MUSI 402 Handout No. 17 November 16, 2021

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.

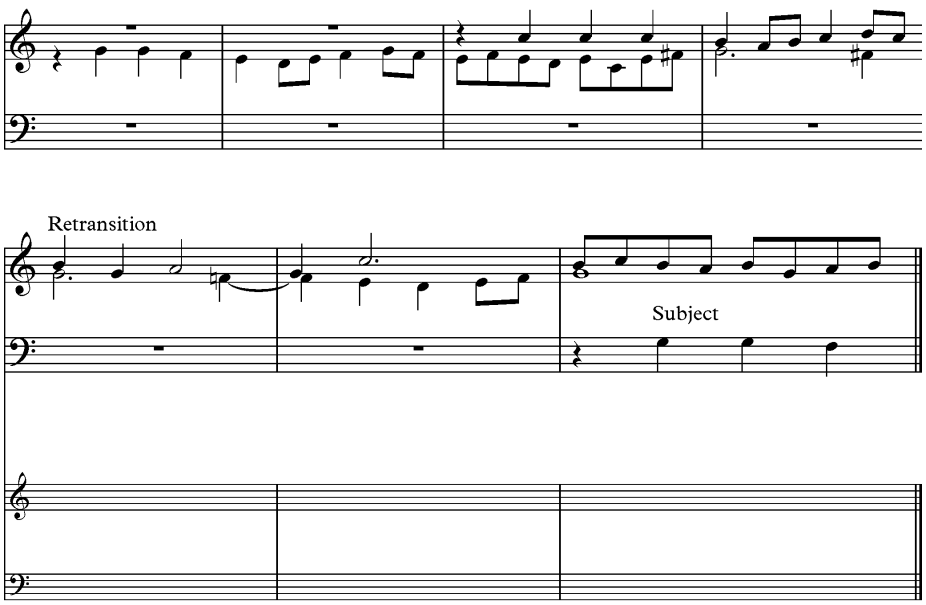
Thus **the beginning of the retransition is "I of V", and the destination is "V of I."** Our challenge in writing the retransition will be to write music that leads convincingly from the beginning harmony to the destination harmony.

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.

