MUSI 402 Handout No. 12 October 12, 2021

Sequences

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A "sequence" is a passage where a "model" is repeated at a regular interval of transposition.

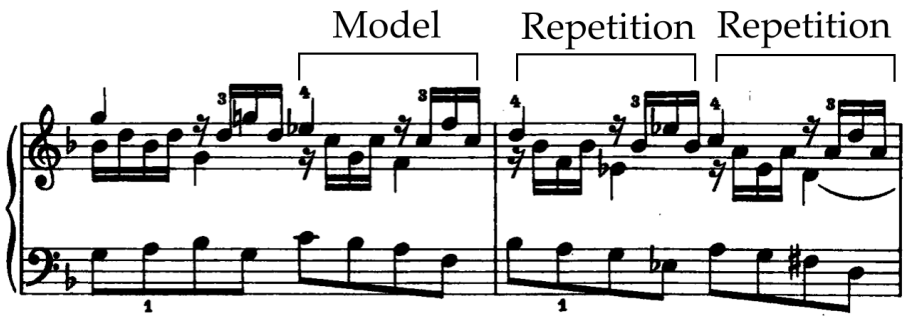


Figure 1: Bach, D minor Toccata, excerpt

Sequences are great for

- writing "episodes", i.e., bridge passages between the various occurrences of the contrapuntal theme (or "subject")
- carrying out modulations
- building up or dissipating tension

On this handout, I illustrate some of the common chord progressions that support sequences, using figured bass. I generally continue the sequential chord progression for several repetitions, but in actual works, it may be repeated as few as one times (i.e., the model, followed by a single transposed repetition). It's also important to note that the sequence-types below can start on a variety of chords; they don't have to begin on the chords illustrated.

A partial taxonomy of sequence harmonic progressions

There are many logically possible sequential harmonic progressions. Of these, only a small number account for the vast majority of actual Baroque sequences, and it is these that I will ask you to learn and use in your compositions.

Two-chord models

Most sequences have a model consisting of two chords.

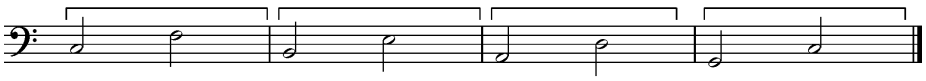
In all the common sequences, there is an ascending- or descending-fifth root motion between pairs of chords. You can think of this root motion as either a "V–I" or a "I–V" motion (although the chords may not literally be V and I; e.g., "vi–ii" is "V–I-like"). You could also think of it as either an "authentic" or a "plagal" motion.

Generally speaking, each of the below sequences has two types:

- diatonic: only the diatonic chords of the key are used
- applied: the "V" chord of each "V–I" or "I–V" motion is an applied dominant chord

Descending-fifths sequences

The descending-fifth sequence and its variations probably account for more sequences than all other sequence-types put together. The descending-fifth sequence features a "V–I" motion that repeats a second lower each time. The name for the descending-fifth sequence comes from the fact that the root of *every* chord in this sequence type is a fifth below the root of the previous chord.

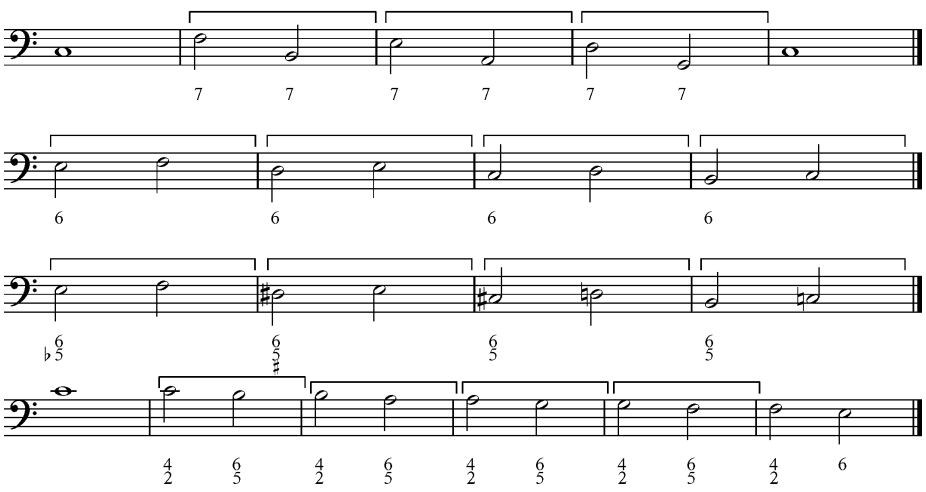


There are many ways the descending-fifth sequence can be varied. These include

- **inverting one or both of the chords**
- **adding sevenths to one or both of the chords**
- **using applied dominant chords**

