

Dissonance treatment 2: Diminutions

Malcolm Sailor

“Diminution” is a historical term that essentially means “embellishment” or “ornamentation.” Besides the dissonant diminutions below, **there is also a very important *consonant* type of diminution: namely, arpeggiation.**

Dissonant diminution idioms

Diminutions are usually metrically weak. The exceptions are noted below.

The most common idioms account for the vast majority of dissonant diminutions. In particular, passing tones probably account for more than half of dissonant diminutions, and neighbor tones might account for half of the remainder.

You should know each of the below idioms, especially the more common ones.

More common idioms

1. passing tone (P)
 - approached: by step
 - left: by step
 - both steps in same direction: either both up (a.) or both down (b.)
2. neighbor tone (N)
 - approached: by step
 - left: by step
 - steps in opposite direction: either up then down (“upper neighbor”; c.), or down then up (“lower neighbor”; d.)
3. anticipation (A)
 - “anticipates” the immediately following (and rhythmically stronger) consonance (e.)
 - often very brief



Less common idioms

4. accented passing tone (AP)

- like a passing tone, but metrically strong (f.)
- more common descending than ascending

5. incomplete neighbor tone (IN)

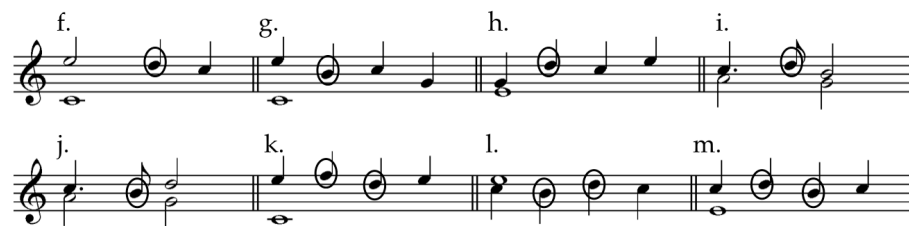
- approached: by leap
- left: by step
- most often approached and left in opposite directions (g.; h.)

6. échappée (E)

- approached: by step up
- left: by leap down
- most often, embellishes a descending step (e.g., the pitches C and B at i.)
- rare, but possible, is the inversion (i.e., step down, leap up; j.)

7. double neighbor tone (DN)

- unlike the other idioms, involves a pair of notes
- the main pitch is embellished by the notes a step above and a step below (in either order; k.; l.)



Note that, while these idioms *allow* us to use dissonance, in certain contexts, we can use the idioms without actually making any dissonance. For example, the pitch B at m. is not dissonant, forming a fifth with the bass. But we can still recognize it as part of a double neighbor tone idiom ornamenting the main pitch C. These sorts of situations are sometimes called “apparent consonances” by music theorists. The idea behind this label is that there is an implied harmony (at m., this harmony would probably be a C6/3 chord) and that the pitch in question is dissonant with this implied harmony, even though it isn’t actually dissonant with any of the other pitches sounding. Thus the consonance is only “apparent.”

Pedal points

Although we have divided dissonance into two main categories (“suspensions” and “diminutions”), there is actually a third type of dissonance that doesn’t

fit neatly into either of these categories: a “pedal point” (or often simply “pedal”).

In a pedal point, **the bass holds either the tonic or dominant pitch, while the chords change to conflict with this pitch.** The pedal must, however, begin and end on a consonance. Thus, in the case of a tonic pedal, it will begin and end on the I chord; in the case of a dominant pedal, on the V chord.



Tonic pedals are especially effective underneath opening prolongational progressions, like in the above example.

Notes on pedal points

The “inversion” of a chord is defined by which chord factor is in the bass. But in a pedal point, the bass stops participating in the chord progression. So, the “inversion” of the chords in a pedal point is undefined. If you are doing a roman numeral analysis, you can just indicate the roman numerals as though the chords were in root position, as I have done above.

Ornamental preparation and/or resolution of suspensions

Very frequently in late Baroque music, **either the preparation or the resolution (or possibly both) of a suspension is decorated by other notes.**

For example, in this passage from Corelli, the *resolution* of the suspension on E is first decorated by a leap to the consonant pitch A.

<i>Original</i>	<i>Reduction</i>
<p>Prep. S Res..</p>	<p>Prep. S Res..</p>

Figure 1: Corelli, op. 5

In this passage from Bach, the *preparation* of the suspension on C is decorated by an ascending scale passage. (Here, the suspension itself is explicitly written as an ornament, in small notes. This was a late-Baroque convention often observed by Bach.)

<i>Original</i>	<i>Reduction</i>
<p>Prep. S Res..</p>	<p>Prep. S Res..</p>

Figure 2: Bach, Harpsichord Concerto in F minor

(It's entirely possible for both the preparation *and* the resolution of a suspension to be ornamented.)

Recognizing such ornamentation is important for two reasons:

1. In *analyzing* music, very often the suspensions don't occur directly on the "surface" of the music, but are "hiding" behind a layer of ornamentation. You need to be able to recognize them in spite of their disguise.
2. For *writing* music, ornamented resolutions are an important element of the late-Baroque idiom.

Ornamental resolutions of suspensions are closely related to another topic that we will see next week: compound melody.