

MODULATIONS TO DISTANTLY RELATED KEYS IN THE MUSIC OF PUNCH BROTHERS

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A Genre-Blurring Bluegrass Band

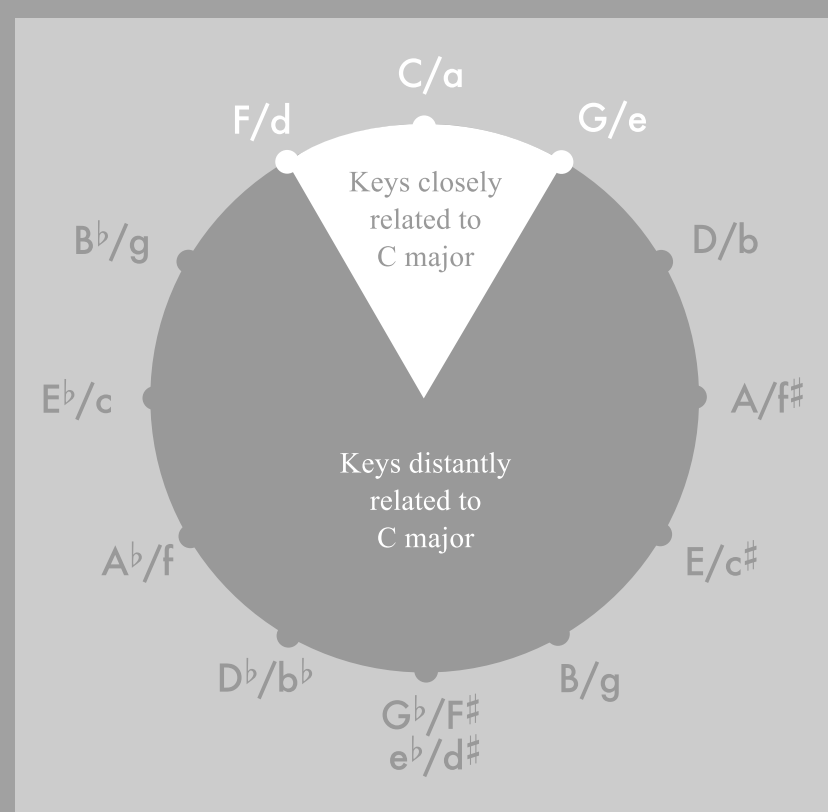


photo credit: Cassandra Jenkins

Mandolinist virtuoso and 2012 MacArthur Fellow Chris Thile has a rich history of performing in a variety of styles and collaborating with musicians as diverse as Bela Fleck, Yo-Yo Ma, and jazz pianist Brad Mehldau. Thile's band Punch Brothers particularly exemplifies his musical adventurousness and flexibility. Despite its standard bluegrass instrumentation of violin (Gabe Witcher), mandolin (Thile), acoustic guitar (Chris Eldridge), banjo (Noam Pikleny), and string bass (Paul Kowert), the music Punch Brothers creates stretches far beyond the traditional bluegrass genre and into areas of pop, classical transcription, and jazz. Described by the New York Times as "American country-classical chamber music", Punch Brothers has released five albums since their formation in 2006.

Modulations to Distantly Related Keys

Punch Brothers' ability to meld different styles into their songwriting is accomplished in-part by their sophisticated use of harmony. One such harmonic device found in numerous Punch Brothers songs is modulations to distantly related keys, keys that differ by more than one accidental. A particularly common occurrence is modulations between keys with a chromatic mediant relationship, keys separated by either a major or minor third such as F# major and D major. While common in the music of Schubert, Brahms, and other Romantic period composers, these types of modulations are rare in folk and popular genres.



Closely related keys to C: a, F, d, G, e. All other keys are distantly related.

The graphic below reveals some of the songs in which these modulations occur. These modulations usually take place between formal sections and it is not uncommon for a song to include more than one of these modulations. For example, the song "My Oh My" modulates through a total of three key areas (C minor, B-flat major, and G major) through the course of its 4:20" runtime. In addition to the diversity of keys and key relationships, Punch Brothers also use a variety of methods to move to new key areas. While common-chord modulations, modulations in which a pivot chord is shared between two keys either diatonically or chromatically, are the most frequent, other types of modulations such as common-tone and phrase/direct are also found in Punch Brothers' music.

