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Dissonance treatment 1: Suspensions

Malcolm Sailor

Two types of dissonance

Broadly speaking, there are **two types of dissonant notes**:

- **chordal dissonances** (or "essential" dissonances)
- **nonharmonic tones** (or "inessential" dissonances)

As the names suggest, a chordal dissonance belongs to a chord (like the seventh of a dominant seventh chord), whereas a nonharmonic tone does not.

Notes

- In earlier styles of Western music (e.g., Renaissance polyphony), there was no such thing as chordal dissonance: *all* dissonance resulted from nonharmonic tones. This means that, although musicians may have occasionally a harmony that we might recognize as a V7 chord, they would have prepared the seventh like any other suspension. Over the course of the 17th and early 18th centuries, however, the V7 chord became so familiar that musicians stopped feeling the need to prepare the seventh (though the dissonance still needed to resolve appropriately).

  It took theorists a long time to catch up to musical practice in this matter. It wasn't until 1774 that Johann Philipp Kirnberger (an erstwhile student of J.S. Bach) introduced the distinction between essential and inessential dissonance.

Chordal dissonances

The **two main dissonant chords** we will use are

1. **the dominant seventh (V7) chord**
2. **the leading-tone diminished-seventh (vii°7) chord**

(Notice that both of these chords are dominant-functioning.) Late Baroque composers used both of these seventh chords without necessarily preparing the seventh, and so may you. However, **you should always prepare the seventh of other seventh chords**, such as ii7, vi7, etc. (These other seventh chords are sometimes called *secondary* seventh chords.)

Put differently, you can think of V7 and vii°7 as autonomous chords in their own right. Other chords, such as ii7, you should think of as triads with an added dissonance created by a suspension (the chordal seventh). This dissonance is prepared on the previous chord, and resolves on the following chord.

The practical import of chordal dissonances is that **they can be treated much like consonances**: they can be freely introduced, and they can be leapt to and from. The one constraint on chordal dissonances is that **they should resolve to the next harmony**.

Notes

- Sometimes a chordal dissonance will not resolve in the voice in which is is introduced, but will be "transferred" to another voice before being resolved.

Nonharmonic tones

Musicians in the Baroque tended to **divide nonharmonic tones into two types**:

- **suspensions**
- **everything else** (passing tones, neighbor notes, anticipations, etc.). This category could go by many names: embellishments, diminutions, etc.

This dichotomy is still useful today, because the way suspensions are treated is fundamentally different from the way other nonharmonic tones are treated. The rest of today's handout will address suspensions. Diminutions will be the subject of our next class.

Suspensions

The suspension idiom has three parts:

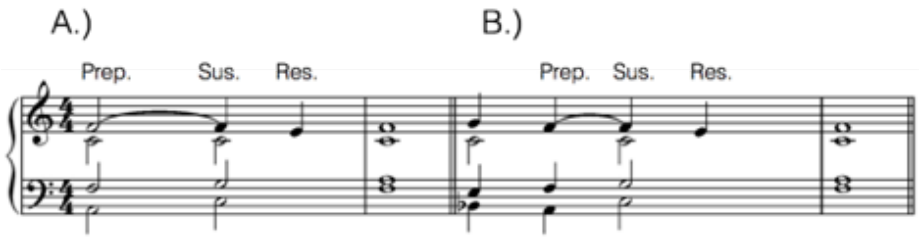
1. **Preparation**
2. **Suspension**
3. **Resolution**

Parts 1. and 3. are consonant. Only part 2., the suspension proper, is dissonant. You should always be able to identify these three parts in any suspension that you write.

The metric placement of suspensions is very important:

- The preparation can be on either a strong (as at A) or a weak (as at B) beat.
- The suspension itself **must be on a strong beat**.

- The resolution **must be on a beat that is weaker** than the suspension itself.



For now, you should only write suspensions that **resolve downwards**.

Details of suspension treatment

- generally speaking, the preparation should last at least as long as the suspension itself.
- as we will see later in the semester, the resolution of a suspension can be ornamented in a number of ways.
- it is not required that the preparation be tied to the suspension. In vocal music, the tie is frequently broken if the composer wishes to change syllables at the onset of the suspension.
- in Baroque style, upwards-resolving suspensions are virtually always leading tones.