Borrowed Chords

Altered chords use notes outside the scale as a means of adding a different "color" to the chord.

How does a composer decide which altered notes to use? In a major key, one possibility is using notes and chords from the parallel minor.

For example, the following chords are diatonic chords in C minor:

But if we use them in a major key, they require accidentals and are therefore altered chords. We call these borrowed chords because they are borrowed from the parallel minor.

And, in fact, these six chords are the six most commonly used borrowed chords in the common practice period. (One of them, the major triad on the lowered mediant, or "flat three," was not used much by composers before the romantic era.)

All the usual part-writing rules apply to these chords, for example:

The borrowed supertonic is a diminished triad, and is therefore always used in first inversion.

The borrowed seventh chords can be used in any inversion, but the seventh must be approached and resolved properly.

It's usually best to resolve altered notes in the direction of their alteration, but doing so in the two altered root chords won't work.

The leading-tone fully diminished seventh is the king of dominant function. Don't even think of resolving it to anything but tonic!

There's another chord that is often erroneously called a borrowed chord: used in minor, taken from the parallel major. It's the picardy third: a tonic chord with a raised third used as the final chord of the piece.

Some theorists refer to the use of these chords as mode mixture.

Wait... why? Since we double the root, moving both roots the same direction can often result in parallel octaves.

It's more important to avoid parallelism than to resolve the notes a certain way, so this use of contrary motion is better.

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Named for 24th-century explorer Jean-Luc Picard!*