

Secondary dominants

Secondary dominants are a way to change to another key (modulate) or pass through another key temporarily (tonicize). The V of V is the most common type of secondary dominant. This is short hand for from the V of a given key, the key that has a tonic that is the same as the V also has a V that is the secondary dominant. For example, the V of C is G, the key of G has a V which is D. D is the secondary dominant of C. The relationship between G and D is a fifth, shorthand for 5 scale degrees in a major scale.

Secondary dominants indicate a movement by fifths between keys. We can also have movement by fifths within a key which is a diatonic movement. A typical movent by fifths used in popular songs is the chords: 1-4-7-3-6-2-5-1, often only two or three of them in a sequence.. This is known as the falling fifths sequence. The sequence of the cycle of fifths is C-G-D-E-A-B, etc or 1-5-2-6-3-7; the reverse of the falling fifths sequence.

The secondary dominant can be seen as the alteration of a minor chord to a major chord (Dm to D) which now becomes the V of V or V/V of the key of C. This is known or interpreted as a chromatic movement as the F in Dm moves up to an F# in D as shown in the graphic below.

In a major scale any diatonic chord can be converted into a secondary dominant except for the diminished chord.

