

## 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.*

## Major key retransitions

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.



Retransition

Subject

A musical staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The treble clef contains a descending scale starting on G4, moving down to D4, with a sharp sign on the D4 note. The bass clef is empty. The word "Retransition" is written above the staff. The word "Subject" is written below the staff.

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.



The second musical example is divided into two systems. The first system contains two staves (treble and bass clef) over three measures. The first measure is labeled "Retransition" and shows a melody in the treble clef: a half note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The second measure continues the melody with a quarter note B4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note G4, and a quarter note F#4. The third measure shows a melody in the treble clef: a half note E4, a quarter note D4, a quarter note C4, and a quarter note B3. The bass staff is empty. The second system consists of two empty staves (treble and bass clef) over three measures. The label "Subject" is placed above the second measure of this system.

An empty musical staff consisting of two staves. The top staff has a treble clef and the bottom staff has a bass clef. Both staves are empty, with no notes or rests.

## 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.



Retransition Subject

A musical score in G minor (one flat) showing a retransition and a subject. The treble clef staff has a descending eighth-note scale: F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, followed by a whole rest in the final measure. The bass clef staff has a descending eighth-note scale: F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, followed by a whole rest in the final measure. Below this, there are two empty staves (treble and bass clef) for further notation.

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 staff has a whole rest in the treble and a bass line with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes: B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat. The second staff has a whole rest in the treble and a bass line with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes: B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat. The third staff has a whole rest in the treble and a bass line with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes: B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat. The fourth staff has a whole rest in the treble and a bass line with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes: B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat. The fifth staff has a whole rest in the treble and a bass line with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes: B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat. The sixth staff has a whole rest in the treble and a bass line with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes: B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat. The seventh staff has a whole rest in the treble and a bass line with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes: B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat. The eighth staff has a whole rest in the treble and a bass line with a quarter rest, followed by eighth notes: B-flat, A, G, F, E, D, C, B-flat.

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.



Retransition Subject

The second system of musical notation continues the two-staff format. The first three measures are labeled 'Retransition' and feature a melody in the treble staff with eighth and quarter notes, and a bass staff with a half-note accompaniment. The fourth measure is labeled 'Subject' and shows the beginning of a new melodic phrase in the treble staff, while the bass staff has a whole note. Below this system is a third system of two empty staves, also in the same key signature, intended for further musical notation.