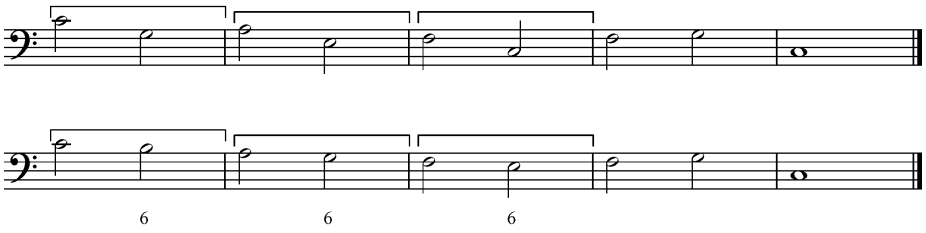
Below is a selection of the most common descending-fifth sequences. **I expect you to be able to**:

1. identify these and related progressions as descending-fifth sequences
2. work out how they are derived from the basic descending-fifth sequence (i.e., by inverting chords, adding dissonances, using applied chords)
3. use them in your compositions



The "Romanesca" sequence

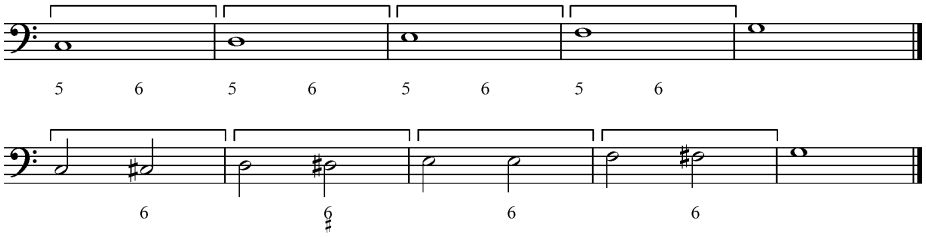
This sequence features a "I–V" motion that is repeated a third lower. The harmonic progression that results has become known as the "Romanesca." The most famous piece using this progression is Pachelbel's Canon.



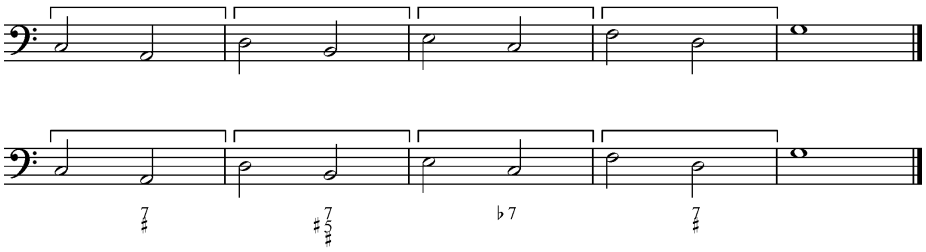
Ascending sequences

All the ascending sequences that we will study are based on a "V–I" motion that repeats a step higher each time. Note, however, that *the V–I motion is from the second chord of the model to the first chord of the next repetition.*

Ascending 5–6 This sequence works in its diatonic form, but it is particularly effective when using applied dominant chords. The applied chords will produce a mostly chromatic bassline.

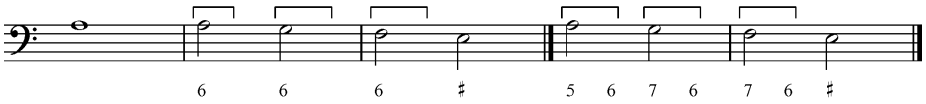


"Ascending 5–6 in root position" This sequence-type is like the preceding one, but with all the chords in root position.



One-chord models

Only one sequence with a one-chord model occurs regularly: the **descending 6/3** sequence, a series of 6/3 chords in descending parallel motion. It works especially well approaching a half cadence, like in the example (which is in A minor). Very often, the 6/3 chords are embellished by 7–6 suspensions, as in the second example. In this case, the first chord typically starts with a 5th, rather than a 7th, in order to avoid beginning with a dissonance (see "harmonic smudges," discussed below).



NB The "7"s in the latter example above are suspensions over a 6/3 chord, and not seventh chords—meaning they should not be realized with a 5th. This ambiguity in figured bass between the two uses of "7"—suspension and seventh chord—must be resolved according to the context.

Harmonic smudges

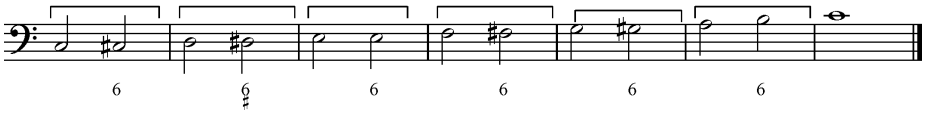
In order to begin or end a sequence smoothly, composers sometimes use what has been called a "harmonic smudge": a chord that almost, but not exactly, matches the later repetitions of the sequence. The second descending 6/3 sequence example above shows an example; we will see others later in the semester.

One of these chords is not like the others: the case of vii

As you know, in major keys, vii is a diminished triad. