

UNIT VIII: DOMINANT AND SUPERTONIC SEVENTHS

Since all the common triad-types can be built by the superposition of major and minor thirds, it is plausible to extend this process to build 4-pitch chords. By analogy with the term “triad”, these might be termed “tetrads”, but they are known instead as “seventh chords”, from the interval, when arranged as a compact stack of thirds, from the bottom note to the top. We have two kinds of thirds to add to four kinds of triads, making in all eight possibilities:

- 1) diminished triad + minor third = (full) diminished 7th chord; the outer interval is a *diminished 7th*
- 2) diminished triad + major third = half-diminished 7th; the outer interval is a *minor 7th*
- 3) minor triad + minor third = minor-minor 7th (or just “minor 7th”); the outer interval is a *minor 7th*
- 4) minor triad + major third = minor-major 7th; the outer interval is a *major 7th*
- 5) major triad + minor third = major-minor 7th (or “dominant 7th”); the outer interval is a *minor 7th*
- 6) major triad + major third = major-major 7th (or just “major 7th”); the outer interval is a *major 7th*
- 7) augmented triad + minor third = augmented-major 7th; the outer interval is a *major 7th*
- 8) augmented triad + major third has no standard name; the outer interval is an *augmented 7th*

These possibilities are illustrated in [EX 1](#). Notice that the names, except for the diminished 7ths, derive from the bottom triad and the outer seventh. The unqualified “diminished 7th” means the full-diminished variety. The names, by no means universal, refer to sonority and spelling only, not to position or function within a scale or key.

The last possibility, #8 above, is included only for the sake of completeness; it is a mere curiosity unlikely to occur in real music. All the other varieties, however, are discovered at least once when we build seventh-chords on the various scale-degrees in major and minor: [EXX 2 - 4](#). Notice the notation (partly my own): a chord including a major 7th is marked: ${}^+IV^7$, ${}^+IV_3^4$, etc.; when the seventh chord is not marked this way the 7th is minor. Notice also the special signs \circ and \flat for full- and half-diminished seventh-chords, respectively.

In 18th-century harmony, the only seventh-chords that can be really said to form part of the vocabulary are the dominant, supertonic, and leading-tone sevenths; that is, V^7 , ii^7 , $\flat ii^7$, $\circ vii^7$, and $\flat vii^7$; the latter half-diminished seventh is very common in the Classic style, less so in the Baroque.

The Dominant Seventh: V^7

The V^7 in both major and minor is a major-minor 7th chord; the 7th is the 4^o of the scale. The most common progression is to the tonic triad: the 7^o moves up to the tonic and the 4^o moves down to the 3^o: [EX 5](#). Thus the characteristic tritone interval contracts, if spelled as a diminished fifth, or expands, if spelled as an augmented fourth. The fact that the 7th of the chord (the 4^o of the scale) usually resolves downward – that is, is treated like a contrapuntal dissonance – often leads theorists to say that the 7th “originated” as a dissonance that is “attached to” or “frozen” onto the chord. Though this seems intuitively plausible, and in seventh chords the 7th can frequently be construed as some type of passing tone, suspension, appoggiatura, etc., as a historical hypothesis it is not very well-grounded, or even well-formed. It seems rather to be the case that 17th-century composers simply began to treat the 7th more freely. In particular the 7th of a dominant 7th need not be especially carefully approached or prepared – except that, in the Bach Chorales, in root-position seventh-chords, the seventh (that is, the note forming

a seventh with the bass) is, in fact, most often a passing-tone or a suspension. It usually resolves downward, with the change of chord.

As shown in [EX 5](#), a complete V^7 most conveniently resolves to an incomplete tonic, one with a tripled root and no 5th. This is a frequent occurrence at the end of a phrase; however, in order to produce a complete tonic triad, several solutions are available:

1. Double the root in V^7 , and omit the 5th: [EX 6](#).
2. Double the root in V^7 , and omit the 3rd: [EX 7](#).
(Usually, it is preferred to omit the 5th in V^7 , but omitting the 3rd is not uncommon.)
3. When the LT is in an inner part, it can proceed, usually downward, to a note other than the tonic: [EX 8](#).
4. Or the 4^o, the 7th of the chord, may, in an inner voice, proceed irregularly: [EX 9](#).
5. Situations can arise in which both “tendency tones” in the V^7 proceed irregularly: [EX 10](#).

