

From the key of Em to F#m & F#

I	VI	IV	VII	(V7)	I
Em ‘ ‘ ‘	C ‘ ‘ ‘	Am ‘ ‘ ‘	D ‘	C#7 ‘	F#m ‘ ‘ ‘

or

Em ‘ ‘ ‘	C ‘ ‘ ‘	Am ‘ ‘ ‘	D ‘	C#7 ‘	F# ‘ ‘ ‘
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or

I	Vb	IIc	(V7)	I
E ‘ ‘ ‘	B/D# ‘ ‘ ‘	F#m/C# ‘ ‘ ‘	C#7 ‘ ‘ ‘	F#m ‘ ‘ ‘

or

E ‘ ‘ ‘	B/D# ‘ ‘ ‘	F#m/C# ‘ ‘ ‘	C#7 ‘ ‘ ‘	F#m ‘ ‘ ‘
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Note:

Vb means chord V in 1st inversion so the lowest sounding note is the 3rd

IIc means chord II in 2nd inversion so the lowest sounding note is the 5th

From the key of Em to Dm & D

I	IV	Ic	IVb	(V7)	I
Em ‘ ‘ ‘	Am ‘ ‘ ‘	Em/B ‘ ‘ ‘	Am/C ‘	A7 ‘	Dm ‘ ‘ ‘

or

Em ‘ ‘ ‘	Am ‘ ‘ ‘	Em/B ‘ ‘ ‘	Am/C ‘	A7 ‘	D ‘ ‘ ‘
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Note: Ic means chord I in 2nd inversion so the lowest sounding note is the 5th

From the key of Bm to Cm & C via the key of Em

I	(V7d)	Ib	(V7)	I
Bm ‘ ‘ ‘	B/A ‘ ‘ ‘	Em/G ‘ ‘ ‘	G7 ‘ ‘ ‘	Cm ‘ ‘ ‘

or

Bm ‘ ‘ ‘	B/A ‘ ‘ ‘	Em/G ‘ ‘ ‘	G7 ‘ ‘ ‘	C ‘ ‘ ‘
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Notice in the example above I started in the key of Bm, then briefly hit the key of Em which I used to get me into C. Passing through more than one key on the way to the target key is not unusual.

So where keys are more distant – have fewer notes in common – you may have to pass through a few keys to get smoothly to the target key.

It all really depends upon how smoothly or how abrupt you want the key change to be – which are of course compositional effects in their own right.

If you want to be really drastic then go straight to the target key. No cadences, no drawing it out. Just go straight there.

Think about the song New York New York. Towards the end there is a sudden key change upwards by one semi-tone [when the tempo halves and big Frank gives it large “Theeeeeeeeeese lil’ town blooooooos – or something like that].

Two keys, one semi-tone apart.

That is as distant as keys get. The tonality is rising upwards too.

The effect is sudden and uplifting. Not subtle.

And in this setting, this sudden uplifting effect is clearly how it is supposed to be.

On the other hand, you may want to gradually and stealthily meander into the distant target key by passing through many keys changing the tonality little by little.

This means making many key changes that are closely related – spinning out the transition like a tonal journey.

When you arrive at the target key it may well go largely un-noticed.

However, the tonal colouring you create during the journey can be breathtaking.

Here is a little progression. Take a look.

Can you figure out the keys that are involved and can you spot the V7 -> I 'perfect cadences'?

And for the smart kids:

What inversions are used?

What scales would you use where?

Em ‘ ‘ ‘	C ‘ ‘ ‘	Am ‘ ‘ ‘	Em ‘ ‘ ‘
E/D ‘ ‘ ‘	Am/C ‘ ‘ ‘	E7/B ‘ ‘ ‘	Am ‘ ‘ ‘
B/A ‘ ‘ ‘	Em/G ‘ ‘ ‘	G7 ‘ ‘ ‘	G7/B ‘ ‘ ‘
C ‘ ‘ ‘	G/B ‘ ‘ ‘	F/A ‘ ‘ ‘	C/G ‘ ‘ ‘
F ‘ ‘ ‘	D7/F# ‘ ‘ ‘	G ‘ ‘ ‘	E7/G# ‘ ‘ ‘
Am ‘ ‘ ‘	A7 ‘ ‘ ‘	D ‘ ‘ ‘	‘ ‘ ‘ ‘

Ok, so this example is a little crass and crashes through a handful of keys in quick succession.

But the idea here is to demonstrate a point.

In fact, if you voice the chords well, this progression should sound ok.

In practice, you can modulate as quickly as I've shown above or quicker too.

But there may be times when you'd maybe like to stick around in some of the keys a little longer to exploit the tonality. Get the listener to become comfortable before you move on. And little by little the music passes through a succession of keys in a fashion that the listener hardly notices the music evolving.

As always

Listen, consider and choose

The best judge is your instincts – the theory simply lays out the options open to you.