

Modal Interchange

Modal interchange is the practice of temporarily borrowing a chord or chords from a parallel scale or mode without abandoning the established tonic. In other words, it's the interaction or movement between two parallel scales or modes, and the notes, chords, and chord progressions that this interaction makes available. *Borrowing* is part of the process. Borrowing is the use of a tone (or chord) outside of a scale or mode to highlight, suggest, or move to a scale, chord, or chord progression that contrasts the original scale or mode while maintaining the same tonic. Hence, this is *not* a modulation. The term "mixture" is another way to describe the process. Mixture is the combined use of elements of both the major and minor scale. As a result, we speak of a *mixture* of the major and parallel minor. The principles below will clarify the technique.

Principle #1: *Modal interchange seems complicated, but it is actually an easy concept to understand.*

At its simplest level, it is nothing more than starting with a scale, altering a note, and ending up with a new scale and some new chords. (This may or may not move us to a different tonic or tonal center.) For example, if we had a C major scale—along with all of the melodies and chords that would be available in it, we could simply change the F to an F#. We would now have a C *Lydian* mode. This gives us a different harmonic orientation in relation to the tonal center, the note C. This would be an example of *Ionian to Lydian* modal interchange. (It's also called *major to major*, but that sounds a little strange and doesn't tell us much.)

Keep in mind, however, that the principle is also very powerful. As a result, it leads to a realm of variations and possibilities that can also be a little overwhelming. In other words, it's difficult not in its principle, but in the application of the principle to the varieties of scales and seventh chords that occur in music. Accordingly, the more familiar you are with your scales, chords, and chord progressions, the more easily and effectively you'll be able to apply the principle.

Principle #2: *There is a difference between modal interchange, tonicization, and modulation.*

Tonicization is a chord progression, typically through the use of an applied dominant (or secondary dominant), that temporarily creates an alternate tonic chord. Modulation is the movement from one key to another where the new key is protracted and has structural or formal importance. Modal interchange is similar to tonicization in that a new chord or chord progression outside the principal mode appears, but is very brief; as short as a single chord. Tonicization suggests a change of key temporarily, but doesn't commit to the new key. Modal interchange doesn't really suggest a new key, but borrows a chord from outside the principal scale or mode. The key doesn't change as there is no suggestion of a new tonic. Another difference is that a

tonicization needs an applied dominant to tonicize a chord, while a modal interchange can occur without one.

Principle #3: *The basic diatonic major (or minor) scale, by itself, is limited in its ability to create contrast, color, and variety, and to sustain interest beyond a few basic progressions. Accordingly, composers and improvisers use chords that make use of tones outside of the basic seven note scale.*

If we include the tones available from the natural minor scale to the major scale (b3, b6, and b7), for example, we end up with no less than *eight* heptatonic scales to use to create melodies and chord progressions. These include:

1) Major	
2) Mixolydian	b7
3) Dorian	b3, b7
4) Natural Minor	b3, b6, b7
5) Melodic Minor	b3
6) Aeolian Dominant (a.k.a. Hindu)	b6, b7
7) Harmonic Minor	b3, b6
8) Major Harmonic	b6

Think of all the chords that these scales make available. Moreover, with the addition of the two other chromatic tones (b2 and #4), many other modes (e.g., Phrygian and Lydian) become available. Additionally, the blues scale includes the b3, #4, and b7 (in addition to the major key) to create color and tension.

Principle #4: *Another simple way to understand modal interchange is to realize that the dominant seventh chord (V7) has two appropriate functional resolutions: to the tonic major and to the tonic minor.*

The tonic major chords that are available in the key of C major are C6, C6add9, CMaj7, and CMaj9. If we include the tonic chords of the parallel minor—which also resolve from G7—we gain access to Cmin6, Cmin6add9, Cmin7, CminMaj7, and CminMaj9.

Parallel major and minor keys are more closely related than are relative majors and minors. The additional chords that the natural parallel minor makes available also give us access to other keys that would otherwise be more difficult to move to.

In major keys, the dominant seventh is preceded by the II minor-seventh; in minor keys, the dominant seventh is preceded by the II minor-seventh flattened-fifth. The use of tones that are available in both the major and minor scale creates interest and variety for the supertonic (II) and subdominant (IV) chords, chords that often precede the dominant.

Finally, the parallel natural minor mode makes available additional chord extensions to the dominant seventh (V7): b9, #9, and b13.

Principle #5: *Besides the three minor seventh chords that are available in the major key (the result being three possible II-V-I progressions), the use of parallel minor modes makes available additional minor seventh chords and thus additional II-V-I progressions. These provide access to other modes and keys.*

In the key of C major, Dmin7, Emin7, and Amin7 each provide access to a dominant seventh chord: the dominant of the key (G7) and two applied dominants (A7 and D7). A7 and D7 offer resolutions to D major and G major, respectively. When additional tones are borrowed from a parallel minor scale, we gain access to additional II-V-I chord progressions. In the case of the natural minor, Cmin7, Fmin7, and Gmin7 provide access to three additional II-V-I chord progressions, and three additional dominant and tonic chords in the keys of Bb major, Eb major, and F major. These keys, all to the flat side, contrast the keys that are naturally available before the introduction of the natural minor, which are all to the sharp side.

