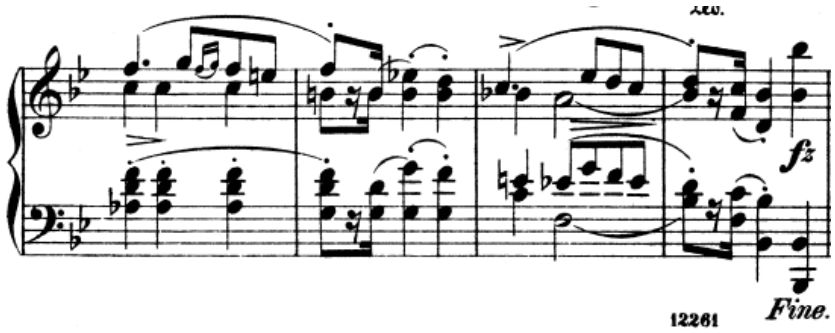
Romantic Chromaticisms

This handout gives loads of examples of chromatic chord progressions in Romantic music. You can steal and adapt anything you like. It is also important to LISTEN to the examples. Once you are used to looking for chromatic stuff, you could look in any Brahms, Chopin, Schubert, Dvorak etc. and see what you can find.

Altered chord in circles of fifths

This is an easy way to spice up your harmony. Take any part of a circle of fifths and mess around with the thirds, fifths and sevenths to change the type of seventh chord.

Chopin Mazurka op. 17/1 (bar 37-40)

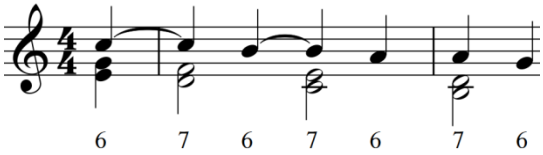


III^7	**VI^7**	**II^7**	**V^7**	**I**
(flat 5 ½ dim 7)	(raised 3rd dom 7th)	(raised 3rd dom 7th)		

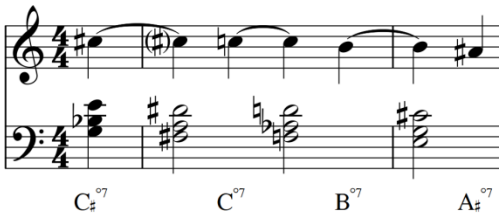
Romantic Chromaticisms

Chromatically slipping seventh chords

This is a development on the familiar chain of 7-6 suspensions:



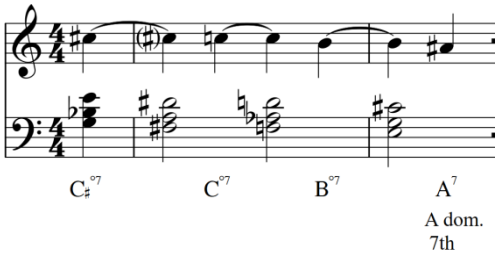
Romantic composers do the same trick but instead of using descending first inversion triads decorated by suspensions, they use descending diminished seventh chords (here in second inversion) decorated by suspensions:



There are two main interesting possibilities here:

- It allows you to modulate by resolving one of the diminished sevenths to a triad
- You can mess about with different types of seventh (diminished, half diminished and dominant).

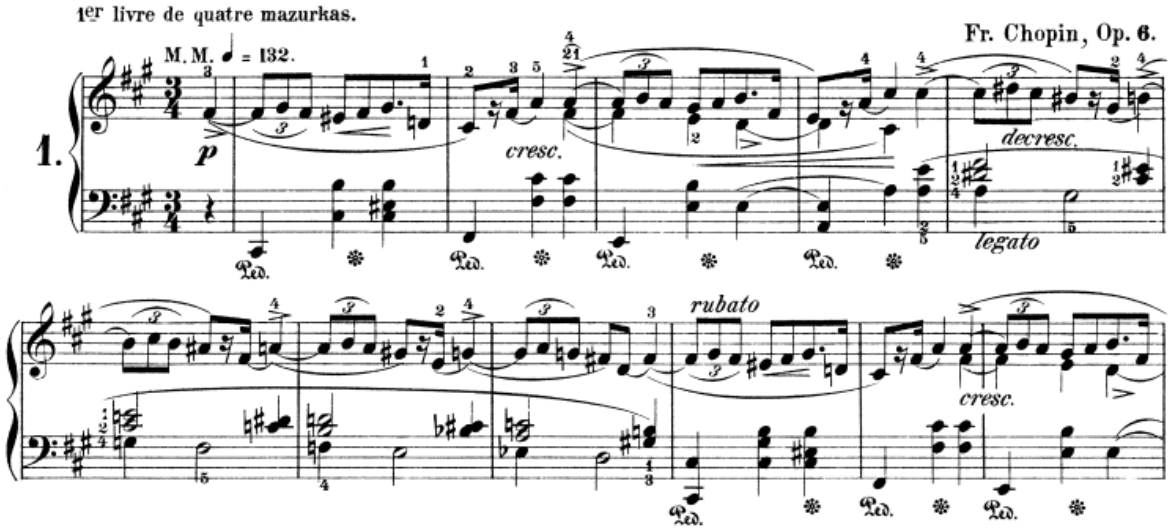
Picking up on the last point, here we have diminished sevenths as the basic chord and the suspensions make half diminished sevenths, but a small change to the last chord in this example (A sharp turned into A natural) makes the last chord a dominant seventh instead:



