Secondary Dominants

There is a duality at the heart of common practice period harmonic progression. Like the ancient conflict of Jedi and Sith, it consists of forces that, at one level, work against each other... but at another, higher level, work together, creating energy that drives all else.

That duality, of course, is the relationship of dominant function and tonic. Dominant harmony typifies tension in the common practice period, and the tonic represents release. Its simplest form, the authentic cadence, has been ubiquitous in Western music for centuries.

The progression of dominant moving to tonic is so strong, it would be nice to be able to use it to provide motion to chords other than tonic.

Let's say we wanted to approach this VI chord.

We could use one of the usual diatonic chords, the tonic, the subdominant, the mediant... but what if we're looking for a bit more tension and release?

If we pretend for a moment that the chord we're resolving to is a tonic chord, what would the corresponding dominant chord be? Altered, yes, but we're not afraid of those anymore:

While we might have once called this a short modulation, it is really more like borrowing another key's dominant chord. If we think of the V chord in the key as the primary dominant, V chords of related keys are secondary dominants.

Now, we're not just limited to the V chord: there are five chords with a dominant function!

These chords often resolve to the chord "under the slash," but they can actually be approached and resolved using the basic root movements!

In major keys, the "x" above can be any diatonic chord other than tonic (obviously) or the leading-tone triad. Why? Because a diminished triad has a hard time acting like a temporary tonic chord.

In minor keys, the composers generally only used secondary dominants of IV and of V.