
Maximizing Macro: A Macro-Analytical Explanation of Non-circle Progressions

Kristy Bryden

In a macro analysis of a piece, circle progressions provide important information about the tonal architecture of the piece by identifying each key area and its length. They also depict how forward motion occurs, such as by long sweeping circle series, successions of short circle series, or a combination of the two. As important as circle progressions are, they do not tell the whole story of a piece. What is occurring in the areas where there are no circle progressions? Often these areas add interest to the music by preparing a new series of circle progressions, by embellishing or intensifying chords within a circle progression, or by using an alternative means besides circle progressions to provide a sense of forward motion. This article explains several types of non-circle progressions, using examples from the first movement of W. A. Mozart's Concerto no. 1 in G major for flute and orchestra, K. 313 and Franz Schubert's *Introduction and Variations on "Trockne Blumen"* for flute and piano, op. 160. The types of non-circle progressions found in these two pieces include positioning chords, signal chords, linear progressions, plagal progressions, third relationships, and predominant areas.

Different types of non-circle progressions perform special functions within a phrase. Often a new phrase begins with a positioning chord to prepare a new circle series or introduce a new key. In the middle of a phrase, neighboring or passing chords may embellish existing circle progressions, or a signal chord may foreshadow a new key area that occurs later. Longer non-circle progressions such as a series of linear chords progressing in parallel motion, third relationships, or plagal progressions provide diverse ways of conveying a sense of movement. They may also extend the length of a phrase. Near the end of a phrase, a collection of predominant chords may prepare for the dominant in the cadence. Each of these predominant chords provide a sense of progressing to the upcoming dominant but not to each other. Occasionally a deceptive progression, such as from V to vi, will delay the final cadence or even facilitate a modulation to another key.

Positioning Chords or Areas

Composers use positioning chords or areas to prepare for a new circle series. A positioning chord is not part of a circle series but is a separate chord (usually the tonic) that precedes a circle series. A positioning area occurs between circle progressions. Sometimes, a composer begins a piece or individual phrase with a positioning chord to assert or reassert the tonic harmony. One instance of a positioning chord beginning a piece occurs at the onset of the first movement of Mozart's flute concerto. Example 1 provides a piano score for the opening phrase (mm. 1–4). In this example, brackets beneath the roman numeral analysis identify a positioning chord in m. 1 and a positioning area in m. 3. The G major positioning chord vigorously establishes the tonic harmony, while the rest of the phrase in mm. 2–4 confirms it with a series of V–I progressions. The positioning area occurs between these two circle progressions.

Allegro maestoso

Flute

Tutti

f

tr

2 3 4

leg. * *leg.*

G D7 G D7 G

I V7 I V7 I

positioning chord positioning area

Example 1. Positioning Chord and Area.
Mozart, *Flute Concerto no. 1 in G Major, K. 313*,
Allegro maestoso, mm. 1–4.

Example 2 shows another positioning chord in the same movement that fulfills a similar role, but is also part of a deceptive progression. In this instance, an E minor chord—the positioning chord enclosed in Example 2—follows a D7 instead of the expected G major chord in m. 45.

5–6. In m. 7, however, a G major chord occurs, fulfilling the expectations brought about by the G major chord in m. 5. The phrase then concludes with a perfect authentic cadence in G major in m. 8.

Flute

Var. II

Tutti

f

2

3

4

e
i

B
V

e[#]7

F[#]7

b

vii^o7/V

V7

i

v

Example 3. Signal Chord.
Schubert, op. 160, Var. II, mm. 1–8.

The image shows a musical score for Example 3, continued, covering measures 5 through 8. The score is written in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano accompaniment consists of a right hand with chords and a left hand with a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. Roman numeral analysis is provided below the piano part for each measure.

Measure 5: Treble clef, G major. Chords: G (III), B7 (V7), e (i).
Measure 6: Treble clef, B major. Chords: B (V).
Measure 7: Treble clef, G major. Chords: G (III), g (iii).
Measure 8: Treble clef, G major. Chords: D7 (V7), G (I).
 A first ending bracket is shown above measure 8, indicating a repeat of the measure.

Example 3, continued.

Linear Progressions

Occasionally, one finds linear progressions (stepwise movement between chords) within the body of a phrase. A typical instance of this type of progression occurs in mm. 23–24 in the first movement of Mozart's flute concerto. Example 4 provides a piano score for mm. 23–25 in which brackets beneath the roman numeral analysis identify this progression. In m. 23, the linear progression begins with the D major chord on the second beat. This chord initiates a series of first-inversion triads descending in parallel motion that end with an A minor chord on the downbeat of m. 24. The V–IV–iii–ii root movement of these chords pro-

vides a graceful connection to the authentic cadence that begins with the concluding ii chord. In this linear progression the smooth stepwise motion between all the voices of the chords gives the music a lyrical flowing quality. Stepwise motion occurs in different ways in other instances of linear progressions. For example, only the bass line might move stepwise, or a descending bass and ascending upper line may form a melodic wedge.

23

Flute

G I D V C IV b iii

linear progression

24 25

a ii D7 V7 G I

Example 4. Linear Progressions.
Mozart, Flute Concerto no. 1 in G Major, K. 313,
Allegro maestoso, mm. 23–25.