Romantic Chromaticisms

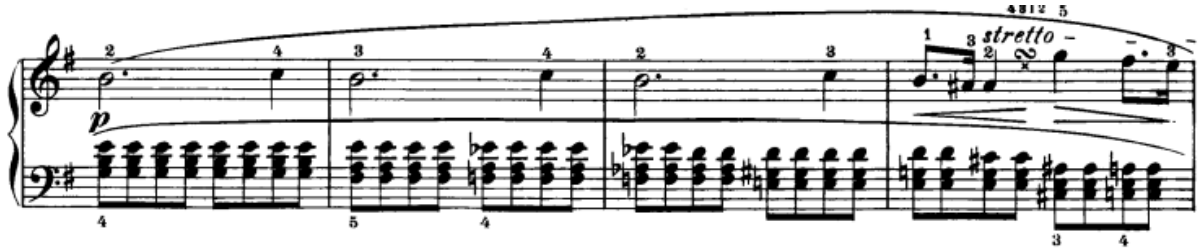
In this example, Chopin begins a series of chromatically slipping sevenths at the end of the first line. He uses a real mixture of dominant, half diminished and diminished sevenths.

Chopin op. 6 no. 1 (bar 5)



In this example, Chopin has a series of descending sevenths. The spelling here is a bit stranger but the effect is similar!

Chopin Prelude in E (bar 13)



