MUSI 402 Handout No. 8 September 23, 2021

Six-four chords

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Logically speaking, a consonant triad (i.e., a major or minor triad) has three inversions: root position, first inversion, and second inversion. As you know, however, one of these is not like the others! **The second inversion, or 6/4 chord, is the ugly duckling of the triad family. It needs to be treated with care because it contains a dissonance—a 4th**.

This handout introduces the various uses of 6/4 chords. Of these, **much the most important is the cadential 6/4 chord**.

Cadential 6/4

The cadential 6/4 chord is simply a 4–3 suspension where the fourth is harmonized with a 6/4 chord. **It usually occurs at authentic cadences**, typically harmonizing the melody $\hat{3}\ \hat{2}\ \hat{1}$:

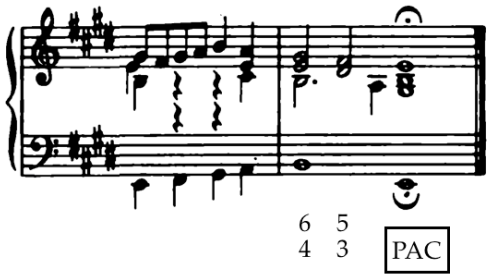


Figure 1: Bach, Fugue in E major, WTC 2. **You should find and label the suspension in the 6/4 chord**.

If you play the above example, you will hear how it is not only the fourth that "wants" to descend, but also the sixth. Thus, **you should think of the sixth as a little like a suspension as well**, although it is not dissonant and thus does not need to be prepared. (In the jargon I introduced in an earlier handout, it can be considered an "apparent consonance.")

The cadential 6/4 chord gradually became so firmly established as a sound in its own right that Baroque composers stopped worrying about preparing the 4–3 suspension (though they often did). You can do likewise: **the fourth of a cadential 6/4 chord does not need to be prepared**. When the fourth is unprepared, it is most often approached by step, like an accented passing tone.

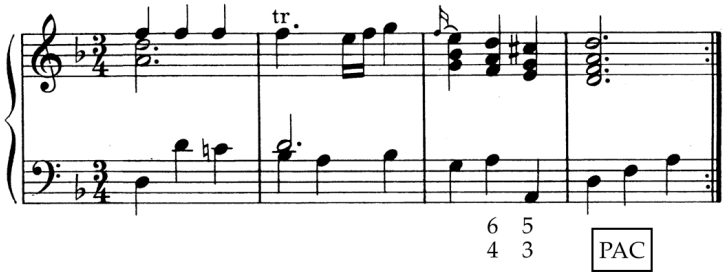


Figure 2: Handel, Menuet from Suite HWV 436. **You should find and label the accented passing tone in the 6/4 chord.**

Notes on cadential 6/4 chords

Besides its common use at authentic cadences, the cadential 6/4 chord can also occur at half cadences, where it embellishes the arrival on the dominant chord. This usage is pretty rare in the Baroque (below is one of the only examples I could find), but became very common later, with composers like Mozart and Haydn.

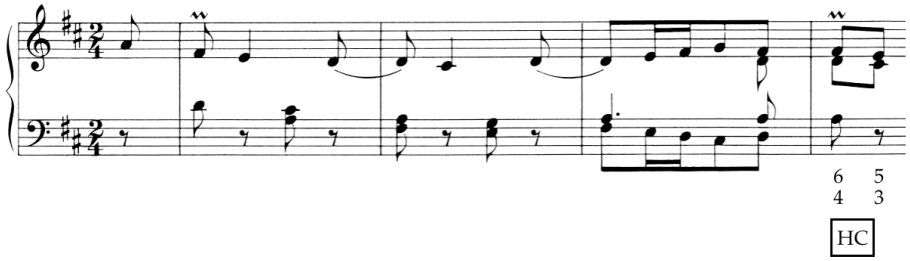


Figure 3: Bach, Aria, Partita in D major. **You should find and label the suspension in the 6/4 chord**.

Some music theorists call the cadential 6/4 chord "I6/4," because it contains the notes of the tonic triad. Others call it "V6/4," emphasizing the suspension and its resolution to the V chord. Believe it or not, some people get quite worked up over this. (I once had a professor friend tell me that saying "I6/4" was like denying climate change.) In this class, we will skirt the whole issue by calling it the "cadential 6/4." But I won't be in the least offended if you use one of the other names.

