

Related keys

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Supposing you are writing counterpoint, and you think, “it would be nice to create some variety by changing to a new key.” What a great idea! But how does one decide which key to switch to?

Later in this course, we will see some common patterns for the arrangement of keys in a composition. (The most important of these is that the first new key visited is usually V.) But for now, I want to introduce a useful rule-of-thumb for choosing the keys we might visit: related keys.

Related keys

Later musicians, like Schubert, Thelonious Monk, or Jacob Collier, sometimes modulate to very distant keys. But in the Baroque era, composers typically stuck to the closest keys.

But what does it mean for a key to be “closest”? There are a number of different ways we might define this notion:

1. Keys whose key signature differs by no more than one accidental from the key signature of the main key.
2. Keys whose tonic triads belong to the scale of the main key.
3. The IV, and V keys of the main key, as well as the I, IV, and V keys of the main key’s relative major or minor key.
4. Keys that are adjacent on the circle of fifths.

All four of these criteria select the same set of keys:

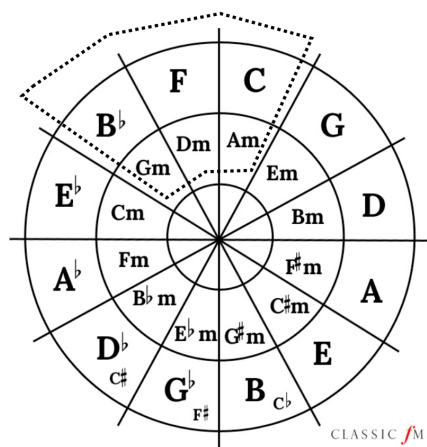
- in major, ii, iii, IV, V, and vi.
- in minor, III, iv, v, VI, VII.

We will call this set the “related keys” of a given key. (In fact it isn’t surprising that 1. and 3. above select the same keys, because they are actually two ways of saying the same thing. Also, note that in 2., for minor keys, the scale in question is the natural minor scale.)

But rather than trying to memorize the list of roman numerals above, **you should pick whichever one of (or combination of) the above criteria is easiest or most intuitive to you and learn it**, so that, if provided with any given key, you’ll be able to readily identify its related keys.

For example, take the key of D minor.

- the key signature of D minor has one flat. F major also has one flat. The keys with zero flats are A minor and C major. The keys with two flats are G minor and B-flat major. Thus (listed in ascending order) the related keys are F, G minor, A minor, B-flat, and C.
- the triads found in the D natural minor scale are: D minor, E diminished, F major, G minor, A minor, B-flat major, and C major. E diminished is not a consonant triad, so we can rule it out. Thus the related keys are F, G minor, A minor, B-flat, and C.
- the I, IV, and V keys in D minor are D minor, G minor, and A minor. D minor's relative major is F major. The I, IV, and V keys in F major are F major, B-flat major, and C major. Thus (omitting D minor itself) the related keys are F, G minor, A minor, B-flat, and C.
- below is a diagram of the circle-of-fifths I found online (thanks, Classic FM!). I've placed a box around the keys that are adjacent to D minor on the circle. As you can see, the related keys are F, G minor, A minor, B-flat, and C.



One thing to note is that **the parallel minor** (e.g., C minor, if we are in C major) **or parallel major** (e.g., A major, if we are in A minor) **is not among the related keys!** “Modal mixture” (the process of switching between the parallel major and minor keys) was relatively rare in the Baroque.

Another important thing to note is that **while, in minor keys, the dominant chord is major, the dominant key is minor.** This fact might seem arbitrary or confusing, but it's actually quite logical if you understand the reason for it:

- the dominant *chord* is major because it needs a leading tone in order to tend convincingly toward the tonic
- the dominant *key* is minor because it is the closest key “sharps-wise” on the circle of fifths. From a given minor key, the dominant *minor* key is much closer than the dominant *major* key.