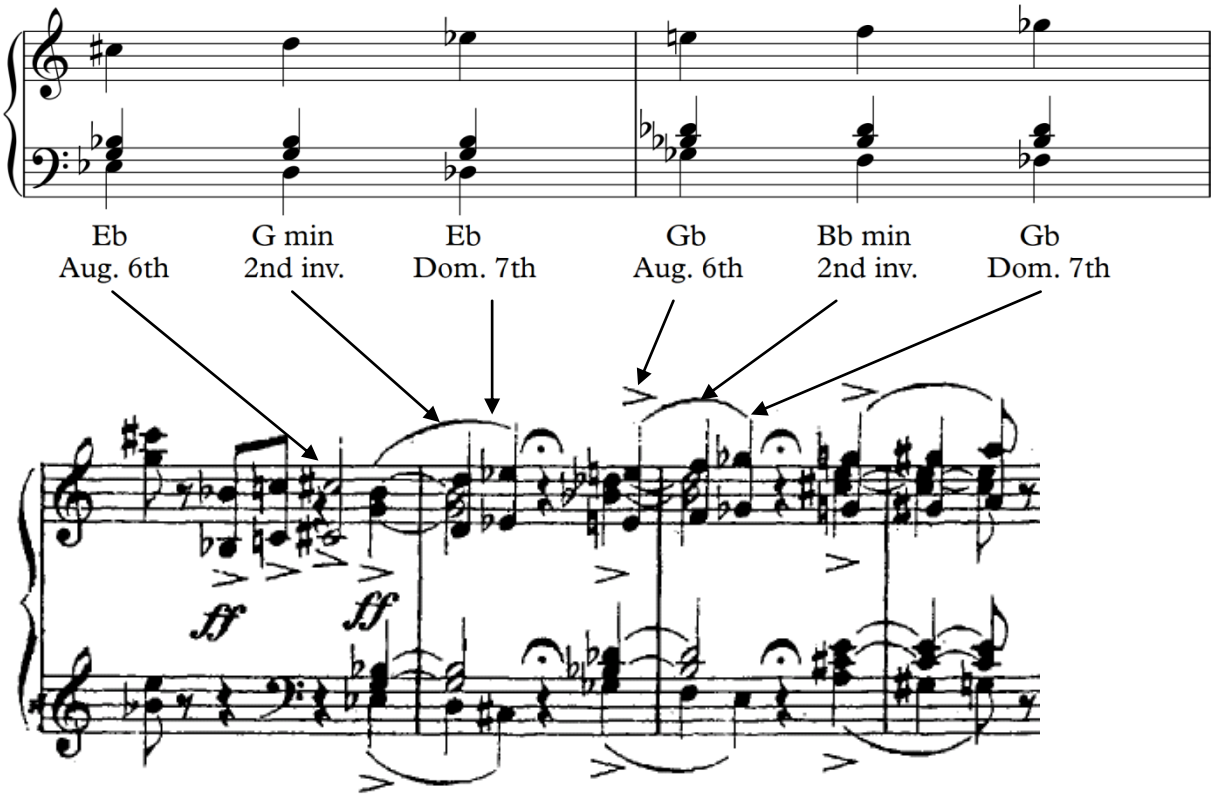
Romantic Chromaticisms

'Omnibus' progression

This is a chromatic progression based on the augmented sixth that is good for creating chromatic tension that just keeps on going!

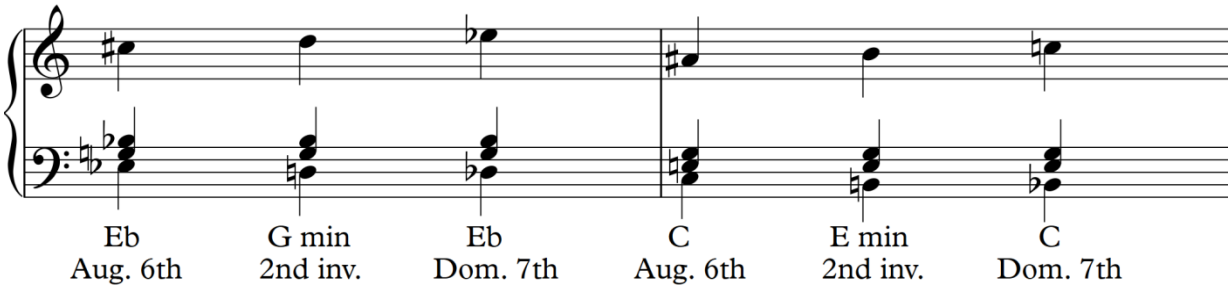
The omnibus progression is a three chord progression that is then repeated at different transpositions to create a chromatic scale. In the example below, note the following:

- The key feature is the contrary chromatic motion, here in the outer parts
- The first interval is an augmented sixth and creates a German augmented sixth chord
- The second interval resolves as expected onto an octave. The chord is effectively IC
- The third interval is a second and is harmonised with a dominant seventh in its last inversion, creating a new tension
- This three-chord progression is then transposed so that the rising chromatic scale continues
- You can see this exact progression in a real example in Tchaikovsky's Sleeping Beauty (for the rest, see Example D5 in *Dramatic Episodes* on Moodle)



Romantic Chromaticisms

The progression can also be sequenced so that the continuous chromatic line is in the bass, as in the example below:

