

## Minor Plagal Cadences

In classical harmony, it is common to speak of *borrowed chords*, which are chords that are not diatonic to the current key but are diatonic to a minor key built on the same tonic. For example, an **Ebmaj7** chord is not diatonic to the key of **C** major, but it is diatonic to the key of **C** minor, often called the *parallel minor*. There are seven possible chords one can borrow from the parallel minor – one for each degree of the scale. However, I find that this is not normally a useful way of thinking about chords, because when these chords appear in a progression, there is almost always a better way of explaining their presence. There is really only one situation where I find it necessary to think in terms of borrowing chords from the parallel minor, and that is when we see a minor **iv** chord in a major key progression. This almost always occurs in the context of a **iv**→**I** progression, which is sometimes called a *minor plagal cadence*. This resolution tendency can be stated as a guideline:

The **iv** chord can substitute for the **IV** chord in a **IV**→**I** progression.

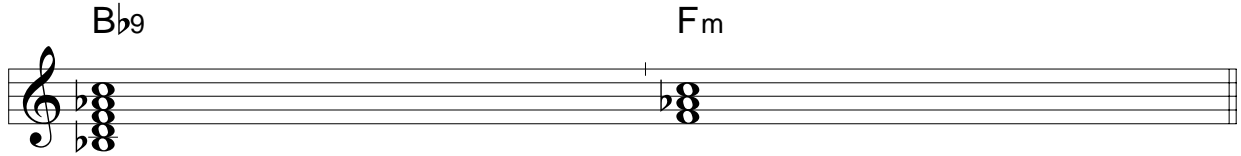
The following progression illustrates the minor plagal cadence:

A musical staff in treble clef showing a progression of three chords. The first measure contains the chord **F**, labeled **IV** below. The second measure contains the chord **Fm**, labeled **iv** below. The third measure contains the chord **C**, labeled **I** below. The notes in each measure are represented by diagonal slashes.

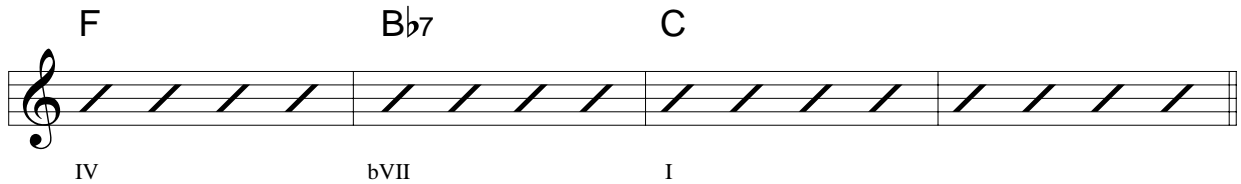
Minor plagal cadences may be used in this simple form, but there is a very special application of this idea that is often used instead. Consider the **iv** chord as a minor seventh chord. Where does a minor seventh chord normally tend to resolve? The circle of fifths guideline suggests it would resolve downward by fifth. Furthermore, as noted in the discussion of the secondary dominant guideline, minor seventh chords tend to resolve to dominant seventh chords. This implies the **iv** chord might tend to resolve to the **bVII7** chord. And in fact, we often find **bVII7** chords in the middle of what we would otherwise recognize as minor plagal cadences. For example, the minor plagal cadence shown above might also be found as:

A musical staff in treble clef showing a progression of four chords. The first measure contains the chord **F**, labeled **IV** below. The second measure contains the chord **Fm7**, labeled **iv** below. The third measure contains the chord **Bb7**, labeled **bVII** below. The fourth measure contains the chord **C**, labeled **I** below. The notes in each measure are represented by diagonal slashes.

Furthermore, we can, if we wish, think of the **bVII7** chord as a kind of substitute for **iv**, just as I suggested that **IV** could be seen as a substitute for **V9sus**. After all, the **iv** chord can be seen as the upper extension of a **bVII9** chord:



If we accept this, then it should not surprise us to encounter a minor plagal cadence in which the **bVII7** actually replaces the **iv** chord:



This is all worth summing up in another guideline:

In a **iv**→**I** progression, the **bVII7** chord may be inserted after or even replace the **iv** chord.

When the **bVII** chord is used as part of a minor plagal cadence, it is sometimes called a *backdoor dominant*, because it is a dominant seventh chord that resolves to the tonic but is not using the ordinary circle of fifths resolution. Instead it resolves through a “back door” upward by whole step.