Chromaticism*

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NOTE: Please note that you must have the most recent copy of Macromedia's Flash plugin installed to play the musical examples.

The **chromatic scale** upon which Western music is based consists of twelve pitches. Each Major or minor key uses only a **subset** of the total chromatic: In the case of Major, each key contains seven pitches. If a progression consists exclusively of pitches from the key, it is considered to be completely **diatonic**. If pitches **outside** the key are introduced, the music is said to become more **chromatic**.

The theme of the 2nd movement of Robert Schumann's **Symphony No. 3, "Rhenish,"** begins with tonic and dominant harmony.

Example 1
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Schumann05>

Later, a **chromatic** version of the theme occurs that incorporates pitches **outside** the key.

Example 2
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Schumann04>

Chromaticism can be momentary or more sustained.

The first note of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's **Piano Sonata in a-minor** is inflected with a **chromatic** grace-note—as momentary as it gets!

Example 3
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Mozart12>

When the theme returns later in the movement, Mozart expands the upbeat into a complete **chromatic** run.

Example 4
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Mozart13>

The chromaticism in this excerpt from Ludwig Van Beethoven's **Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 74,"Harp,"** is more extensive: The slow moving **chromatic** line leads eventually to a tonic cadence.

Example 5
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Beethoven22>

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The moving lines in the following excerpt from Joseph Haydn's **Piano Sonata No. 62 in E-flat Major** are almost entirely **chromatic**.

Example 6

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Haydn08>

This excerpt from Ludwig Van Beethoven's **Piano Sonata in E-Major, Opus 109**, has only one brief **chromatic** note.

Example 7

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Beethoven29>

Its return slightly later in another key includes more pervasive **chromaticism**.

Example 8

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Beethoven28>

Chromaticism has many functions: It can help accentuate a particular note. In Ludwig van Beethoven's **Für Elise**, a **chromatic** note decorates the fifth scale degree.

Example 9

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Beethoven20>

At the refrain of the melody, Beethoven even extends the decoration.

Example 10

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Beethoven21>

Chromaticism can help lead more strongly to a non-tonic chord, thereby foreshadowing or recollecting important harmonic goals. This is a bit like looking at a brochure before visiting somewhere or flipping through the photo album afterwards.

The opening theme of Beethoven's **Sonata in A-Major** includes a deceptive cadence strengthened by **chromaticism**.

Example 11

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Beethoven26>

Later, this momentary emphasis is expanded into a move to the key of f#-minor, the chord emphasized by the **deceptive cadence**. Fragments of the theme appear. The earlier **chromaticism** has helped to prepare this key as a target of modulation.

Example 12

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Beethoven25>

The second movement of Franz Schubert's **String Quintet in C** opens with an expansive progression in E-Major.

Example 13

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<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Schubert03>

The turbulent middle section is in the distantly related key of f-minor, which shares only two pitches with the original key. The shift from E to f is prepared only by a trill.

Example 14
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Schubert02>

The closing passages chromatically blends the two keys. Within the return to E-Major, Schubert incorporates an allusion to f-minor. If there are any doubts about Schubert's intentions, they are answered by the trill, which reinforces the connection.

Example 15
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Schubert01>

Chromaticism can create **modal mixture** by borrowing chords from the **opposing mode**.

In the **"Brindisi" ("Drinking Song")** from Giuseppe Verdi's **Otello,** Iago first enjoins his comrades to drink with him in Major. Then, as he repeats the words "beva, beva" ("drink up, drink up"), he shifts to minor, concluding with a descending **chromatic scale** that leads to a cadence back in Major.

Example 16
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Verdi02>

The opening of Ludwig van Beethoven's **Sonata in C-Major, Opus 53, "Waldstein,"** begins in Major but quickly makes it way to an arrival in minor, where the fast moving rhythm stops. The music briefly pauses before resuming in Major.

Example 17
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Beethoven45>

At the end of the movement, Beethoven revisits the tension between Major and minor: In this excerpt, the same progression is played three times. The progressions are identical except for a **single** pitch borrowed from minor.

Example 18
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Beethoven46>

No matter how much **chromaticism** is present, the cadence is the final arbiter of harmonic motion: If the tonic is strongly affirmed, the music is still rooted in that key.

Compare these excerpts from Franz Schubert's **Piano Sonata in B-flat Major**, **D. 960.** The first, while incorporating a considerable amount of **chromaticism**, nevertheless cadences only in one key. The second, based on the same motivic material, moves through five keys.

Example 19
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Schubert08>

Example 20
This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35091/1.1/Schubert09>

If the notes of the scale are considered a "family," **chromaticism** is like having guests. The greater the number of guests or the longer they stay, the greater the complexity of the social dynamics. Generally, the greater the amount of **chromaticism**, the more disruptive it is to the stability of the key.