The Inversions of V^7

These are labeled V^6_3 , or usually V^6_5 , first inversion (3rd in the bass)

V^6_4 , or usually V^4_3 , second inversion (5th in the bass)

V^6_2 , or usually V^4_2 or just V^2 , 3rd inversion (7th in the bass).

The figures are from Bc practice, and are the same for all seventh chords. The inverted V^7 is usually written complete, and the voice-leading to the tonic is quite unproblematic: [EX 11](#). As in this example, V^6_5 almost always proceeds to the tonic, the bass LT ascending. Likewise in V^4_2 , the 4^o in the bass usually drops, the resolution being to I^6 . This makes V^2 useful as a passing chord: [EX 12](#). The V^4_3 , like second-inversion triads ($\bar{4}$ -chords) is often a passing chord, especially from I to I^6 , or vice-versa: [EX 13](#). [EX 14](#) shows a less common and mildly-deceptive resolution to the tonic (I^6). Notice the 7th rises to avoid doubling the 3rd in the tonic.

Resolutions to chords other than the tonic

The various deceptive cadences, as given in Unit IV, are equally effective with V^7 :

$$\left. \begin{array}{l} V^7 - vi \\ V^7 - VI \end{array} \right\} \text{EX 15: The voice-leading is unproblematic when the } V^7 \text{ is complete.}$$

$$\left. \begin{array}{l} V^7 - IV^6 \\ V^7 - iv^6 \end{array} \right\} \text{EX 16: In these the 7}^{\text{th}} \text{ of the } V^7 \text{ fails to resolve, being held over into the IV.}$$

$$\left. \begin{array}{l} V^6_5 - vi^6 \\ V^6_5 - VI^6 \end{array} \right\} \text{EX 17} \qquad \left. \begin{array}{l} V^7 - vi^6 \\ V^7 - VI^6 \end{array} \right\} \text{EX 18}$$

In harmonizing chorales, phrases will not usually end on V^7 . In addition, often a simple dominant triad is preferable to the V^7 as a chord choice.

The Supertonic Seventh

Seventh-chords built on the dominant and on the leading-tone (the latter to be taken up in Unit X) are sometimes classed together as “dominant-function” sevenths, since they behave in much the same way. By far the most common non-dominant seventh chord in 18th-century music is the one built on the supertonic: ϕii^7 , $\phi ii^{\flat 7}$ etc. in minor; ii^7 , $ii^{\flat 7}$ etc. in major. It proceeds almost exclusively to V or V^7 , and its most characteristic use is in first inversion, at cadences: [EXX 19-20](#)*. Notice that the seventh of the chord is held over; it is in fact a “slow” suspension, resolving with the change of chord to V. In the half-diminished version, notice also, the tritone does not expand or contract as it does in the V^7 : only one voice moves. Almost all supertonic sevenths, in whatever inversion, are treated as “slow suspensions” in this way, in the Chorales and similar repertoires.

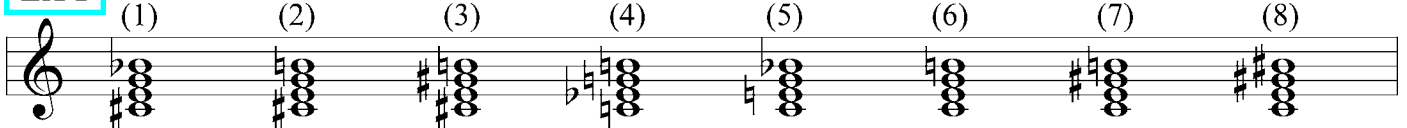
The next most common progression involving the supertonic seventh occurs not so much in Chorale harmonizations, as in other Baroque music: $I ii^4_2 V^{\flat 6}_5 I$: [EX 21](#).

