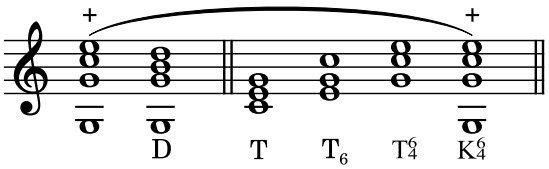
Last Updated: Jan 29, 2024

Chapter 9: Cadential Six-Four Chord

1. Definiton and Notation

In cadences, the dominant chord often directly follows a chord that appears on the surface to be the second inversion of the tonic triad.

Example 9-102

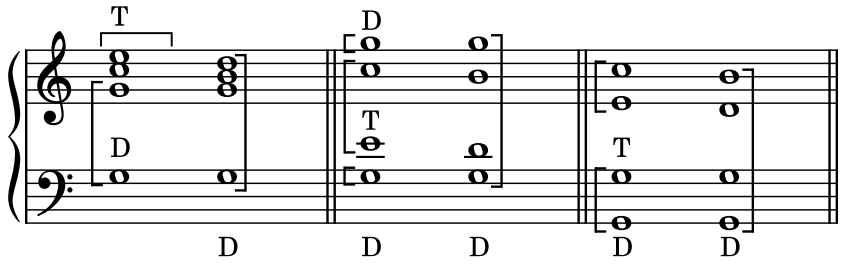


Based on the position of this chord within the musical structure and the intervallic relationship between its upper two tones and the bass (which is the bass note of the dominant chord), this chord is called the cadential six-four chord. It is marked by the letter K (cadence) followed by the intervallic distance of each of its tones from the bass tone.

2. Functional Characteristics of K^6_4

Although the cadential six-four chord appears similar on the surface to the second inversion of the tonic triad, its functional characteristics differentiate it—it is not the tonic harmony. The distinctive feature of this chord lies in its functional aspect: it encompasses two functional tones: the bass tone being D, while above it is T, with D serving as the foundation of the harmony and holding precedence.

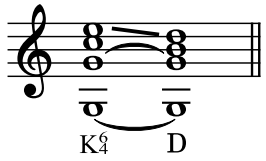
Example 9-103



A chord containing elements of two functionalities is termed as bifold function. This attribute grants K^6_4 its unique tension and instability, distinct from the inherent stability of the tonic function (T).

The cadential six-four chord delays the arrival of D, yet progression to D becomes necessary; this progression is referred to as resolution.

