

Music 11, 7/26/06

Of all the triads in the scale, some are more “important” than others. The triads built on $\hat{5}$ and $\hat{1}$ are by far the most important, since they signify the key. More specifically, it is the relationship between V and I that establish the key, because the resolution of the tendency tones immediately call to the foreground a dynamism that is unique to each key. The diminished fifth, which is natural to the major scale is expressed in the V7 is resolved to the tonic in traditional voice leading. (Note: there is only 1 diminished fifth in a given key.)

Within any given key, the triads built on the different scale degrees have special characteristics.

Chord characteristics

The vii chord is the most unstable harmony in a key. Like the dominant, it contains volatile tendency tones (especially those that outline the diminished fifth, $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{4}$). Thus, it functions to lead to the tonic harmony. The vii chord is actually a close relative to the dominant, and is completely contained within the harmony of the dominant seventh.

vi and iii are close relatives of the tonic harmony. They each have two out of three chord-tones in common with tonic, and are relatively stable. At times, the vi chord can *substitute* for the tonic, and achieve a kind of harmonic repose when at a cadence. However, such a stable harmony cannot give as a full a closure or convincing sense of “arrival” as tonic. Also, vi can lead smoothly to ii, a dominant preparation harmony, because of the fifth relation between their roots. In chord syntax, vi—ii has a falling fifth motion that imitates that of ii—V and V—I.

ii and iv are both dominant preparation harmonies. These chords are usually expected to precede V. When positioned before a dominant triad (V), they bring $\hat{4}$ into the series, which emphasizes the instability of V. With $\hat{4}$ in the dominant preparation harmony, and the leading tone, $\hat{7}$ in the dominant chord, the succession of chords has an even greater tendency towards tonic. In chord, ii—V—I is an extremely dynamic chord progression. The ii chord (and the iv chord) gives the V—I progression an even greater sense of purpose.

In a minor key, the chord built on $\hat{3}$, III, is major. It is special because it represents the relative major scale. Taken alone, it can be understood to represent the key signature, even though in a minor context the tonic is minor. For this reason, the III chord in minor is more stable than the iii chord in major.

Minor key

In a natural minor key, there is no leading tone. This presents a problem in harmonic progression, because the dominant chord does not have the dynamism that would be

otherwise present with a half-step between $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{1}$. So, in common practice, composers impose a chromatic alteration to $\hat{7}$: in minor, composers raise $\hat{7}$ so that it can effectively lead to $\hat{1}$ in harmony. As a result, the triad built on $\hat{5}$ in minor becomes major, and the leading tone leans toward tonic resolution. Also, the dominant seventh becomes a major-minor seventh, a “true” dominant seventh chord with all the tension that we expect in a major key.

Cadences (resolutions)

The dominant seventh chord has the following scale degrees:

V7:	root	third	fifth	seventh
Scale Degrees:	$\hat{5}$	$\hat{7}$	$\hat{2}$	$\hat{4}$

Because of the dynamism inherent to the construction of the scale, these scale degrees/chord members *must* move to certain tonic harmony chord members in order to relieve tension.

The third in the V7 chord is $\hat{7}$. It must resolve up by semitone to $\hat{1}$.

The seventh in the V7 chord is $\hat{4}$. It must resolve down by semi-tone to $\hat{3}$.

If the above resolutions are realized, then the diminished fifth in the dominant seventh harmony is resolved properly, and a sense of relief is achieved.

Also, $\hat{2}$ tends to move to $\hat{1}$, and $\hat{5}$ tends to resolve likewise to $\hat{1}$. EXCEPTION: when $\hat{4}$ is in the bass of a V—I progression, it *still* must resolve to $\hat{3}$. Therefore, the tonic resolution will always be in first inversion. In this case, the $\hat{5}$ in the V7 chord, which is somewhere else in the chord, can be retained in the tonic harmony.

TIP: If you always resolve the two strongest tendency tones in the V7 chord ($\hat{7}$ and $\hat{4}$), the other chord members can effectively move to their closest chord-tones. It will always sound resolved, no matter what inversion the harmonies are in... These resolutions require practice, and are difficult to verbalize here, but hopefully the drill exercises in the homework and textbook have helped clarify this... If followed religiously, this chord progression can be characterized as “efficient” or “smooth” voice leading.