

The Neapolitan Sixth

The Neapolitan Sixth usually occurs as an altered chord II before a perfect cadence. It is the MAJOR chord on the FLATTENED SUPERTONIC. e.g. in C major or minor the supertonic is D and the flattened supertonic Db. The Neapolitan Sixth will be a Db major chord in C major or minor.

The name comes from its early appearance in the work of opera composers in Naples in the 1680s, so it is found occasionally in Bach and Handel (usually for moments of intense expression) and more frequently in subsequent periods.

Here are two examples from 'The Magic Flute' by Mozart (somewhat simplified). The Neapolitan 6th is in first inversion, which is the most common form.

Adagio

V7b I b Neap6th IVb IV V(with suspension) V I

In G minor, it will be an Ab major chord, again usually in first inversion.

I Neap6th Ic V I

If the prevailing key is major, note that you will have to alter the root AND the fifth of the chord e.g. in the key of D major the Neapolitan 6th will be an Eb major chord with Eb and Bb not in the key. In D minor the B will already be flat.

The same rule always applies - it is the MAJOR chord on the FLATTENED SUPERTONIC, and it usually moves directly to chord V.