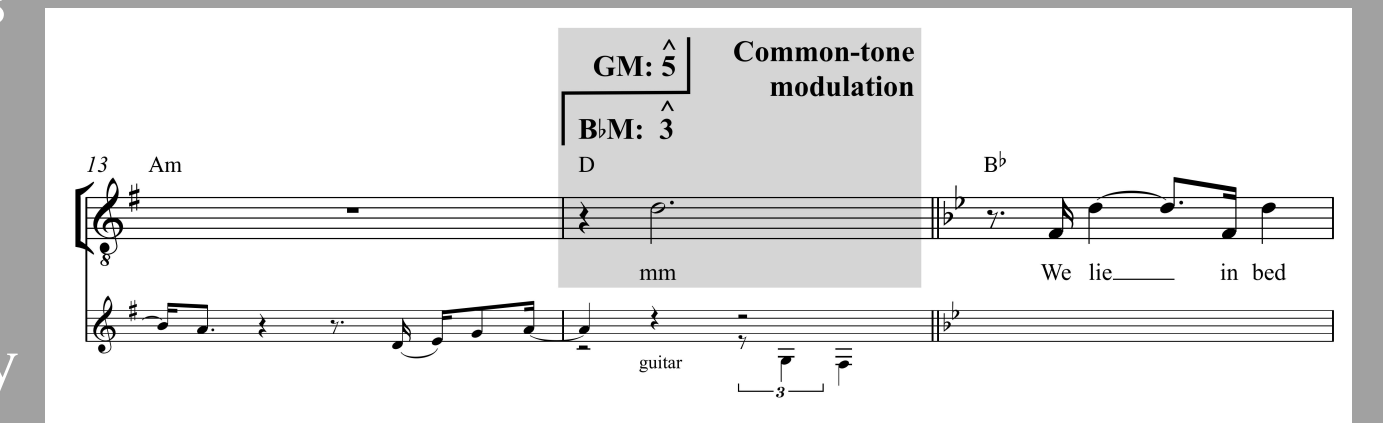
Distantly Related Keys Project a Larger Tonal Trajectory

Numerous Punch Brothers songs use distinct key areas to delineate the different sections of a piece. In "Omahallelujah", each of the three main sections inhabit a key that is distantly related from the key of the previous section: F# major verse, A major chorus, and C major bridge. Interestingly, the song closes by rapidly moving backwards through the exact same chain of chromatic mediant, returning to the original key of F# major before reaching the double bar. A similar motion, without the symmetrical return, is found in "Familiarity Part II and III". The major sections of the song are punctuated by changes of key a minor third away from the previous key (E major, G major, and B-flat major).

Modulations Support and Illuminate Lyrical Narrative

The song "Magnet" follows a straight-forward structure of verse, pre-chorus, chorus, with the verse residing in G minor and the chorus residing in B minor. The song oscillates between these two keys as the lyric describes a dysfunctional relationship between two partners who "keep pushing each other away" because of their own self-centeredness. Harmonically, the two distantly related key areas of G minor and B minor possess their own warring magnetism that is constantly in flux until the final resolution of the song.

In the song "Familiarity", a scene of evening celebration and excess transitions to the sober realities of the morning-after via a common-tone modulation. Beginning in the key of G major, a half cadence is reached as Thile holds out a D (scale degree five). Rather than resolving to the tonic, the key suddenly shifts to B-flat major with Thile's held D now functioning as scale degree three in the new key. By smoothly changing the tonal center, Thile musically depicts the sense of gradually waking up in a new place after a night out.

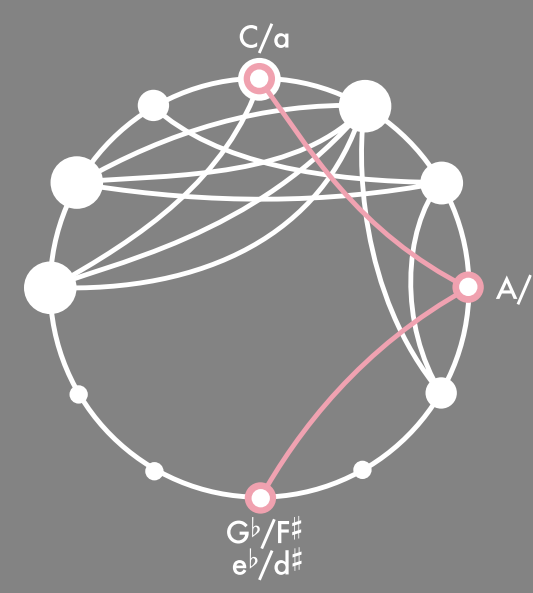


Common-tone modulation from G major to B-flat major in "Familiarity".