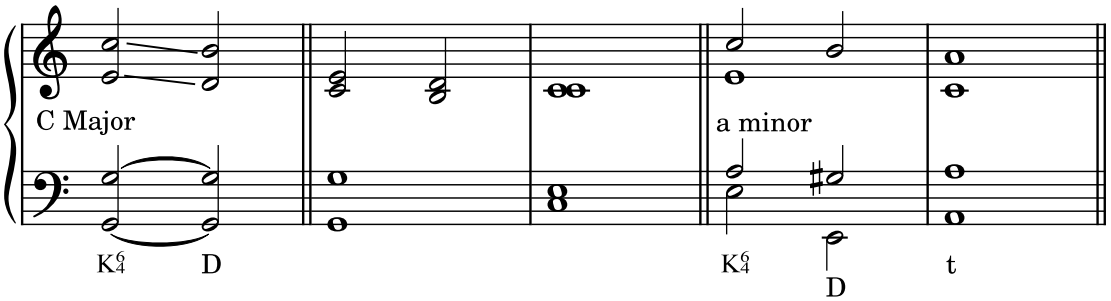
Example 9-104



3. Voice Leading

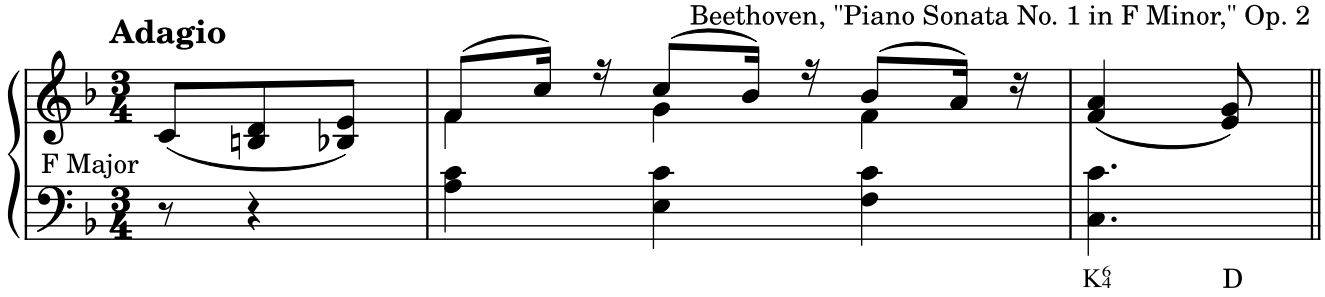
To emphasize the dominance of the dominant function within K^6_4, it usually repeats the root tone of D. When the cadential six-four chord resolves to D, the root tone of the dominant chord and its doubled tone typically remain unchanged, while the tones of the tonic chord step downwards to the third and fifth tone of the subsequent D.

Example 9-105

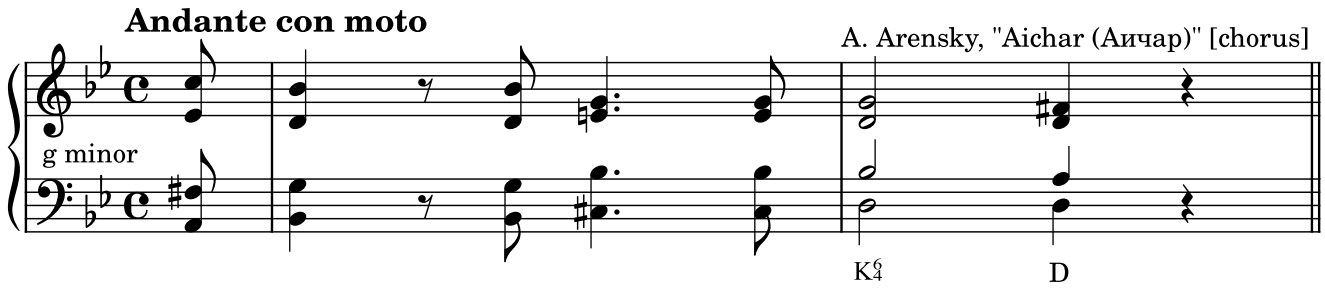


In a half cadence, when K^6_4 resolves, these two tones from the tonic chord must progress smoothly:

