in retransitions is known as *inganno* (“deception” in Italian). In this technique, at the cadence to V, the leading-tone is lowered, so that we never actually resolve to V. Instead, the lowered leading tone (which is  $\hat{4}$  in the main key) helps lead us back to the tonic.



A musical score in C major, 4/4 time, consisting of three measures. The first measure has a half note G4 in the treble and a whole rest in the bass, with the label "NB *inganno*" below it. The second measure has a half note A4 in the treble and a whole rest in the bass, with the label "Retransition" above it. The third measure has a half note C5 in the treble and a whole rest in the bass, with the label "Subject" below it. Below this system is an empty system of two staves.

## Minor key retransitions

In minor keys, we can use all the devices already mentioned. One difference is that moving away from the dominant key will involve not only lowering sharp  $\hat{4}$  but also lowering  $\hat{2}$  of the dominant minor key to  $\hat{6}$  of the tonic minor key (e.g., lowering E-natural to E-flat when the tonic is G minor).

The following retransition is based on another embellished descending scale. Note the chain of 2–3 suspensions.



A musical score for a retransition and subject in G minor, consisting of four measures. The first two measures are labeled "Retransition" and the last two are labeled "Subject". The treble clef staff has a descending eighth-note scale (F4, E4, D4, C4) in the first measure, a half note C4 in the second, and a descending eighth-note scale (B4, A4, G4, F4) in the third and fourth. The bass clef staff contains a descending eighth-note scale (F3, E3, D3, C3) in the first measure, a half note C3 in the second, and a descending eighth-note scale (B2, A2, G2, F2) in the third and fourth. Below this system is a set of empty staves for practice.

In minor, a useful option is a sequence that tonicizes IV and then III with applied dominant chords, and from there returns to the tonic. (See the next example.)



Retransition Subject

A musical score in 2/4 time, key of B-flat minor. The first three measures are labeled 'Retransition' and show a bass line with a half note B-flat, quarter note A, quarter note G, and quarter note F. The next two measures are labeled 'Subject' and show a bass line with a half note E, quarter note D, quarter note C, and quarter note B-flat. The treble staff is mostly empty, with a few notes in the final two measures: a half note B-flat and a quarter note A. Below this, there are two empty staves for further notation.

As already indicated above, the use of applied dominant chords is very typical of retransitions. As in the previous example, these applied chords are often sequenced. Here is a further example. In this case, first III is tonicized, and then I is, before we proceed to a half-cadence that prepares the reappearance of the subject.



The second system of musical notation consists of two staves (treble and bass clef) in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The system is divided into two parts: "Retransition" and "Subject". The "Retransition" part consists of four measures. The melody in the treble staff begins with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The bass staff begins with a half note G3, a half note A3, and a half note B3. The "Subject" part consists of two measures. The melody in the treble staff begins with a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The bass staff begins with a half note G3, a half note A3, and a half note B3. The system ends with a double bar line.