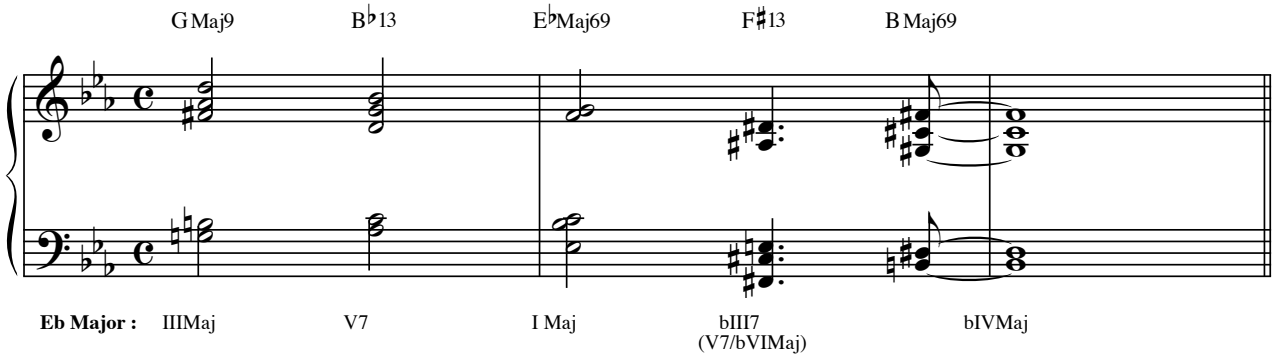
bIII & bVI Major Chords and Chromatic Mediants

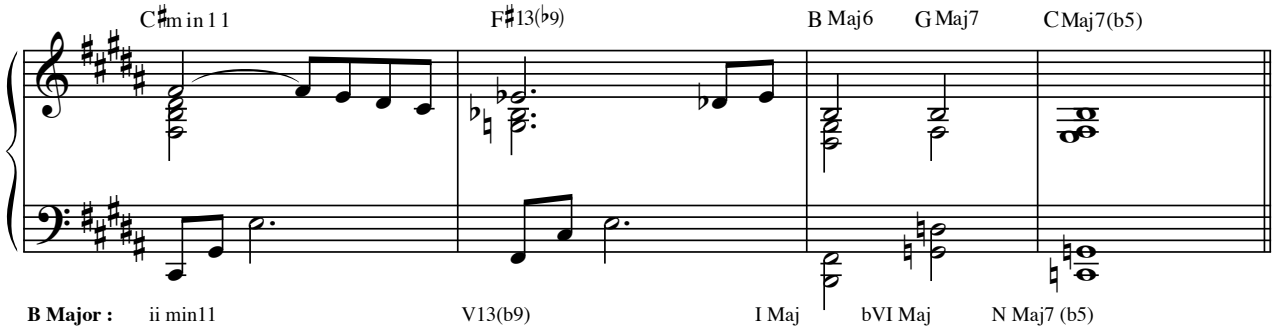
Ex.17l

'Giant Steps' (measures 5-7)



Ex.17m

'La Mesha' (measures 19-22)



A discussion of bIII and bVI borrowed chords could easily involve the topic of chromatic mediant relations due to both chords' formation a nondiatonic third from the tonic. However, as chromatic mediants will be discussed in another chapter, the primary purpose of this discussion will be to observe how the two harmonic progressions above relate to the topic of borrowed chords and modal mixture.

As previously mentioned, the bIII chord frequently functions as a secondary dominant for the bVI chord and Ex.17l above, from John Coltrane's 'Giant Steps', is no exception. The nomenclature below the stave indicates this by identifying the bIII (F#13) as V7/bVI. Although this F#13's triad (F#, A# & C#), as well as its resolution chord (B maj69 in measure 3) can be located in the modes of the parallel natural minor (Eb minor), the seventh of the F#13 (E) violates the mode, in turn suggesting this chord progression's stronger affiliation with the theory of chromatic mediant relations.

Therefore, it is fair to say bIII and bVI major chords can be located in the parallel minor scale (Ex.17b) to the given key of any piece. Their intervallic relationship with the tonic of the parallel major key is a chromatic 3rd, and therefore one can see how the theoretic principals 'borrowed chords' and 'chromatic mediant relations' overlap. Let's look at this another way. The relative major of any given key's parallel minor can be found a minor 3rd away from the original key's tonal center. Take for example C Major and its parallel minor (C minor). Note that the relative major to this parallel minor (C minor) is Eb Major, which is a nondiatonic or chromatic 3rd from C Major. Recognizing harmonies and harmonic progressions such as these in different ways constitutes a greater understanding of music theory and enables musicians to perform, compose and hear music in new ways.

The second example above (Ex.17m) is from the last four measures of Kenny Dorham's ballad 'La Mesha". The G Major 7 or bVI chord in the third measure comes from the parallel natural or harmonic minor scale (B minor). Also note this chord (G Major 7 or bVI) functions as a type of dominant for the Neapolitan Chord in the final measure (C Maj7). This type of progression is commonly found in classical music from the romantic period onward.

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