Example 9-106

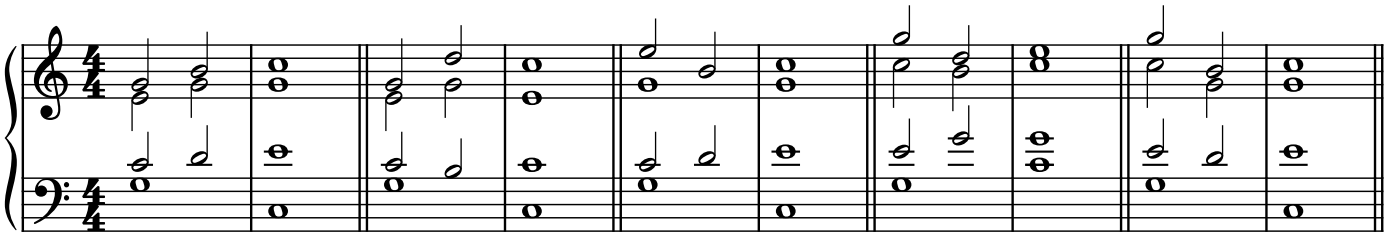


Example 9-107

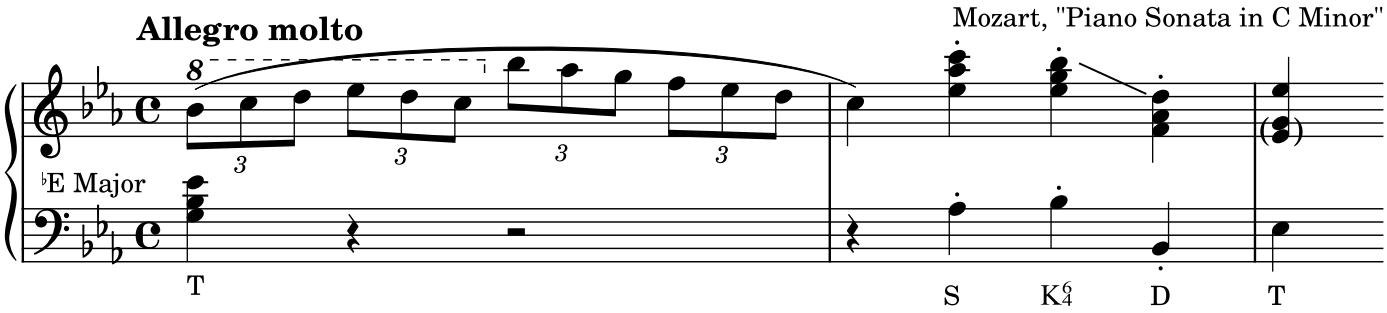


In a final cadence, as K_4^6 resolves to D, the upper voice often leaps to the third or fifth tone of the dominant chord.

Example 9-108a



Example 9-108b



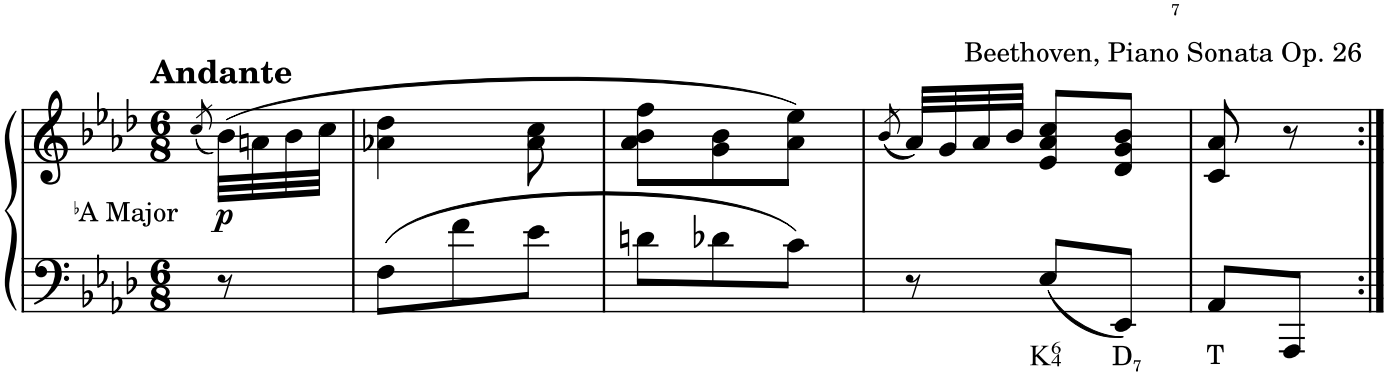
When the cadential six-four chord resolves to D, its bass tone either remains stationary or leaps by an octave (usually descending).

