The Neapolitan Six

The Neapolitan Six chord, since it is built on a form of the supertonic, has some characteristics of a subdominant function chord in that it often resolves toward a dominant function. In fact, it is very common to see the Neapolitan chord resolve to a dominant seventh in third inversion, or to a cadential six-four chord.

The Neapolitan Six chord is not a borrowed chord, this chord can be used in both major and minor.

That chord is a major triad built on the lowered second scale degree.

Since it’s not a borrowed chord, this chord can be used in both major and minor.

There are a couple of interesting things about this chord. One is the fact that it is almost exclusively used in first inversion.

Seriously! Although this chord is extremely common in the common practice period, there are very few examples of it used in root position. Second inversion is even rarer.

The second interesting thing about the chord is its name: you might expect it to be called a “flat two,” in keeping with the other altered root chords.

But, in fact, this is the first of a few chords that have special names. This particular one is called the Neapolitan chord.

“Neapolitan” means “from Naples,” referring to the city of Naples, Italy. The chord isn’t actually from Naples, though; it was just associated with the operas written by Neapolitan composers like Alessandro Scarlatti.

Funny thing is, this chord was used pretty commonly before Scarlatti’s time, in compositions far from the courts of Italy.

It’s also worth noting that although nearly every theorist and theory textbook calls the chord a “Neapolitan Sixth chord,” it is more properly called a “Neapolitan Six chord.” That’s because in the rare situations where it is used in root position, it is simply called the Neapolitan chord, and when it is found in second inversion, it’s called the Neapolitan Six-four.

Since we don’t pronounce I^6 as “one sixth,” we shouldn’t say “Neapolitan Sixth” for N^6!