

The Neapolitan sixth chord (N⁶)

Background: the name "Neapolitan" may come from the fact that this chord was used a lot in Neapolitan (from Naples) opera of the 17th and 18th centuries, but nobody is absolutely sure of the origin of the term. The Neapolitan sixth chord is a **chromatic pre-dominant chord** which comes before V (or V⁷, or i₄⁶) in much the same way as iv or ii^{o6} would. The Roman numerals in the preceding sentence imply minor mode, and this is intentional: the Neapolitan sixth chord occurs more frequently in minor mode, though it is used in major mode as well. It may occur more frequently in minor because in minor it has only one altered note (accidental), while in major mode it actually has **two** altered notes, as you will see below. The Roman numeral most frequently used is N⁶, though you may also encounter ^bII⁶.

Spelling it: the chord is a **major triad built on ^b2̂ of the key**. Note carefully that in this explanation, ^b2̂ stands for **lowered 2̂**. If the key is E major, ^b2̂ thus represents F[♯], not F^b. Therefore, it's spelled ^b2̂ 4̂ 6̂ in minor mode, and is even *more* altered in major: ^b2̂ 4̂ ^b6̂ (^b6̂ again represents **lowered 6̂**). Since it most frequently occurs in **first inversion** (hence Neapolitan "sixth" chord), scale degree 4̂ is often in the bass (note the similarity to other pre-dominant chords).

Doubling: double the **third** of the chord (scale degree 4̂). If it's in first inversion (N⁶ or ^bII⁶), you would then be doubling the **bass note**. The underlying principle: if at all possible you should **not** double chromatically altered notes.

What comes before it: the N⁶ is preceded by anything that comes before ii^{o6}: it is most often preceded by VI, iv⁶, iv, i, or ii^{o6}. In major mode everything's similar; in addition, composers sometimes precede it with the borrowed ^bVI or iv⁶.

What follows it: since it's a pre-dominant chord, it often progresses to V. It may also move on to V⁷, i₄⁶, or even to ^o7/V (less frequently V₅⁶/V). These are most typical; it may go elsewhere.

Typical progressions: 1) i iv⁶ N⁶ V i 2) i V₅⁶/iv iv V VI N⁶ ^o7/V i₄⁶ V i

Voice leading: remember **two IMPORTANT things:**

1. use **CONTRARY MOTION**: just like iv - V or ii^{o6} - V, there should be contrary motion between the bass and upper voices in the progression N⁶ - V (or for that matter, N⁶ - i₄⁶).
2. scale degree ^b2̂ **MUST** work its way down to scale degree 7̂, sooner or later. In the progression N⁶ - V (or to V⁷), ^b2̂ - 7̂ forms a diminished third, but do it anyway. When a chord like i₄⁶ or ^o7/V comes between the N⁶ and the V, the voice that contains scale degree ^b2̂ will pass through 1̂ on its way to 7̂. See the examples below.

d: i N⁶ i₄⁶ V i A: I N⁶ V I b: i VI N⁶ ^o7/V V i

The Neapolitan may occur in root position (simply N, or ^bII). It may be preceded by its dominant or dominant seventh (V⁷/N - N or even V₄⁷/N - N⁶). It may thus be tonicized for a while. Finally, it may be used as a pivot chord in a modulation. We'll cover these topics later in the semester.