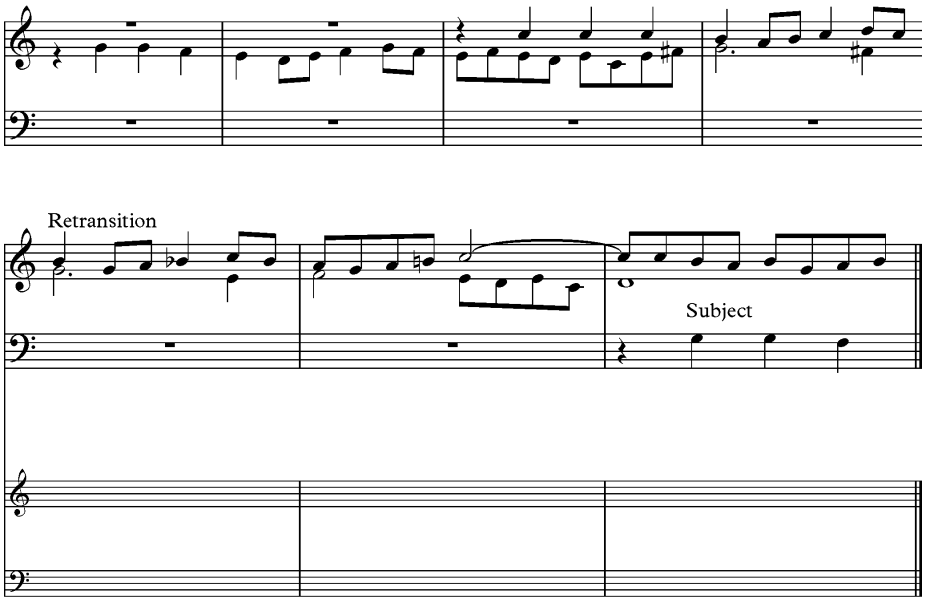
Major key retransitions

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

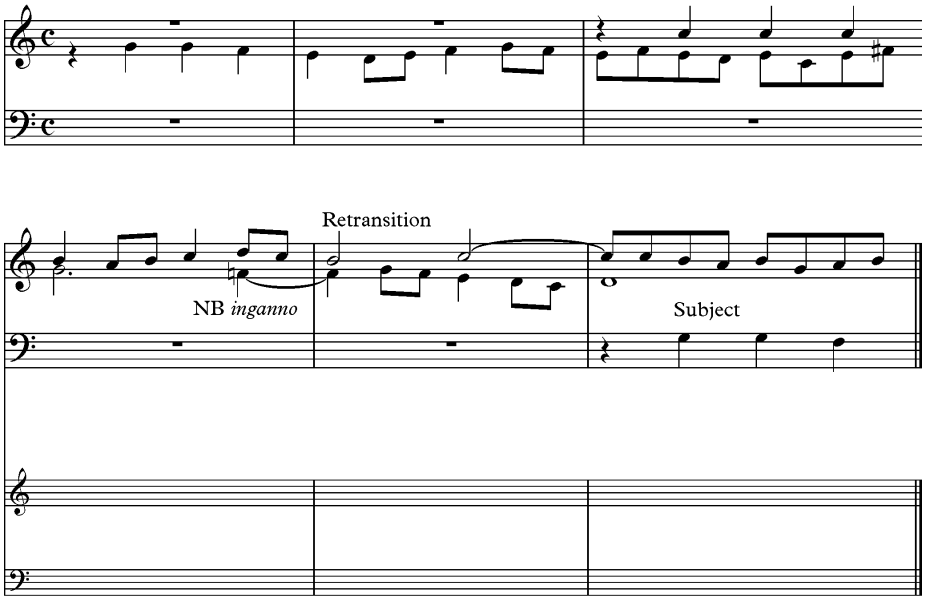
One common way of doing this is just to set a descending scale beginning on $\hat{5}$, which we can embellish as we see fit. (It is especially idiomatic to use many suspensions in such a descending scale passage, resulting in a chain of 7–6 or 2–3 suspensions.) At some point, we will have to break the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



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.



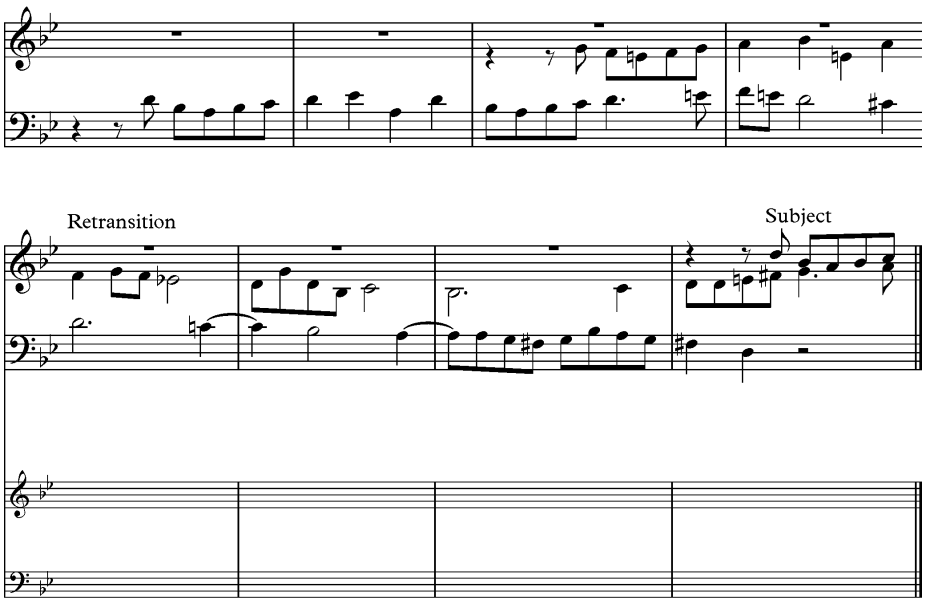
One special technique that is especially useful in retransitions is known as *inganno* ("deception" in Italian). In this technique, at the cadence to V, the leading-tone is lowered, so that we never actually resolve to V. Instead, the lowered leading tone (which is $\hat{4}$ in the main key) helps lead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



