Music 11, 7/27/06

One of the main reasons why goal-oriented progressions in harmony is possible is because different triads in a key have different levels of stability. Triads that are relatively unstable lead to harmonies that are more stable. Stable harmonies can then move to chords that are unstable… harmonic progressions tend to have an oscillation between stable and instable harmonies… The most basic progression that we have seen in this class is V—I (and by extension, ii—V—I or IV—V—I).

Why is I (tonic) so stable?

It is a consonant triad built on scale degree 1 (^1), and has no tendency tones. Furthermore, in context, this harmony tends to be the "arrival" after a moment of *instability*. So in context, its stability is foreground.

Why is vii the least stable?

vii not only contains the leading-tone (^7, the most dynamic tone in the scale), but the entire triad is *built* on it. Furthermore, all three members of the vii chord are, to varying degrees, tendency tones. ^2 tends toward ^1, and ^4 tends toward ^3. Thus, like the dominant seventh chord, it yearns for the specific resolution in tonic harmony (I). Actually, now that we compare vii with V7, we see that V7 contains the entire vii triad *in it* (the upper three notes). So perhaps it is not a stretch to say that the vii chord is even more unstable than the V7 because it is very much like the V7 *without a root*!

In a nutshell, though, the best way to describe why vii is so unstable is : vii contains ^7, ^2 and ^4, all of which require resolution into tonic harmony.

Voice leading

NOTE: other than resolving the V7 harmony to tonic, the following voice-leading info will (probably) not be on the final exam. However, understanding the language with which I explain these concepts might help to clarify the ways notes and harmonies interact in a musical context, so read on!

There are conventions in voice-leading. Since the idea of voice-leading is extremely complicated, and involves concepts that even music majors spend many years exploring (like counterpoint, functional harmony, common practice, etc.), let me only list only a few of the more basic "rules" for voice-leading that we can apply immediately without knowing more nuanced styles of music composition and/or analysis:

1. ^7 is a leading-tone that tends to resolve to ^1.
2. ^4 is a tendency tone that requires resolution in ^3.
3. When possible, we double the root of a harmony (usually harmonies are voiced with 4 notes, even though there are only 3 members of a triad).
4. In many cases, the bass note can be doubled.

5. As music flows through chord to chord, two types of "motion" are preferred:
    1. Roots of triads tend to move by fifth (as in the falling-fifths sequence), or by third (as in "Heart and Soul").
    2. individual voices, that is, the melody, soprano, tenor, alto, etc., are most "smooth" when they move by steps (passing-tones are very common in melodies, as you noticed in your homework from this week, right?).

Decorative tones, aka non-chord tones

Passing-tone: A non-chord tone that is approached by step and then departed by step in the same direction. The PT connects two different chord tones.

Neighbor-tone: A non-chord tone that is approached by step and then departed by step in the opposite direction. It returns to the same note it left. It decorates two utterances of the same chord tone.

V7

The dominant seventh chord is a four-member chord built on ^5. This means that the members of the harmony include ^5, ^7, ^2, and ^4. The diminished fifth formed between ^7 and ^4 requires immediate resolution: ^4 resolves to ^3, and ^7 resolves to ^1. Once this dissonance has been resolved, the other members of the dominant seventh can move to their closest neighbors, stay the same. (Traditionally, it the V7 chord is in root position and occurs at a cadence, its root ^5 should reinforce the resolution by leaping down a P5 or up a P4 to the root of the tonic harmony, ^1. It is very common at a cadence to land on a tonic harmony that is missing a fifth, and whose root is tripled.