Notes on the Phrase Model

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1) The basics of the model

According to the phrase model, every phrase can be thought of as a progression from an initial tonic to an authentic cadence – to a progression from V (or V7) to I, each in root position.

The simplest harmonic progression looks like this:

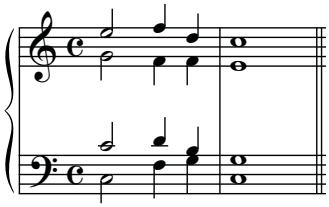
I –V – I.

Because we will soon generalize these basic chords, we can think not in terms of specific chords, but in terms of harmonic functions: one or more chords of tonic function (T) move to one or more chords of dominant function (D) which then return to tonic function (T), or:

T – D – T.

While some phrases act like expanded versions of I – V – I, it is even more common for phrases to resemble the progression

I – IV – V – I.



The subdominant chord is understood here as having a particularly general function – that of preparing for the cadential dominant. Its function is therefore called ‘predominant’, or PD. In abbreviations of functions, our second basic progression is

T – PD – D – T.

Of course, some phrases end with half cadences; as a result, the progressions T- PD – D and T – D are also possible. The notes won’t consider these possibilities further, but they are related in obvious ways to the things that are discussed.

We already know two predominant chords – the subdominant and the supertonic. Thus the following progressions all follow the same basic pattern, which follows at the end:

I – IV – V – I

i – ii°6 – V - i

I6 – ii – V7 – I

T – PD – D – T.

The progressions above illustrate the conceptual power of functional labels; an initial tonic might be I, i, or I6, a predominant IV, ii, or ii°6, and a dominant V or V7, but no matter which members of each category are chosen, the progression still fits the model T-PD – D – T.

2) Expanding Harmonic Functions with Inversions

Often, the functional labels describe not just a single chord, but multiple chords that together expand a single harmonic function. For example,

I – I6 – ii – V6 – V7 – I

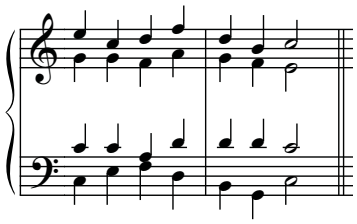
is a longer progression, but it also fits the pattern

T – PD – D – T.

When multiple chords expand a single function, placing function labels below the roman numerals becomes handy:

I – I6 – ii6 – ii – V6 – V7 – I
|_____| |_____| |_____| |__|

T – PD – D – T.



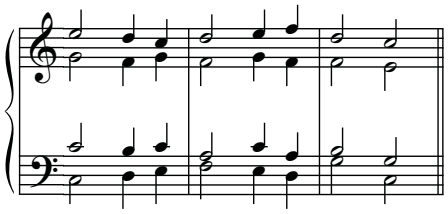
The brackets indicate how the progression of chords is divided into segments of harmonic function.

3) Expanding Harmonic Functions with Voice-Leading Chords

A second common way of expanding a segment of harmonic function is by using voice-leading chords between two chords that have the function being expanded. A simple example is the familiar progression I – vii°6 – I6. This expands tonic function. Thus the progression

I – vii°6 – I6 – ii6 – (I6) – ii – V7 – I

T – PD – D – T



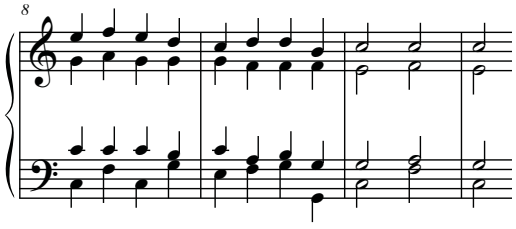
also fits the model.

<u>Note that a segment of harmonic function generally begins and ends with a chord of that function (we will see one exception below).</u>

A subdominant chord can also lead directly to a tonic chord, and a dominant chord that occurs before a phrase ending is not understood as participating in a cadence, so initial tonic segments can become quite long:

I – IV – I – V – I6 – ii6 – V7 – I – IV - I

T – PD – D – T



Note that this phrase illustrates the principle that plagal cadences are merely elaborations of final tonics that have already been approached by cadential dominants – unlike authentic cadences and half cadences, plagal cadences do not establish any degree of harmonic closure.