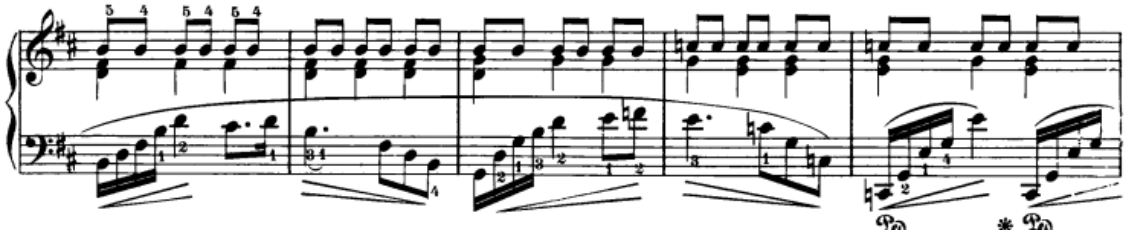


Romantic Chromaticisms

Progression and modulation by third

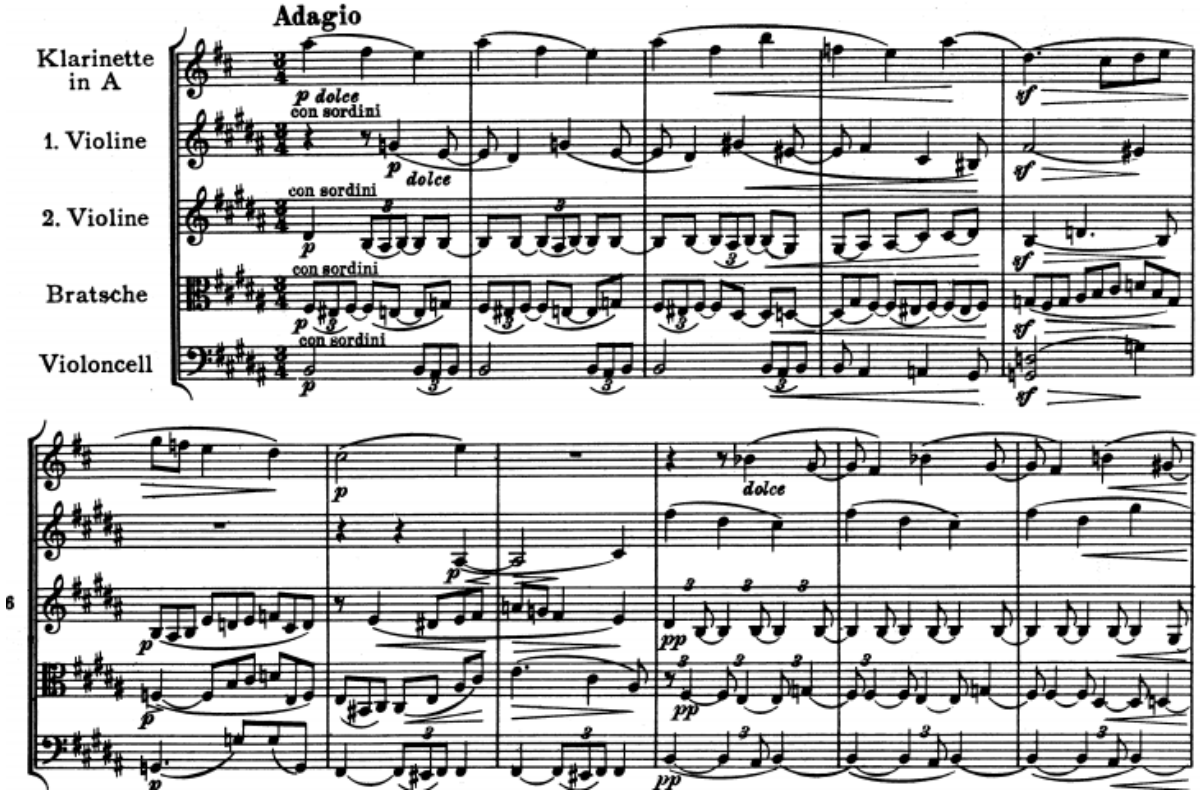
In this B minor prelude, Chopin uses the very common progression **i - VI** but then he turns the G major into a dominant of C major and modulates there. Simple, but very effective. C major is the Neapolitan of B minor so it is easy to get back when you want to.

Chopin B minor Prelude No. 6 (bar 9)



In the slow movement of the Brahms Clarinet Quintet, we see the same progression but this time we are in B MAJOR, so moving to G major is a chromatic **flat VI** (yes – the flat submediant again!). On the second line, Brahms treats the G7 as an augmented sixth to land back on the dominant (F#) in bar 7.

