

TRANSPOSING

Transposing means to change the key of an entire piece, not to be confused with modulation which means to change the key during a piece.

Pianists, especially, often find themselves obliged to transpose music. This may involve the tune as well as the chords or if accompanying an instrumentalist or vocalist, being able to change the chords for backing purposes.

Some tips for transposing.

1. Always look at the music before playing it and play it in your head. Spend as long as you can get away with it doing this. In the normal course of events, you would check the key, time signature, dynamics, style and the geography of the piece, ie. the repeats, the DS's, DC's and sections that might be crossed out or altered on the music.
2. Look at the chord sequence. If it consists of II V's I's, I VI II V's or I II III IV etc - ie. sequences which all lie in the key, you shouldn't have too many problems. Where modulations occur, see what interval this is to the former key. For example, in Blue Moon, the first 16 bars all lie within the key, or are substitute chords on the same bass notes as the originals (eg. D7 instead of Dm7). In the middle 8, you stay within the key for the first 4 bars, then modulate to from the key of F to Ab - the minor seventh which leads to this new key is a Bbm7 which is up a perfect 4th from the preceding chord (F). Think of this step first and also think of the whole II V I as a unit. In the 7th bar of the middle 8, the tune modulate from Ab to C and then in the 8th bar to F again. To get to C you go via the Dm7 which is a tritone interval (the notes Ab - D) To get to F from there is simple and you just need to change from a G7 to a Gm7. To sum up, you would coast your way as far as the modulation to Ab, then remember the 4th interval to the Bbm7 chord and the tritone to the Dm7.
3. This technique will also apply to any strange unexpected chords you might come across. The important thing is to discover what the interval between the adjacent chords is. If you have the music in front of you, you don't have to remember the type of chord or any extensions or alterations because they will apply the same. What you need to know is what is the bass note.
4. Look out for any other patterns in the music. Does it have any descending or ascending lines over a number of chords, such as dominant 7s going down a semitone at a time? Try and spot these things.
5. Another way of doing things is to do things by intervals as you go along. The original music may be in F. If you then play it in Db, that's a major 3rd below, therefore each chord in the new key will be a major 3rd below. Remember that if it's down a 6th it's also up a 3rd, and if it's down a 7th, it's up a 2nd. These smaller intervals are easier to remember. But be consistent for the whole tune - up or down. If you can't work out the key at the start,

look at the first chord. Say it's a Dm7 and the first chord in the new key is a Gm7 - the interval will be a perfect 5th down or perfect 4th up.

6. The same things apply to the notes. See if the music goes up or down, and if there are any strange intervals, like a major 7th in the tune.
7. Use your ears. It helps if you know the tune already. Even if not, be guided by your ears for getting the right intervals and chords. If you're lucky enough to have a bass player who can be trusted to play the right notes, use the root notes as a basis for getting the chords right.
8. If you can't get it right, console yourself with the thought that most other musicians will also be struggling. Be confident and don't be cowed. If it's too difficult, no-one can be expected to do it.
9. There is one type of transposition which is relatively easy. In transposing baritone sax parts (written in the treble clef an octave and a major 6th above how they sound) to concert, mentally change the clef from treble to bass and change key signature to the key a major 6th below. Now play it. You do have to watch out for accidentals but it should still help you. If you're awake enough you can do the same technique for transposing alto parts to concert (ie. of transposing music down a major 6th) except that you have the added step of playing everything up an octave to finish off with.
10. The reverse of this process is also worth knowing - transposing from bass clef to Eb pitch in treble clef. Getting to know every major 6th interval and doing it that way may be easier, you may find.