4) Expanding Harmonic Functions with Nested Cycles

According to the phrase model, phrases begin and end with chords of tonic function (usually I chords). Expanded initial tonic segments also begin and end with chords of tonic function (often I chords). Because dominant chords must (usually) be in root position and must (always) fall at the ends of phrases in order to participate in cadences, dominant chords that fail to meet one or both of these criteria are often found in initial tonic expansions, and they often participate in a weaker version of the same kind of harmonic progression that governs a phrase. For example, a progression such as

I – I6 – IV – V4/2 – I6

will generally not constitute a phrase, because the dominant is not in root position. But it can serve perfectly well as an initial tonic segment:

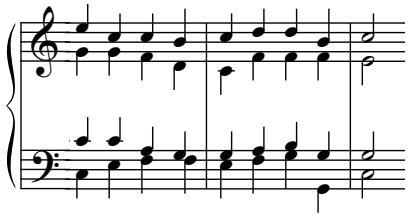
I – I6 – IV – V4/2 – I6 – ii6 – V7 - I
|_____| |_| |__| |_|

T – PD – D – T.

Because the tonic expansion goes through a progression of tonic to predominant to dominant to tonic, we speak of a ‘nested cycle’ of harmonic function, and bracket it as such within the initial tonic expansion:

I – I6 – IV – V4/2 – I6 – ii6 – V7 – I
|____| |__| |____| |__|
T PD D T
|_____| |_| |__| |_|

T – PD – D – T.



It is often a judgment call whether or not to label a nested cycle as such. For example, in the following idiomatic progression, it is not likely that a nested cycle will be heard strongly unless the harmonic rhythm is quite slow:

I – IV - vii°6 – I6 – ii – V7 – I
|_____| |_| |___| |_|

T – PD – D – T.

The bottom line is that you should label nested cycles when you hear them. As a guideline, though, it is usually helpul to label a nested cycle when it contains any PD chord that is so strong that it can only be followed by V or by some even stronger PD chord (so far the supertonic is the only such chord we know, but this category will expand when we learn about subdominant seventh chords and about chromatic PD chords).

5) Starting the Initial Tonic Segment Off Tonic

Above I stressed that a segment of harmonic function always begins and ends with a chord of its own function. There is one exception to this.

An initial tonic segment will sometimes begin with a chord of a different function. Most commonly it is a dominant chord, as in

V6 – I – IV – V – I
|____| |__| |_| |_|

T PD D T.

Here the initial V6 resembles an incomplete neighbor tone.

More elaborate progressions are also possible:

IV - vii°6 – I6 – ii – V7 – I
|_____| |_| |__| |_|

T – PD – D – T.

6) General Guidelines for Analyzing Harmonic Function

There are two basic progressions: T – D – T, and T – PD – D – T. If a phrase ends with a half cadence, the final T will be omitted.

In analyzing for harmonic function, start by listening for the cadences. The dominant that participates in the cadence is the D at the primary level. Any other V chords or related chords (such as vii°6) that are not heard as part of a cadence will serve to expand a tonic segment. After finding the primary D segment, work backwards from the cadence in determining whether or not there is a PD segment and if so how far back it extends.

Nested cycles are possible within the initial tonic segment.

A segment of harmonic function generally begins and ends with a chord of that function (exception: initial tonic segments can begin with dominant or predominant chords).

Voice-leading chords are usually found within segments of harmonic function, as they internally expand some harmonic function. Only initial tonic segments can begin with voice-leading chords (in which case they are incomplete neighbor chords). No segment of harmonic function ever ends with a voice-leading chord. We have already encountered one case in which a voice-leading chord falls "in between the cracks", creating voice-leading connections between two different segments of harmonic function; the passing I6 that connects ii and V does this (online lecture notes on the supertonic, C.2). Later in term 2 we will encounter more. We will call attention to these cases when they occur, as they are found relatively infrequently. Look twice at any analysis that does not include every chord inside some segment of harmonic function, and at any analysis in which a chord that is usually a voice-leading chord begins or ends a segment of harmonic function.

True I chords are never found within PD or D segments. They are found there only when they are functionless voice-leading chords, "I" or "I6".

V and vii° chords are never found within PD segments.

7) Classification of Chords by Function

Tonic: I and I6, sometimes vi, sometimes iii

PD: IV, ii, sometimes vi, sometimes iii, sometimes VII in minor

Un-nested D: V or V7 in root position, in first inversion only if expanding root position

Nested D: V(7) and vii°(7), in any inversion, sometimes VII in minor