Brahms Clarinet Quintet second movement

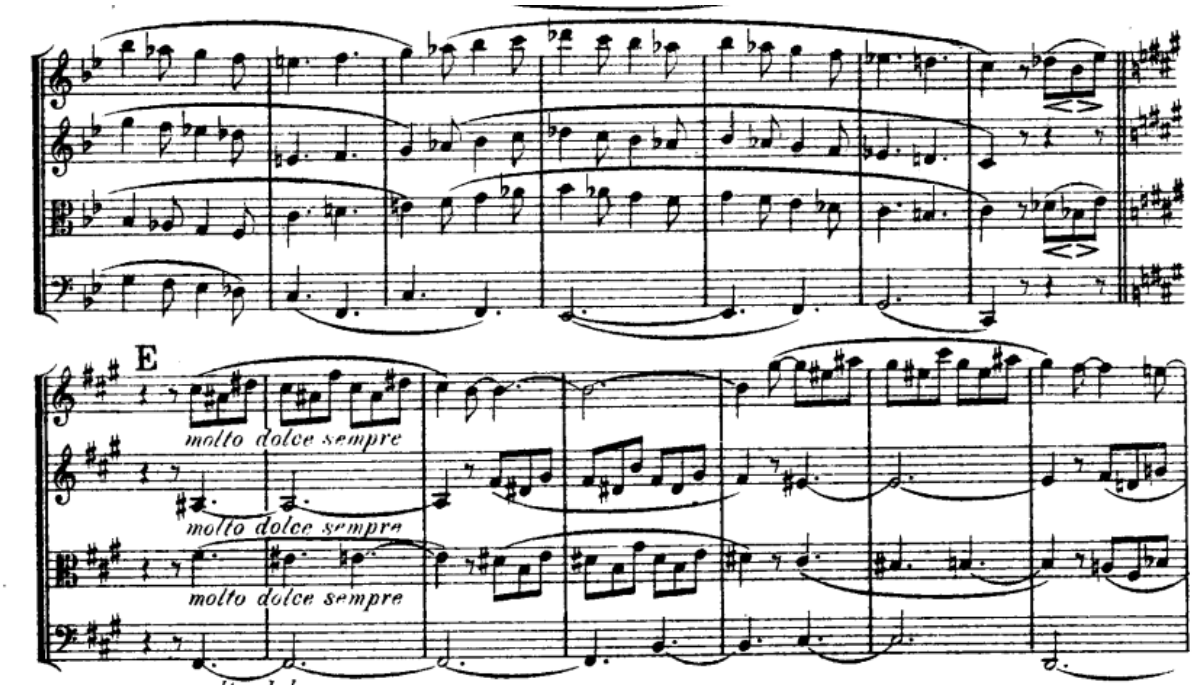


Romantic Chromaticisms

Chromatic diversions

Romantic composers go on all sorts of weird and wonderful chromatic diversions. Max Reger once wrote that “any chord can follow any other chord”. It all depends on voice-leading and context. Look at this really weird modulation from C major via an F# chord to B major. Brahms makes it work by repeating a melodic figure that links the two chords.

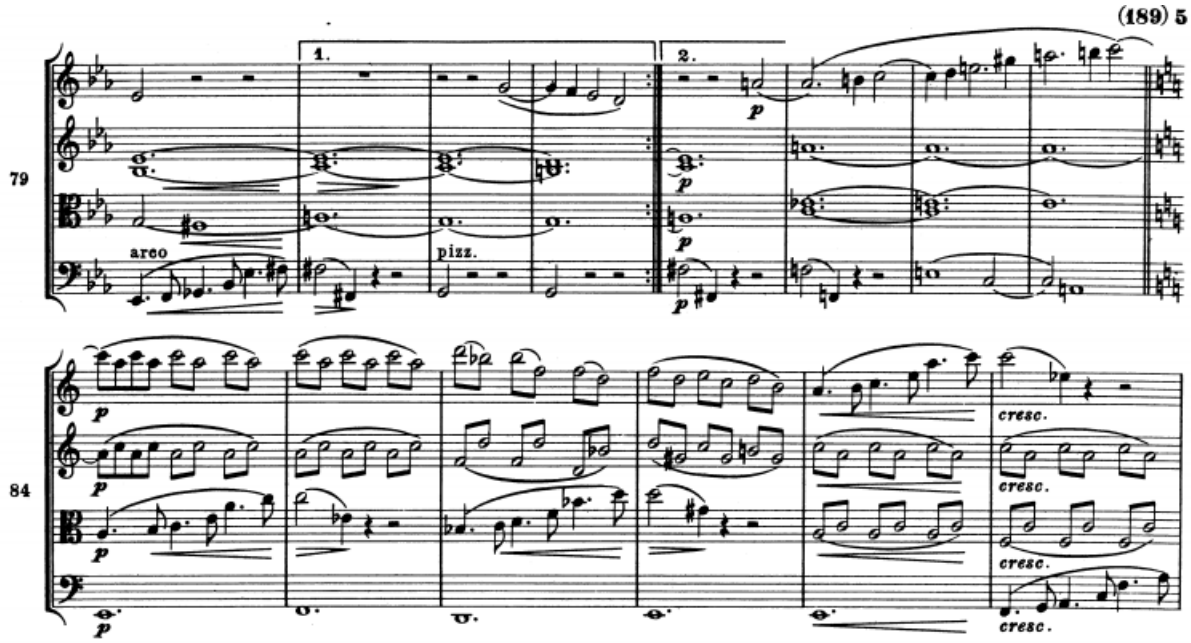
Brahms Quartet No. 3, movement 1 (Letter E)



