

Notes on borrowed chords

Borrowed chords are chords—often *triads* such as those we've been studying—which are “borrowed” from the parallel major or minor key and substituted for the “normal” chord in a progression. In other words, in the key of C Major, chords may be borrowed from c minor; in d minor, the chords may be borrowed from D Major, and so on. Incidentally, some theorists use the terms **modal borrowing** or **mode mixture** for these chords.

Why do composers use borrowed chords? Mode mixture is particularly common in music of the 19th century. It is often used for affective reasons—for example, the composer wishes to create a greater emotional impact when setting some “sad” word in a vocal piece, so the composer uses a minor iv chord or a minor i chord in a piece otherwise in a major key. Mode mixture also greatly expands harmonic resources and color. Borrowed chords occur more frequently in major-mode pieces, because the major scale has less tonal variety than the various forms of minor; therefore, borrowing from the minor expands the harmonic vocabulary at the composer's disposal. One of the most common borrowed chords results from the “Picardy third,” creating the major chord found at the end of many minor-mode pieces, most especially from the Baroque period.

Here are the most frequently-seen borrowed chords, shown as D major borrowing from d minor and the reverse:

D: i \flat III iv ii $^\circ$ 6 ii $^\circ$ ₅ \flat VI \flat VII vii $^\circ$ 7 d: I ii IV

- Note that in each case, the *chord quality* differs from what you would expect. For example, when in a major key, you'd expect a major IV chord. The minor iv is unexpected.
- In three cases, the triads are built on *roots* which are different than what you'd expect. As with the \flat VII triad discussed earlier, the \flat sign in front of the III and VI chords doesn't really mean “flat III or flat VI” so much as “lowered III and VI,” or “III and VI built on the note a half-step lower than what you'd normally expect.”
- The fifth chord is labeled ii $^\circ$ ₅, which would be pronounced “two half-diminished six-five.” The eighth chord is labeled vii $^\circ$ 7, which would be pronounced “seven diminished seven.” These may mean nothing to you now—nor should they—but they're included for completeness. You'll encounter them later on, and they're pretty frequently used (especially vii $^\circ$ 7).
- The moral here: RN sizes matter greatly. Be sure that your RNs are absolutely *flawless*.

Here are two progressions which exemplify the use of borrowed chords. Note that the *function* of the borrowed chords (their RNs are circled) within the progression is the same as their “normal” cousins; they just have a different and unexpected *quality* or *color*. In the second progression, note that the borrowed chord arises from the use of the melodic minor scale in the melody. Also note that in each case, what you'd double were the chord “normal” is what's doubled in the borrowed chord—for example, the root is doubled in the root-position ones.

B \flat : I V₆ I \flat VI iv ii $^\circ$ 6 V I f#: i V₄ i $^\flat$ IV vii $^\circ$ 6 i V⁷ I

Be sure to review the examples covered in class, too. See in particular pp. 36 and 59 in *Music Sources*.