Plagal Progressions

Plagal progressions—subdominant to tonic progressions—may occur at any point in the phrase. Several instances of plagal progressions occur in the Introduction of Schubert's *Introduction and Variations*, op. 160. In this passage, a series of plagal progressions in each phrase provide a unique way for the music to progress to the concluding authentic cadence. Example 5 includes the score for this passage. Brackets beneath the roman numeral analysis indicate where these plagal progressions occur. Following a perfect authentic cadence in E major in mm. 4–5, there is a series of two plagal progressions in mm. 5–7. Another series in mm. 8–10 follows the authentic cadence in mm. 7–8. In each instance, rhythmic cues provide a strong sense of forward motion from an A major or minor chord to an E major or minor chord. At the end of mm. 5 and 6, these rhythmic cues consist of a double dotted-quarter, sixteenth-note rhythm in the outer voices. At the end of mm. 8 and 9, sweeping runs in the flute add to the strong sense of forward motion provided by the rhythmic figures in the bass. Because of this strong sense of rhythmic motion within the plagal progressions, the sense of forward movement between the interim descending fifth progressions is weakened. Dotted slurs in the macro analysis under the staff in mm. 5–6 and 8–9 indicate this weakened relationship. Composers sometimes also use a plagal progression after an authentic cadence to extend the cadence and to strengthen the tonic. Often this serves to provide the ending with a greater sense of repose.

Flute

5 6

f[#]7 B E A E A

ii^o7 V I IV I IV

plagal plagal

Example 5. Plagal Progressions.
Schubert, op. 160, Introduction, mm. 4–12.

7 8 9

cresc. *f*

E B7 E a e a
I V7 I iv i iv
plagal plagal

10 11 12

e a B e
I iv V i

Example 5, continued.

Third Relationships

Chord progressions involving third relationships are another way composers provide a sense of forward motion within a phrase without using circle progressions. An extensive series of chords related by thirds occurs in mm. 189–196 in Mozart’s flute concerto. Example 6 includes the score for this passage. This series of third relationships begin with a G

major chord in mm. 189–190. The harmony descends to E minor in m. 192, to C major in mm. 193–194, and on to A minor in m. 195. Each of these chords is embellished in some way. A D-sharp diminished chord in m. 191 briefly tonicizes the E minor chord and double neighboring tones embellish the C major and A minor chords in mm. 193–195. On the downbeat of m. 196, this series of chord roots descending by thirds reverses direction with a C major chord. This chord begins a predominant area that prepares for the cadential dominant at the downbeat of m. 197. Besides providing an alternative way for the music to progress through the phrase, the third relationships in this phrase also provide a means to extend this phrase considerably. Moreover, the use of third relationships between chords in this passage complements other uses of melodic and harmonic thirds. The sixteenth notes in m. 189 and the flute in m. 190 feature sequences of rising melodic thirds, and the accompaniment in mm. 191–193 and 195 includes a series of harmonic thirds.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system covers measures 189 and 190. The flute part in measure 189 has a whole note G4, and in measure 190 it has a sixteenth-note sequence: G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5. The piano accompaniment in measure 189 has a sixteenth-note sequence: G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4. In measure 190, the piano accompaniment has a whole note G3. The second system covers measures 191 and 192. The flute part in measure 191 has a quarter note G4, a quarter rest, and a quarter note G4 with a trill. In measure 192, it has a quarter note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, and a quarter note C5. The piano accompaniment in measure 191 has a half note G3, and in measure 192 it has a whole note G3. A diagram below the piano part shows a dashed line connecting a D# diminished chord (vii°) and an E minor chord (vi).

Example 6. Third Relationships.
Mozart, *Flute Concerto no. 1 in G Major, K. 313*,
Allegro maestoso, mm. 189–199.

193 194 195

C IV a vi

196 197 198 199

C A7 D7 G
IV V7/V V7 I

Example 6, continued.

Predominant Collections

A collection of predominant chords creates a sense of high intensity because each in turn heightens expectation for the approaching dominant. A predominant area occurs in m. 76 in the first movement of Mozart's flute concerto. Example 7 provides the score for mm. 74–77. The slurs and dotted slurs in the macro analysis beneath the score indicate the strong sense of expectation each predominant chord has for the dominant. This particular predominant area leading to A7 provides a way to facilitate the change of key from the home key of G major to the dominant D major. The lowest horizontal line over "V" in the example denotes this new key area. Another horizontal line over "V" above this line indicates a secondary half-diminished leading-tone seventh chord and secondary

dominant seventh chord.¹ A tonic six-four chord between these two chords facilitates the smooth stepwise voice leading in this predominant area. In addition to the predominant chords in this example, composers also frequently use Neapolitan sixth (♭II) and augmented sixth chords to prepare for the dominant.

Flute

74 75 76 77

G e G g[#]7 E7 A7 D

I ii IV vii[#]7 V7 V7 I

V

V

Example 7. Predominant Area.
 Mozart, *Flute Concerto no. 1 in G Major, K. 313*,
Allegro maestoso, mm. 74–77.

Summary

Non-circle progressions play a significant role in giving a piece a distinct personality. As we have seen, linear progressions provide a seamless connection from the beginning of a phrase to the concluding cadence. Third relationships and plagal progressions provide interesting alternatives for giving a sense of forward motion within a phrase. Before a cadence, a collection of predominant harmonies serves to intensify the upcoming dominant. There are numerous other types of non-circle progressions besides those discussed in this article. For example, backward circle progressions are sometimes found at phrase endings, where the

1. Some theorists prefer the term *applied* instead of *secondary* when referring to chords that tonicize a certain harmony.

dominant follows the tonic after a cadence. This kind of progression provides additional reinforcement to an established tonic. Passing and neighbor chords sometimes embellish their surrounding circle progressions. Elided circle progressions—a circle series with a chord missing—impart an idiosyncratic moment to the music. A deceptive cadence (a V–vi progression) surprises the listener and delays resolution until the arrival of an authentic cadence. Whether by embellishing or intensifying the underlying harmony, astonishing the listener, or by providing a sense of continuous motion, non-circle progressions enrich the common-practice repertoire.