

Changing key

A modulation is not just new accidentals — it is a new home. The ear only accepts it when a cadence confirms it, so every change of key is really the arrival of a new chord V and I.

WHERE TO GO FROM C MAJOR

G · dominant

F · subdominant

Am · relative minor

Em · mediant minor

Dm · supertonic minor

Cm · tonic minor

Eb · flat mediant

The three highlighted keys are the near neighbours — one accidental away, and the destinations of almost every modulation in classical music. The rest are further afield: usable, but they need more preparation and a clearer cadence.

FOUR WAYS TO GET THERE

Pivot chord

C → Am → D → G

Am is vi in C and ii in G

Find a chord both keys share, land on it, then cadence in the new key. Smooth to the point of being invisible — the standard method.

Chromatic

C → D → G

The F# inside D announces the new key

One voice moves by a semitone into a note the old key does not own. Quicker and more noticeable than a pivot, and very effective mid-phrase.

Direct (phrase) shift

C → G || Eb → Bb

A full stop, then simply begin again elsewhere

End the phrase, take a breath, start the next one in the new key with no preparation at all. Bold and cinematic; the last chorus key-change.

Enharmonic

C → C7 → B → E

C7 respelled is the German sixth of E major

A diminished seventh or an augmented sixth is rewritten and resolves somewhere unexpected. The dramatic option — use it once.

MAKING IT CONVINCING

- 1 Approach the new key through its own chord V. Nothing else establishes a key so quickly.
- 2 Finish with a perfect cadence in the new key. Until that lands, it is only a passing accidental.
- 3 Give the new key time — at least a phrase. Modulate and leave again immediately and the ear hears a wrong note.
- 4 Write the accidentals in rather than changing the key signature, unless the new key stays for a whole section.

WHERE IT BELONGS IN A PIECE

Binary, end of A	To the dominant, always. The B section brings it home.
Ternary, B section	Relative minor or subdominant — enough contrast to make A's return feel like arriving.
Sonata, bridge	Tonic to dominant, and the second subject stays there until the recapitulation.
Rondo, episodes	Each episode takes a different related key; the refrain never leaves home.

SPOTTING ONE IN A SCORE

Look for an accidental that keeps returning, then find the cadence after it. A one-off accidental is decoration; a repeated one with a cadence is a new key.

TONICISATION

A single V-I in passing — a brief bow to another key without settling. Written as a secondary dominant, V/V or V/vi, and gone within two bars.

COMING HOME

The return is as important as the departure. Prepare it the same way, and let the tonic arrive on a strong beat at the start of a phrase.