When using the first-inversion supertonic 7th, be wary of parallel fifths: [EX 22](#). The 3rd above the bass in these chords is an important note, and should not be omitted, even though it’s technically the 5th of the chord. This leads one to speculate to what extent a cadential $ii^{\flat 6}_5$ is “really” a supertonic, and to what extent it’s in fact a subdominant chord with an “added sixth”. If it’s a supertonic, why is it so often in first inversion? On the other hand, if it’s a subdominant, why are its dominant and tonic analogs so rare in common-practice music?: [EX 23](#).

* The notation #141¹⁰⁻¹¹ in [EX 19](#) refers to the Bach chorale harmonization #141 in the Richter edition (Breitkopf, Leipzig 1898), measures 10-11.

Examples, Chapter VIII

EX 1

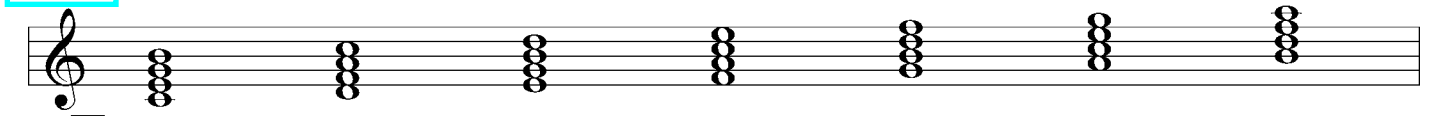


(1) (2) (3) (4) (5) (6) (7) (8)

diminished half-diminished minor-minor minor-major major-minor major-major augmented-major ????

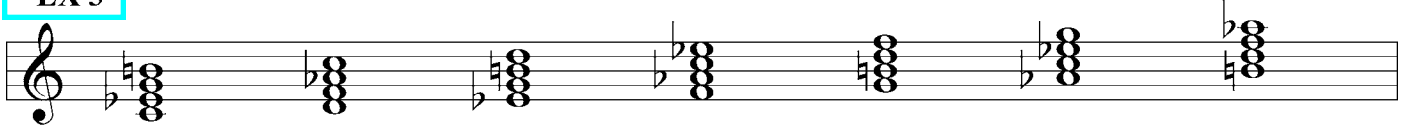
("minor") ("dominant") ("major")

EX 2




C: +I⁷ ii⁷ iii⁷ +IV⁷ V⁷ vi⁷ oVII⁷

EX 3



c: +I⁷ oii⁷ +III⁷ iv⁷ V⁷ +VI⁷ oVII⁷

EX 4



c: i⁷ ii⁷ +III⁷ IV⁷ v⁷ o⁺vi⁷ ^-VII⁷ +^-VII⁷


EX 5 7° → 1°



4° → 3°


D: V⁷ I

EX 6 (omitting 5th)




D: V⁷ I

EX 7 (omitting 3rd)



D: V⁷ I

EX 8



EX 9



EX 10



EX 11

A \flat : V_5^6 I V_3^4 I V_3^4 I 6 V_3^4 I 6 V_2^4 I 6 V_2^4 I 6

EX 12

D: V V_2^4 I 6

EX 13

A \flat : I V_3^4 I 6

EX 14

B \flat : V 7 I 6

EX 15

E: V 7 vi e : V 7 VI

EX 16

E: V 7 IV 6 V 7 IV 6 V 7 IV 6 e : V 7 iv 6

OR OR etc.

EX 17

A: V_5^6 vi 6 a : V_5^6 VI 6

(rare)

EX 18

E \flat : V 7 vi 6 $e\flat$: V 7 VI 6

(rare)

EX 19

g: i ii⁶ V⁻⁷ i

(EX 19)

g: i iv⁶ i⁶₄ ii⁶₅ V⁻⁷ I #141¹⁰⁻¹¹

EX 20

F: vi ii⁶ V⁷ I

(EX 20)

F: I⁶ vi I⁶ ii⁶ V⁻⁷ I #285¹⁰⁻¹¹

EX 21

E: I IV⁶₄ I ii⁴₂ V⁶ I Bach, WTC I, Prelude IX

EX 22

??

(EX 22)

BUT:

EX 23

C: iii⁶ ??

(EX 23)

C: vi⁶ ??