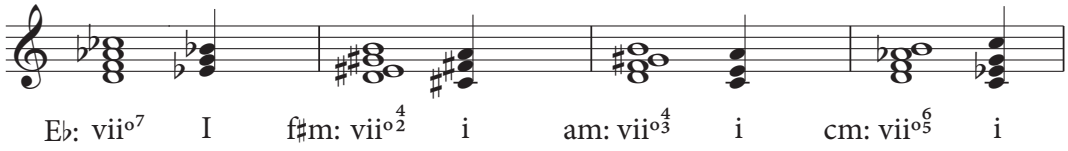
T261: Enharmonic Reinterpretation

Diminished Sevenths

Most chords sound different when you invert them. That's why you can **hear** the difference between a major triad in root position and a major triad in first inversion; it's also why you can identify the root of a triad or seventh chord by ear.

But there are a few special "symmetrical" chords that sound the same no matter how you invert them. The most familiar example of this type of symmetry is the fully-diminished seventh. Because all of its intervals are minor thirds (or are equivalent to, or composed of minor thirds), it sounds the same in any inversion.

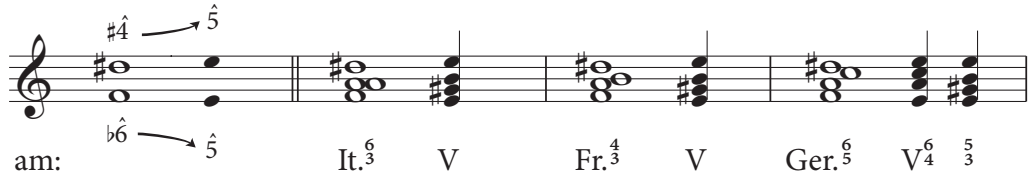
This means that you can't tell by ear which note is the root. Any of the four notes could be the root! And so the chord can resolve in four different directions.



Composers figured out pretty quickly that it's possible to "reinterpret" these diminished sevenths in order to modulate unexpectedly to keys a minor third or tritone away. This type of modulation is a lot like a normal pivot chord modulation, but it requires (at least in theory) a respelling of the pivot chord. Sometimes the composer will be fussy and respell all of the pitches for you; but sometimes they won't respell anything, and you'll have to recognize the reinterpretation by looking at how the chord resolves.

Augmented Sixths

The augmented sixth chords are based on the resolution of an augmented sixth interval outward to a perfect octave. Most of the time it resolves outward to scale degree 5, as shown below. Note that three of the pitches in the augmented sixth chords (F, A, D♯) are always the same; you can therefore distinguish these chords by their treatment of the fourth note.



Unlike diminished sevenths, augmented-sixth chords are **not** symmetrical. When you invert them the sonority changes, and so it's not possible to reinterpret an augmented sixth in (e.g.) A minor as an augmented sixth in any other key.

But the Italian and German augmented sixths do sound like a different type of chord: they sound like **dominant sevenths**. So by enharmonically reinterpreting the augmented sixth interval as a minor seventh (or vice-versa) it's possible to modulate by half-step.