Romantic Chromaticisms

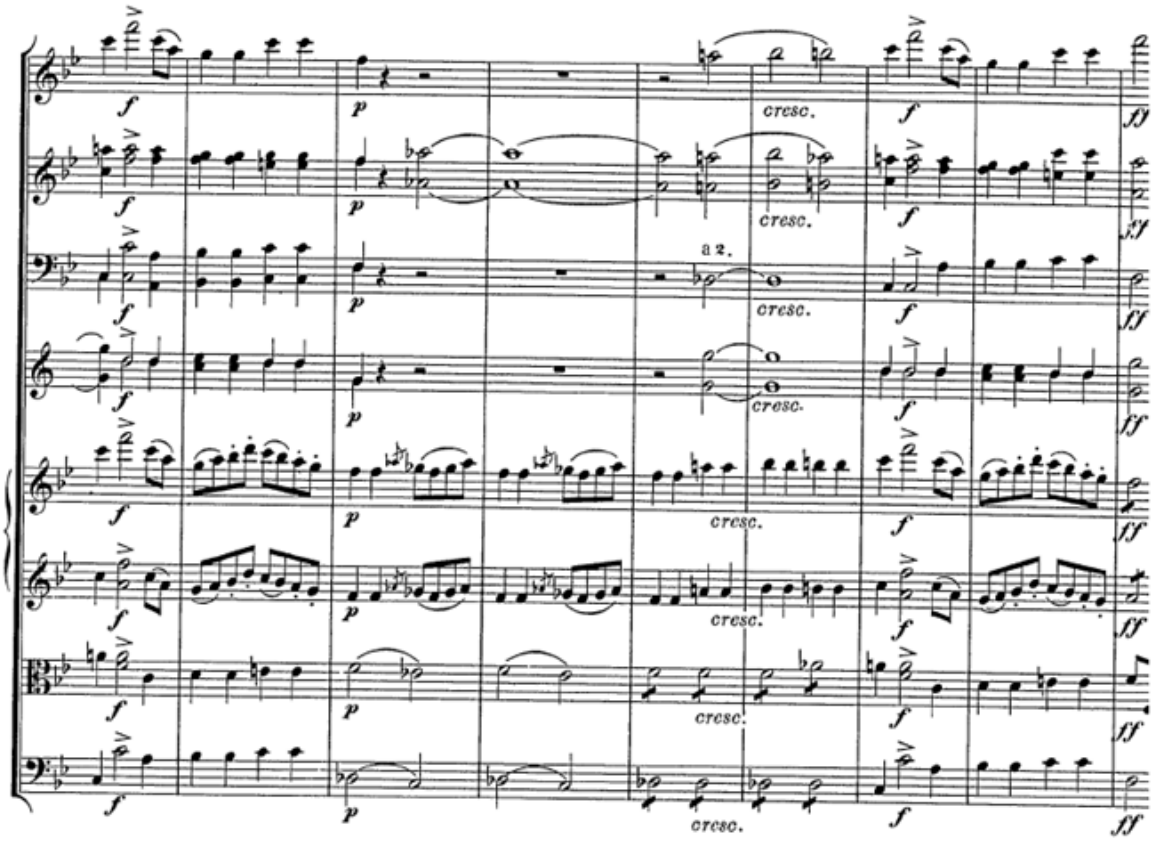
In this Brahms quartet, he goes from Eb minor to A minor via an F# diminished seventh in bar 80 (the second time bar). It is all about making it work with voice leading and melodic continuation.

Brahms Quartet no.1, movement 1 (bar 79)



