

The Neapolitan Sixth Chord (bII⁶)


I. DESCRIPTION, PURPOSE, AND CONSTRUCTION

THE N6 CHORD is a Major triad, built on $b\hat{2}$, usually in first inversion, hence it is also labeled **bII6**. The purpose of altering a chord in this way is, like MIXTURE, to *decorate and chromatically intensify diatonic harmonic progressions*, specifically those which involve the *supertonic* triad.


The N6 is identical in minor keys and their parallel majors, but note the difference in accidentals:

(i) in **minor** keys it involves lowering $\hat{2}$ to $b\hat{2}$ (together with the other usual notes of a ii° triad), but

(ii) in **major** keys *two* accidentals are necessary: (a) $\hat{2}$ to $b\hat{2}$, and (b) $\hat{6}$ to $b\hat{6}$:



(i)
 c:
 N6
 (bII6)




(ii)
 C:
 N6
 (bII6)

II. FUNCTION

The N6 chord (**bII6**) functions in the same way as a diatonic **ii** (in Major) or **ii^o** (in minor) chord, which means it is a **pre-dominant class chord**. Thus, it usually goes to:


i) some form of **V** (including the cadential $\frac{6}{4}$), but

ii) it may *also* move to a **secondary dominant-function** chord *further intensifying* the approach to the dominant. In this case, **vii^o7** of **V** seems to have been preferred over $V6/5$ of **V**, which can sound rather harsh. Play the two examples below and ask yourself if the second sounds any harsher to your ears. If so, what do you think might cause this “harsher” quality?



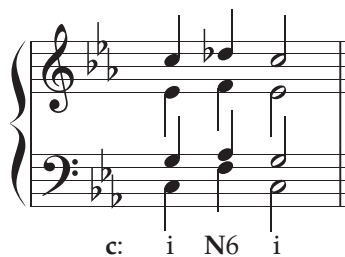
c: N6 vii^o7/ V7 i

or



c: N6 V₅⁶/V7 i

EXCEPTION: Although not common, the N chord sometimes moves *directly* to **I** (see example below)! Why do you think this was sometimes considered acceptable, since **ii** - **I** was not?



c: i N6 i

III. VOICE-LEADING, DOUBLING, AND OTHER POINTS TO REMEMBER

- It is more common in minor keys than major, but possible in both.

- $\hat{b}2$ is usually in the soprano.

- $\hat{b}2$ is a tendency tone whose attraction is towards $\hat{1}$. However, as we have seen, the predominant *function* of the N6 chord means that the following chord is usually *dominant*, which does not have $\hat{1}$ as a chord member, so where can $\hat{b}2$ go? The answer is that it does the *next best thing*: it **moves to $\hat{7}$** (in V), which *then* must resolve to $\hat{1}$ (*ti-do*), as is normal for leading-note resolution in the soprano.

- This creates the unusual effect of a melodic *diminished second* between $\hat{b}2$ and $\hat{7}$, but this is *typical* and *characteristic* voice-leading for the Neapolitan chord, and contributes to its unique sound. It is as if the tonic note is approached by leading tone from below ($\hat{7}$ - $\hat{8}$) and another “leading” tone from above ($\hat{b}2$ - $\hat{1}$) in successive pitches. **Note that $\hat{b}2$ NEVER moves to $\hat{4}2$!**

c: N6 V7 i

- If the next chord does NOT have a leading tone (N6 sometimes goes to V_4^6 , V^{4-3} , or vii°/V), then $\hat{b}2$ **must** pass through $\hat{1}$ on its way to $\hat{7}$, which of course then resolves back to $\hat{1}$:

c: N6 vii[°]7/ V7 i or c: N6 vii[°]7/ V₄⁶ ₃ i

- SINCE DOUBLING CHROMATICALLY-ALTERED NOTES IS GENERALLY AVOIDED, the **third** (i.e. the bass if it's in first inversion) is **most often doubled**.

- Chromatically-altered notes *tend* to resolve in the direction of the accidental (lowered notes continue down, raised notes continue up), but note that in N6 to vii[°]7/V progressions, the fifth of N6 (Ab, in the above examples) moves *up* to the third of vii[°]7/V (A natural). This goes against tendency, but is nevertheless commonly done, perhaps mitigated by its occurrence in an interior voice.

- Chromatically-altered notes need to be approached carefully; by chromatic or diatonic step, or small skip is best.

- N6 is usually approached by iv (IV), vi, bVI in Major (=VI in minor, =V/N6!), or vii[°]/N6, or I (i).

- Other inversions (**bII**, **bII₄⁶**) are *possible*, but rare; 1st inversion (**bII₆**) is most common.

- **bII₅⁶** (or **bII₇**, etc.) is extremely unlikely; avoid writing chordal sevenths with this chord.

IV. THE N6 IN CONTEXT

- We have said that the purpose of the N6 chord is to decorate and chromatically intensify progressions which involve the supertonic triad. This means that we now know of three different ways of chromatically intensifying this triad; can you name the other two?