Moreover, each additional minor-seventh chord provides access to *two* other keys as a pivot chord. In major keys, there are a total of three minor seventh chords that naturally occur: II7, III7, and VI7. Accordingly, any one minor seventh chord will be a II7 of one key, a III7 of another key, and a VI7 of yet another key. Besides functioning as a II chord (as discussed above) we have access to two additional keys for each minor seventh.

For example, Cmin7 is also a III in Ab major, and a VI in Eb major; F minor is also a III in Db major, and a VI in Ab major; G minor is also a III in Eb major, and a VI in Bb major. These minor seventh chords, common to different keys simultaneously, create harmonic ambiguity, while also giving composers and improvisers a natural path to other keys

Principle #6: *If a II-V works for a tonic chord (I or I minor), it should (and does) also work for tonic function substitutions.*

This explains many of the "pathways" that the parallel minor makes available. If you consider that the tonic chord has two functional substitutes (the mediant and submediant), the II-V-I can be applied to those, as well as to the original tonic chord. In the major key (C major, for example), the I chord (CMaj7) can be replaced by III and VI. Accordingly, the chord progression the II-V-I (Dmin7-G7-CMaj7) could be substituted with II-V-III (Dmin7-G7-Emin7) and II-V-VI (Dmin7-G7-Amin7). These are deceptive cadences, and are not the strongest progressions available, but they are cadences nonetheless.

In the parallel minor key, the tonic chord is a minor chord (Cmin). The mediant and submediant tonic chords are EbMaj7 and AbMaj7, respectively, and substitute effectively for the tonic chord. As a result, the II-V (Dmin7b5-G7) moves functionally and effectively to either these two chords, particularly when the dominant has a flatted-ninth and/or a flatted-thirteenth.

When we consider that the parallel major and minor are freely interchangeable (since they have the same dominant chord), we can move freely and easily between the C tonic major chord and its functional substitutes, Amin7 and Emin7, and the C tonic minor chord and its functional substitutes, AbMaj7 and EbMaj7. These are all deceptive cadences.

Principle #7: *A II-V-I can move you anywhere you want to go. Nevertheless, the chords whose roots are related by third to the tonic chord (E, A, Eb, and Ab), particularly in jazz, are most closely connected to the tonic key. Moreover, The major chords of the parallel natural minor effectively harmonize the two most stable tones of the parallel major scale (C and G), and set up alternative color treatments of many other major scale tones.*

The parallel minor scale sets up chord choices that provide an alternate set of tones that are related by third to the tonic note. Instead of A-C-E (minor third, major third) we have Ab-C-Eb (major third, minor third) available from the natural minor. Third relationships are an important characteristic of jazz and pop harmony.

Moreover, the chord roots that are made available by modes with lowered scale degrees (Mixolydian, Dorian, natural minor, and Phrygian) now provide for an alternate *major* third treatment of four major scale tones. In the key of C major, the tones C, D, F, and G are part of a chord whose root is a *minor* third below each tone. Each of these modes introduces a tone that can potentially underpin each of these four scale degrees as the third of a *major* or *dominant* chord.

Principle #8: *Alternate scales and modes become available when chords in a scale or mode have one or more notes in common with chords that lie outside of it.*

Think of the movement of the tonic major sixth (e.g., C6) to an Ab major seventh chord (AbMaj7). Although two of the four tones are different, they both have two notes in common. This makes the chord progression sound natural and appropriate, even though the chords are different, functionally speaking. (This could be understood as an Ionian or Lydian to natural minor modal interchange.)

If the chord progression moves between these two chords, we could call it a modal one; there is a simple, repeating two-chord pattern, each associated with a particular mode. There is a semblance of key, but no functional chord progression that gives us a strong sense of a tonal polarity. If the AbMaj7 then moves to Dmin7, G7, and CMaj7 we have introduced a tonal progression clearly defining CMaj7 as the tonic chord. Nevertheless, up until that point there was no sense of the tonic (not enough information), and we could move to almost any key. The functional II – V – I provides the final piece of the puzzle.

Another way to understand these chord relationships is to consider that a II – V in the key of Eb, for example, typically resolves to its tonic, Eb (major or minor). It also has, however, a deceptive cadence resolution to C major (VI). This is the so called “back door” progression or resolution. This takes advantage of the ambiguity of the II – V in its plausible resolution to more than just one key, in much the same way that a diminished seventh chord has many different plausible resolutions. The Fmin7 to Bb7 takes advantage of the ambiguity it offers as a dominant (or more specifically a subdominant – dominant) in the key of Eb *and* as a subdominant minor in the key of C.

Principle #9: *In addition to chords and chord progressions, chord extensions can be borrowed from parallel modes.*

These are *altered extensions* as they are outside the scale of the key. When you consider the extensions available to the dominant chord of a key, the flatted-ninth, sharpened-ninth, sharpened-eleventh, and flatted-thirteenth, each of these four tones can be considered as borrowed from the parallel Phrygian mode.