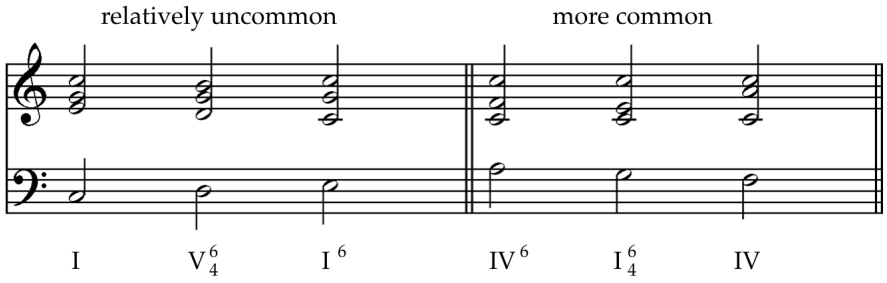
Other 6/4 chords

Below, you will find some notes on the usage of a few other types of 6/4 chords. If it all seems fussy and confusing, take heart: you shouldn't have to use any of

these chords (none of which are especially common in the style we are studying). And if you don't use them, you won't need to remember any of this. But for those of you who are interested in delving deeper, read on.

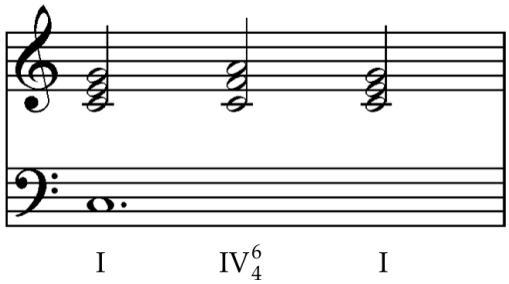
Passing 6/4

The passing 6/4 chord is somewhat uncommon. It occurs when the bassline moves by step up or down a third. It is relatively unusual on $\hat{2}$, when passing between $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{3}$. (More usual here is to use vii°6 or V4/3, as in the rule of the octave.) Its most common usage is passing between $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{4}$.



Neighboring 6/4

The neighboring 6/4 chord is straightforward. The bass holds a single pitch (most often $\hat{1}$, sometimes $\hat{5}$). Over this bass, begin on a 5/3 chord, move to a 6/4 chord, and then return to the 5/3 chord. Thus, depending on the bass note, the progression will be either I5/3–IV6/4–I5/3 or V5/3–I6/4–V5/3.



The neighbor 6/4 chord can be seen as being formed from a pair of neighbor tone figures, 3–4–3 and 5–6–5. Just like neighbor tones, the neighboring 6/4 chord will usually be metrically weak.

Deep dive: the *cadenza doppia* and the "fake suspension"

An irregular 6/4 chord is used in one common Baroque idiom, known as the *cadenza doppia* ("double cadence" in Italian). The protoypical form of this

idiom features a long $\hat{5}$ in the bass and consists of four chords, figured 5/3–6/4–5/4–5/3. (Either or both of the 5/3 chords can also be root position seventh chords, as in the example below.) Here, the fourth of the 6/4 chord is *not* a suspension because it is metrically weak. Instead, it is the fourth of the 5/4 chord that sounds like a suspension. This means that the fourth on beat 2 sounds like a *preparation*—but it is dissonant. For this reason, this idiom is sometimes called the "fake suspension." (We can rationalize this dissonance treatment by considering $\hat{5}$ in the bass to be a pedal point, which permits the upper voices to be freely dissonant against the bass.)

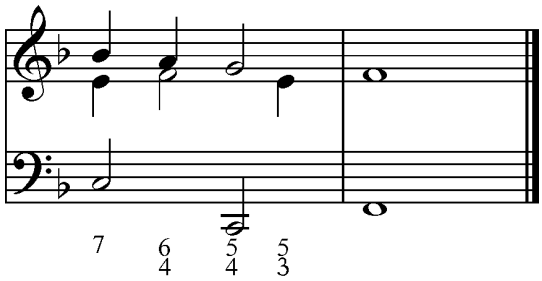


Figure 4: Corelli, Trio Sonata, op. 3, no. 1