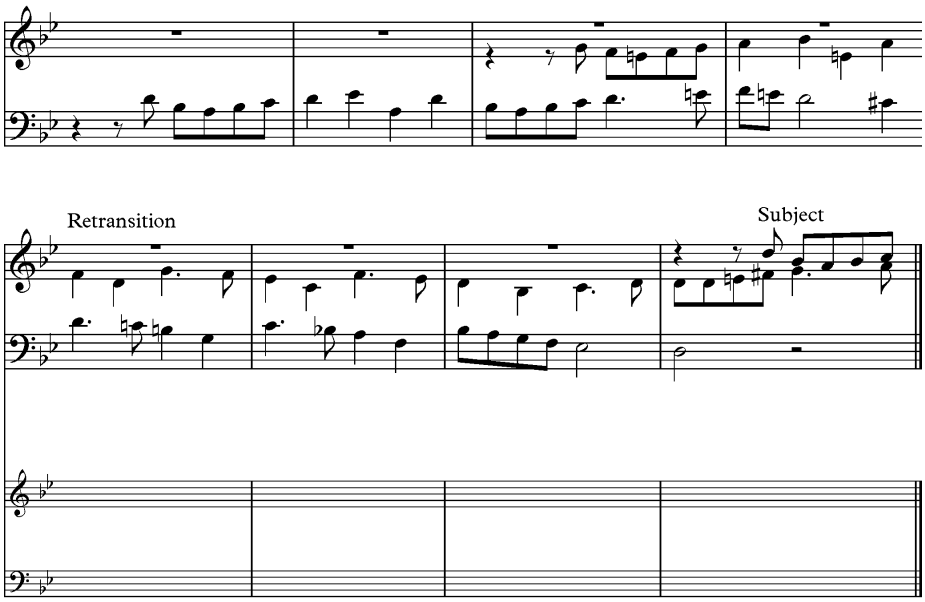
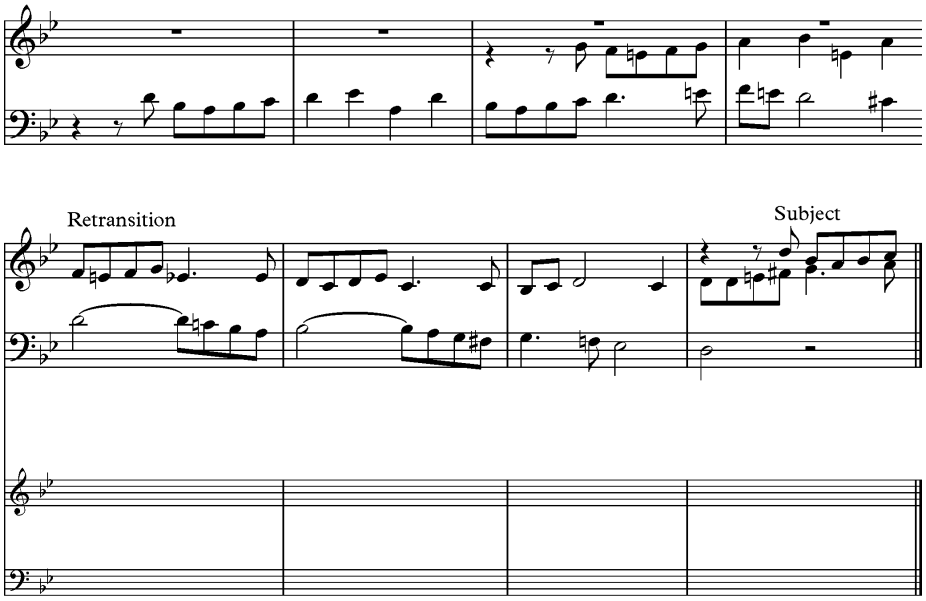
Minor key retransitions

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.



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.)



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.