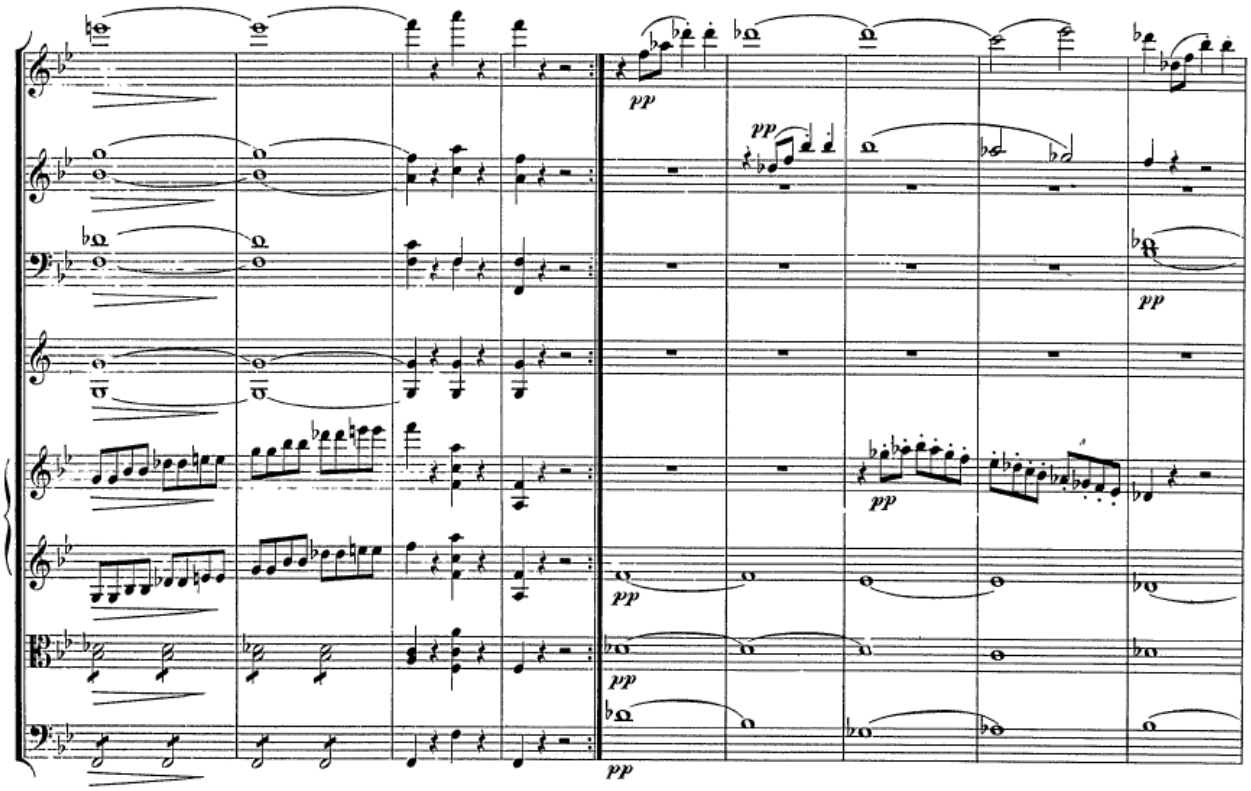
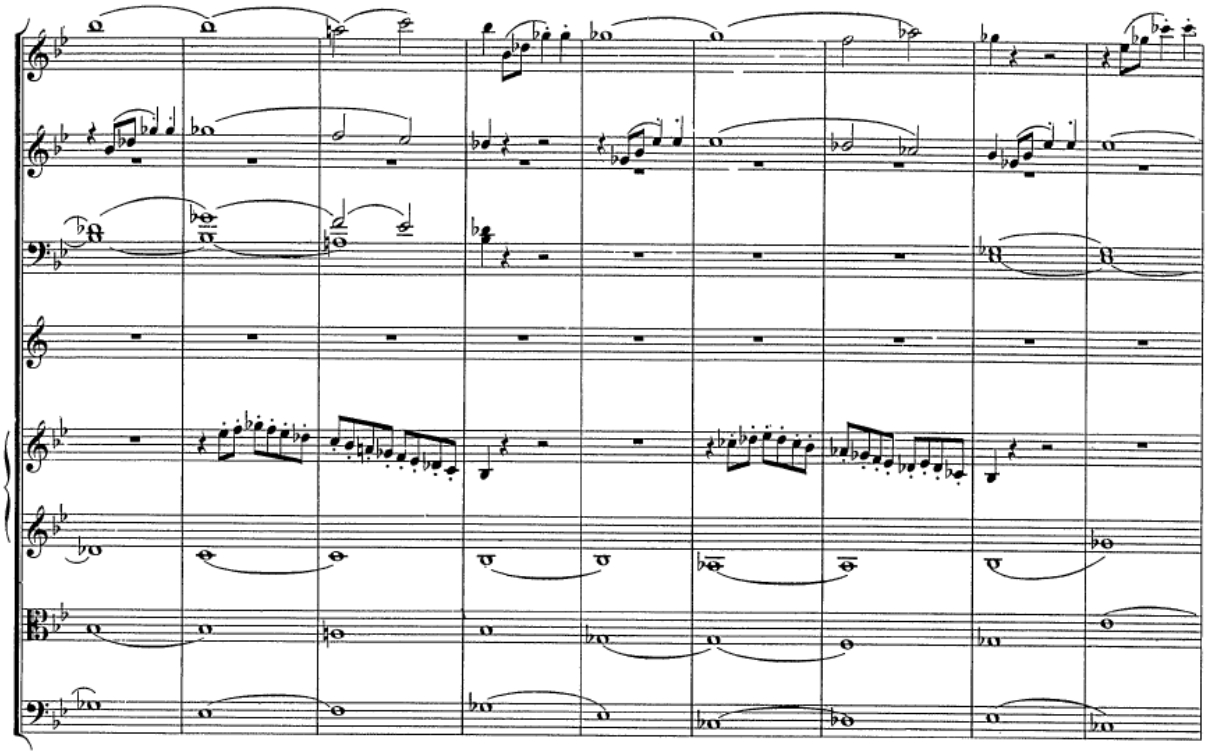
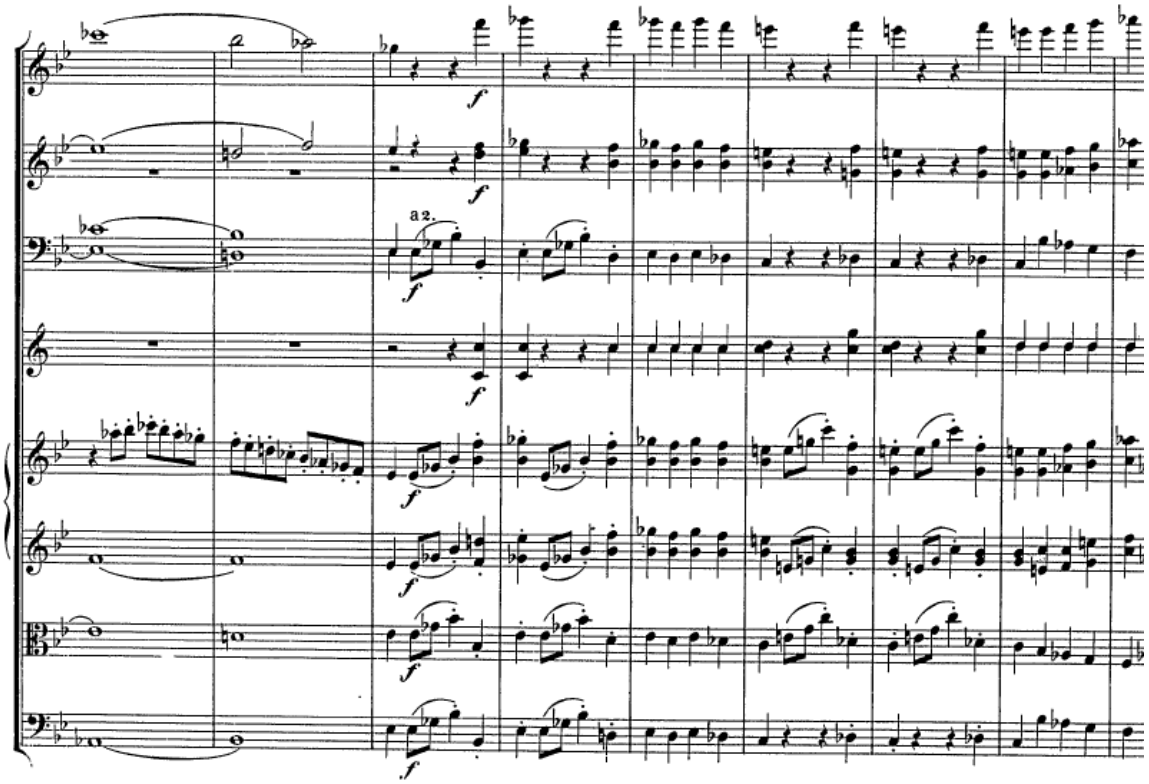
Romantic Chromaticisms

There are two really good examples of modulation in Schubert's Symphony No. 5. In this first example, we are in F major, but it diverts to D flat major:



Romantic Chromaticisms

In the development, Schubert keeps repeating the progression I – vi – ii – V first in Db major then Bb minor (he uses an interrupted cadence on Bb to get here) then in Gb major and then Eb minor. All from a start in F major!



Romantic Chromaticisms