

Modulation

Changing the key in which a melody is played is called modulation.

Celtic and Oldtime bands often abruptly change key from one tune to another. This can make for a dramatic change. Blunt. Not elegant. In traditional music the key changes are usually among the keys of G, D and A. Sometimes the key of C will show up too and more rarely the key of E. In pop and country music, modulations by a half step or a full step are often done. If there is a female – male singing duo, often modulations will be done at the beginning of each verse to accommodate the different vocal ranges.

One of the more elegant ways to modulate a melody is to use pivot chords. Here's how that is done

Pivot Chord Defined

A pivot chord is a chord that is present in two keys. We'll stay with the diatonic scale since that is the familiar do re me fa so la ti do scale.

The chords constructed on the diatonic G scale are:

G Am Bm C D Em F#^o and G

The chords constructed on the diatonic D scale are:

D Em F#m G A Bm C#dim and D

See the pattern? No matter what the scale or key, the pattern of the chords is always the same on the diatonic scale

I ii iii IV V vi vii^o

The scales of G and D share these chords:

Bm, D, Em, G

Using Pivot Chords

These shared chords are the pivot chords between the keys of G and D. So when you arrange a tune such that the key will change from, say G to D, one or more of these four chords will help make the transition smooth and ensure the change isn't abrupt.

The most frequently used pivot chords are the ii and IV chords of the new key. Again, if the movement is from the key of G to the key of D, those chords are Em and G. Don't overlook the Bm as a pivot chord. It isn't used as much and that can make it particularly effective.

The other point about using pivot chords as the transition for a modulation is that you are not limited to a single chord. It is possible to establish a bit of harmonic rhythm by employing several of the pivot chords in sequence.

The Theory

Chords on a diatonic G Scale: I ii iii IV V vi vii^o

Equivalent chords from the

Diatonic D scale: IV V vi vii^o I ii iii

Pivot chords are any chords with the same naming tone (root tone) and quality (major, minor, diminished).

So, moving from the scale of G to the scale of D, the pivot chords are:

G (I in G but IV in D – both major chords)

D (V in G but I in D – both major chords)

Em (vi in G but ii in D – both minor chords)

Bm (iii in G but vi in D – both minor chords)

These four chords – Bm, D, Em, and G – are the pivots you can use to modulate between the keys of G and D.

An Example Modulating from the Key of G to the Key of D

A chord progression to modulate from the key of G to the key of D could be [starting the key of G]:

G [end of first tune] - Bm – Em – A – [beginning of second tune]

The chords of Bm and Em are shared by the keys of G and D. Moving from the Em to the A helps the transition to the key of D. That's because the A chord is the V chord in the key of D. This establishes an implied tension and prepares the listener settle into the new tonal center of D.