COLTRANE CHANGES
INTRODUCTION

- The Béla Bartók’s axis system (see the corresponding presentation) gives us multiple options for choosing the Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant chords in each given key.

- On the other hand, as we have 12 notes and 3 harmonic functions, the “logical” way would be to choose the Tonic, Dominant and Subdominant chords by dividing the octave into 3 equal parts. This means that, between the roots of these 3 chords, there is always a Major 3rd interval (2 Steps).
BARTÓK’S AXIS SYSTEM

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For example, if the tonic is C Major, we would take E Major as the Dominant and A♭ Major as the Subdominant. On the Harmonic Wheel, these 3 chords are placed following a spiral line.

Since there are always 2 Steps between these 3 chords, the 3 harmonic functions show a perfect symmetry, thus limiting the concept of Tonic.

This idea of dividing the octave into 3 equal parts was well developed by John Coltrane, the great Jazz saxophonist, without even knowing Bartók’s axis system, which represents a great merit.
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The most famous example of using this technique by Coltrane is, without doubt, Giant Steps.

In this tune, the basic chords are BΔ, GΔ, EbΔ and the transition from one to another is done by means of a V7, which is sometimes preceded by a IIm.

Thus, the chord progressions go by descending thirds:

BΔ  D7  GΔ  Bb7  EbΔ

or by ascending thirds as well:

EbΔ  Am  D7  GΔ  C#m  F#7  BΔ