The most common modal interchange chords come from the parallel minor mode; the Aeolian mode. A chord progression in C major could utilize F minor seventh (IV-7) and Ab minor seventh (VI-7):

CMaj7 Amin7 Dmin7 EbMaj7 AbMaj7 G7 CMaj7

The examples below show the wide variety of modal interchange chords that each of the (parallel) modes makes available:

Ionian:	IMaj7	Iimin7	IIimin7	IVMaj7	V7	VIimin7	VII-7b5
Dorian:	Iimin7	IIimin7	bIIIMaj7	IV7	Vmin7	VIimin7b5	bVIIimin7
Phrygian:	Iimin7	bIIIMaj7	bIII7	IVmin7	Vmin7b5	bVIMaj7	bVIIimin7
Lydian:	IMaj7	II7	IIimin7	#IVmin7b5	VMaj7	VIimin7	VIIimin7
Mixolydian:	I7	IIimin7	IIimin7b5	IVMaj7	Vmin7	VIimin7	bVIIIMaj7
Aeolian:	Iimin7	IIimin7b5	bIIIMaj7	IVmin7	Vmin7	bVIMaj7	bVII7
Locrian:	Iimin7b5	bIIIMaj7	bIIIimin7	IVmin7	bVMaj7	bVI7	bVIIimin7

A good example of modal interchange falls under the heading of *subdominant minor*. These are chords that have the flatted sixth scale degree; the minor 3rd of the subdominant minor chord: Ab, the minor third of F-7 in the key of C. The subdominant minor chords include:

bIIIMaj7 IIimin7b5 IVmin6 IVmin7 bVIMaj7 bVII7

Other modal interchange examples include:

1. Dmin7 G7 Emin7b5 A7 Dmin7 G7 C6
2. GMaj7 BbMaj7 EbMaj7 AbMaj7 Amin7 D7 GMaj7 ("Here's That Rainy Day")
3. D7 G7 F#min7b5 Fmin7 Emin7 A7 Dmin7 DbMaj7 CMaj7
4. Dmin7 G7 Fmin7 Bb7 CMaj7 ("Ladybird")

5. CMaj7 FMaj7 BbMaj7 EbMaj7 AbMaj7 DbMaj7 CMaj7 (Descending fifth progression of major sevenths)

Review and Summary

What is the purpose of modal interchange?

Modal interchange makes available chords and progressions that lie outside the principal scale of the key.

How does it do this?

It does this by taking advantage of the resolution of the dominant chord to both a major and minor tonic with the same root, and the notes and chords that the parallel minor scale offers alongside the scale of the major key. The major scale “borrows” these notes and chords from the minor mode, creating chords and extensions that would otherwise be unavailable.

What are examples of modal interchange?

As mentioned, a II – V – I can resolve to both a major and minor tonic. Dmin7 to G7 (or Dim7b5 to G7b9) can resolve to both C major and C minor. The Dmin7b5 and the G7b9 have an Ab in them. This Ab is borrowed from the parallel minor mode. If the latter progression resolves to C major, it can be understood as a change from the minor to major mode.

Another simple example of modal interchange is the *minor Plagal cadence*. Normally, a Plagal cadence is a I – IV – I progression; the “Amen” progression. Both chords are in the major scale. If the IV chord is replaced with a IV minor, the IV chord now borrows the b6 degree from the parallel minor scale. The scale now implied by both chords in the progression is now the Aeolian dominant, or Hindu scale; the new mode. In the key of C, the progression would be C – Fmin – C; the scale would be C D E F G Ab Bb C for the F minor, and the following C major. The Ab and Bb are borrowed from the parallel C minor mode, replacing A and B natural. This is very common in jazz, typically in the I – IVmin – bVII7 – I progression (C6add9 – Fmin7 – Bb7 – C6add9); a “back door” progression. The Fmin7 and Bb7 both function as a minor subdominant. This is another example of a change of mode from minor to major.

DbMaj7 to G7 to CMaj7 also takes advantage of the subdominant minor with DbMaj7. This chord is borrowed from the Phrygian mode; the scale associated with this chord is C Phrygian. Parallel modes not only offer various chord choices, but also establish the scale or scales associated with a chord outside the principle scale or mode.

One of the more beautiful examples of modal interchange is the minor to major. (Cole Porter used this a lot.) This is where a minor-seventh with a flatted-fifth appears as a II chord preceding a dominant seventh, usually with an altered extension. This sets up the expectation for a resolution to a tonic minor chord, but the progression resolves with a tonic major. This happens, for example, in “Night and Day,” “What Is This Thing Called Love,” and “So In Love.”

In summary, modal interchange is not just about providing options for chord choices as ultimately any chord or chord relationship can be created without considering a particular context. Any chord can follow any other. Rather the concept offers a method of organizing a

hierarchy of functional and plausible chord relationships, or degrees of closeness, that a key or tonality offers when considering parallel modes. Also remember that the harmonic relationship between a major key and the parallel minor key is the closest relationship you can have between two modes as they both share the same tonic and leading tone. The parallel minor mode opens the door, so to speak, to a much wider ranging harmonic vocabulary than the major mode by itself.