4. Beat Conditions

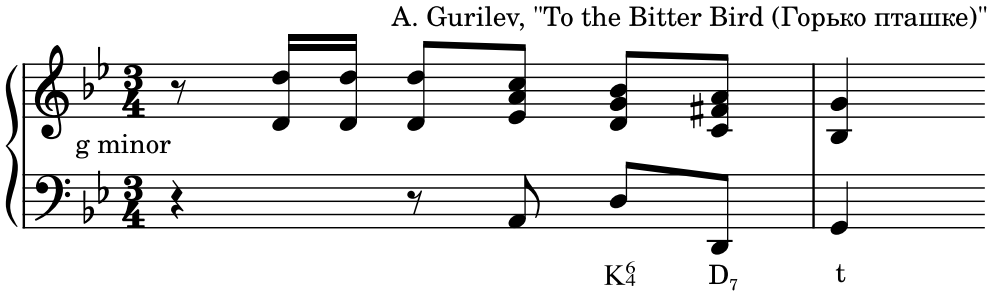
The application of the cadential six-four chord has certain beat conditions. In a single beat, it should occur on the strong beat, while in four or six beats, it should be on the secondary strong beat. Under any other beat conditions, K_4^6 always needs to be placed on a stronger beat compared to the subsequent D.

In triple meter, K_4^6 sometimes appears on the second beat, while the following D is placed on the weaker third beat (see Example 8-96).

Example 9-109



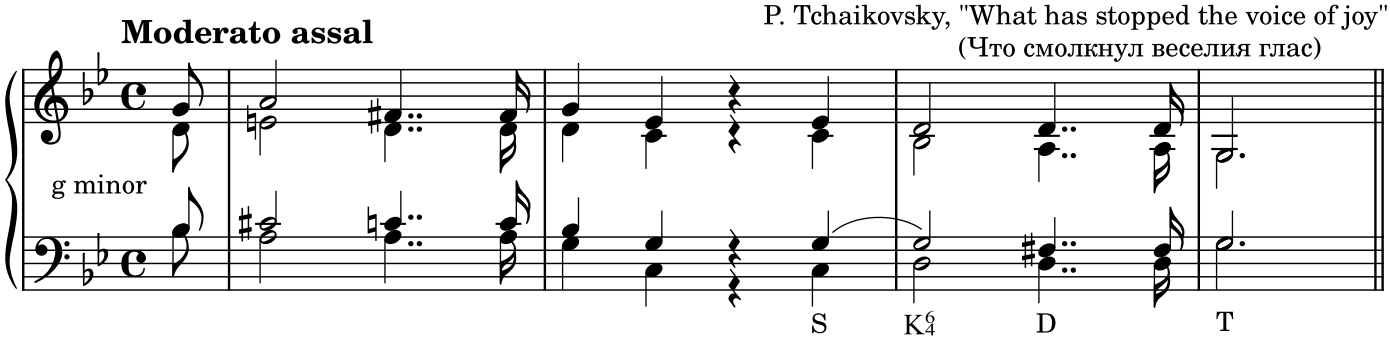
Example 9-110



5. Preparation of K6/4 Chord

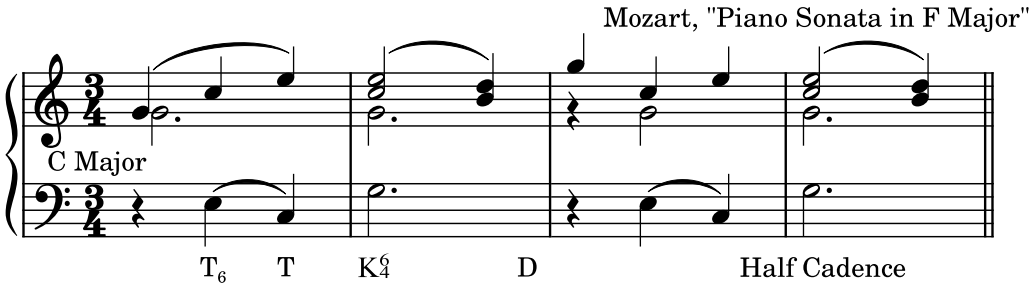
The most natural preparation for K6/4 is with a subdominant harmony. The subdominant chord shares common tones (the fifth tone of S) with K6/4, allowing them to connect with method of harmonic connection, providing a conventional preparation for the dissonant interval in K6/4 (the fourth). This is why this method is most widely employed:

Example 9-111

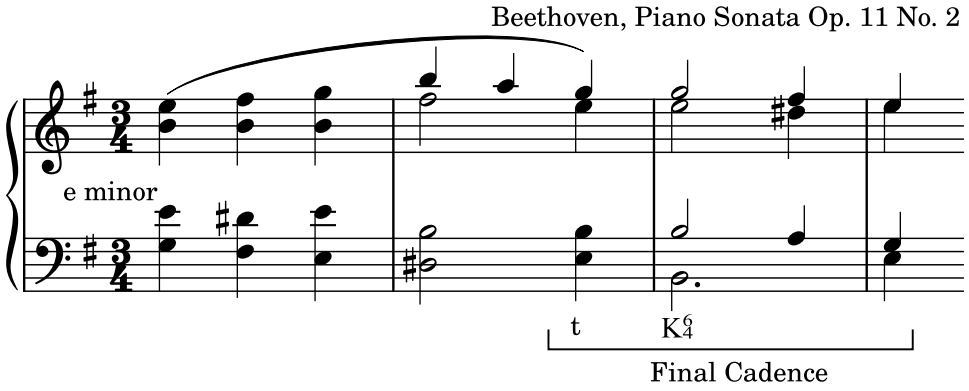


However, in cadences, K6/4 is often placed directly after the tonic chord without a preceding subdominant chord. This progression is most typical for a half cadence but can to some extent be used in final cadences as well:

Example 9-112



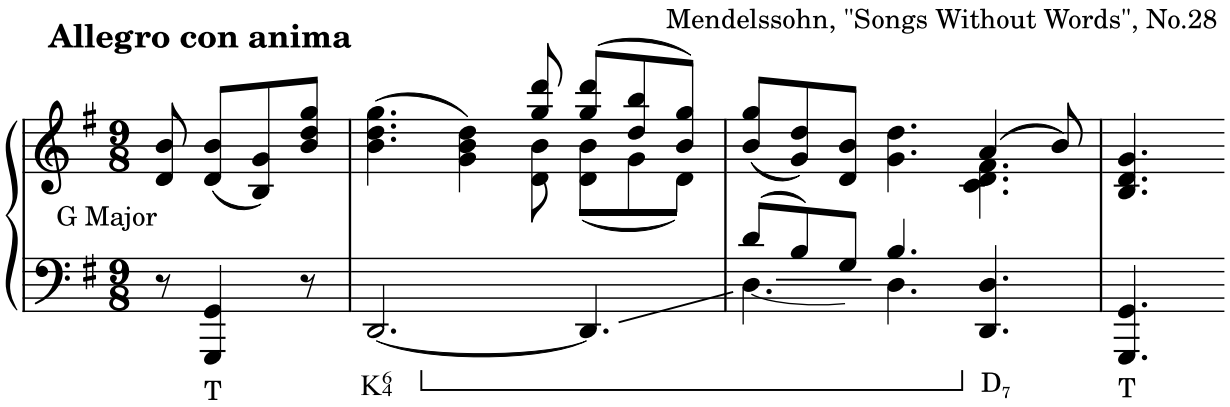
Example 9-113



6. Transition

Similar to all other chords, the cadential six-four chord can also undergo transitions. During this, the bass tone remains stationary or leaps by an octave (ascending or descending), K^6_4 alters its melodic position or spacing, and subsequently, the dominant chord can similarly transition:

Example 9-114



7. The role of K^6_4

K^6_4, as a harmonically unstable chord, introduces new tonalities and additional tension to both half cadences and full cadences. In the conclusion of a musical period, K^6_4 maximizes the delay of the tonic chord's arrival, utilizing the existing harmonic means. The stronger the inclination towards the tonic chord, the greater the overall tension of the cadence. In the half cadence of a phrase, the K^6_4 uses its own tension to reinforce the temporary stability of the dominant chord, which is its resolution. This is the role of the cadential six-four chord in various cadences and the reason for its widespread use.