Tonic, Mode and Key*

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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.

1 Tonic, Mode and Key

The musical term **key** indicates the **tonic** and **mode**: Thus, a work in the **key** of C-Major has a **tonic** of C and is in the Major **mode**. A work in the **key** of f-minor has f for a **tonic** and is in the minor **mode**. The keys of D-Major and d-minor are called **parallel** keys, because they share the **same tonic** but are in **different modes**.

2 Staying in and Leaving a Key

Repertoires that consist largely of circular progressions tends to be rooted in a single key. By mixing both circular and linear progressions, classical music developed the possibility of **changing keys**.

Harmonies that remain within one key are called **diatonic progressions**. Moving from key to key is called **modulation**. Along with distinguishing between Major and minor, being able to discriminate between **diatonic progressions** and **modulation** is a cornerstone of hearing **Common Practice harmony**.

Classical music puts a great value on **harmonic kineticism**–on forward progress and suspense. Too much emphasis on the tonic would impede that: It would be like trying to drive with the emergency brake on. Thus, a classical work often avoids its main tonic for significant stretches, saving its greatest emphasis on the home key for the end.

A **diatonic progression** may be entirely limited to the notes of the key. The following excerpt from Georg Frederic Handel's **Water Music** is consists exclusively of the pitches of its home key, D-Major.

Example 1

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at
<http://cnx.org/content/m35116/1.1/Handel06>

On the other hand, **modulations** create novelty: They introduce new pitches and cadence in new places. This excerpt from J.S. Bach's **Partita No. 1 in B-flat Major** begins in one key - g-minor - and ends in another — the home key of B-flat Major.

Example 2

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<http://cnx.org/content/m35116/1.1/Bach30>

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The treatment of themes is one of the strongest perceptual cues for **modulation**. Expository passages, in which themes are presented **whole**, generally remain within a single key. On the other hand, developmental passages, in which themes are broken into fragments, are often **modulatory**: Presenting the theme in its entirety would put a drag on the harmonic motion; the thematic "shorthand" allows the music to progress more rapidly. **Fragmentation**, along with the **introduction of new pitches**, is a strong indicator of **modulation**.

The Finale of J.S. Bach's **Concerto in d** opens with the main theme presented by the string orchestra.

Example 3

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at <http://cnx.org/content/m35116/1.1/Bach17>

A later **modulating** passage consists only of thematic fragments.

Example 4

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The Finale of Brahms' **String Quintet in G-Major, Opus 111** opens with the following phrase.

Example 5

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at <http://cnx.org/content/m35116/1.1/Brahms01>

A later **modulating** passage only uses the theme's head motive.

Example 6

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at <http://cnx.org/content/m35116/1.1/Brahms02>

Thus, themes presented whole typically remain within a key whereas **fragmentation**, along with **introduction of new pitches**, is an indication of **modulation**.

Classical music is loaded with **modulation** — that is one of its distinguishing features. Being alert to the difference between **diatonic progressions** and **modulation** invigorates your hearing of harmony and makes you more fully present to the music's energy and drama.

We will now probe further into music that remains within a key and music that moves from key to key.