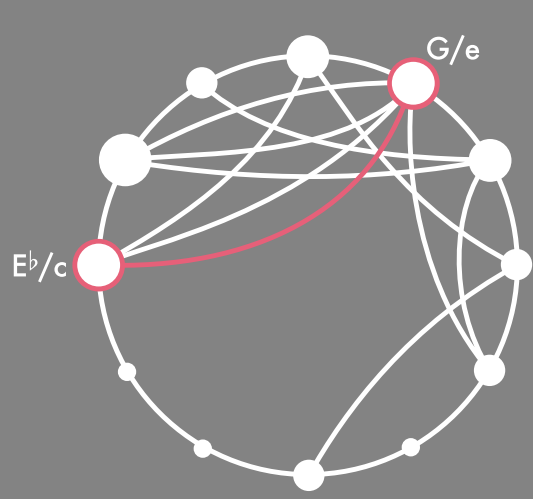
Application in the Theory Classroom

With resources such as "Contemporary Musicianship" by Snodgrass and websites like hooktheory.com, it is becoming increasingly common to incorporate popular music into the theory classroom in order to illustrate theoretical concepts. The diversity of modulations, key areas, and modulation types found in Punch Brothers' music make their music another rich resource for theory teachers looking for original musical examples of more advanced topics such as modulation. Additionally, Punch Brothers unique bluegrass instrumentation, which is often new to many music students, opens up avenues of exploration into American roots and folk music. For more information, analyses, and transcriptions, please visit my website at www.pauldavidthomas.net/what-the-punch

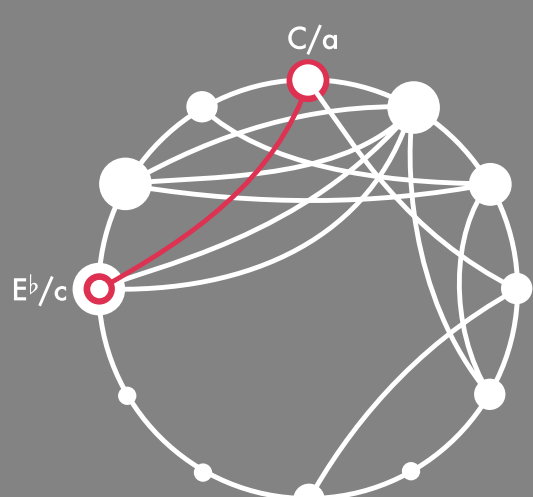
Song: Omahallelujah
Performance: A Prairie Home Companion
Verse: F# major
Chorus: A major
Bridge: C major
Mod. Types: Common-chord and Phrase



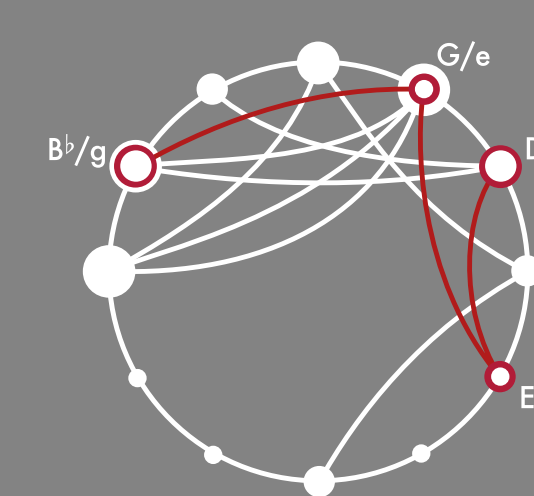
Song: Between First and A
Album: The Phosphorescent Blues
Theme A: G major
Theme B: E-flat major
Mod. Types: Common-chord and Phrase



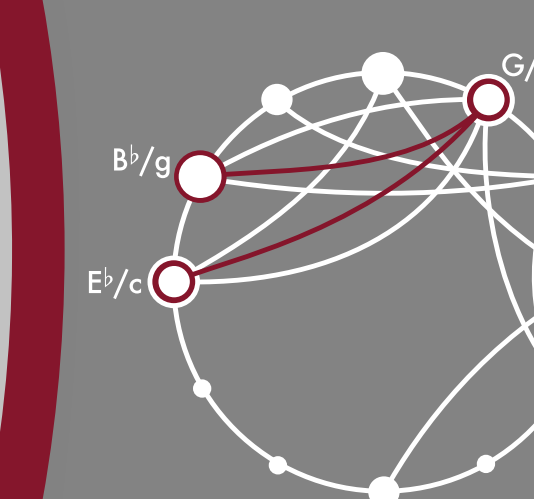
Song: Don't Get Married Without Me
Album: Who's Feeling Young Now?
Verse: E-flat major
Chorus: C major
Mod. Type: Common-chord



Song: Familiarity Part II and III
Album: The Phosphorescent Blues
Verse 4: B minor
Bridge: E major
Ending: G major
Part III Verse 1: B-flat major
Mod. Types: Common-tone and chord



Song: My Oh My
Album: The Phosphorescent Blues
Chorus 2: B-flat major
Instrumental: G major
Chorus 3: E-flat major
Mod. Types: Common-tone and Phrase



Song: Magnet
Album: The Phosphorescent Blues
Verse and Prechorus: G minor
Chorus: B minor
Interlude: D minor
Mod. Type: Phrase

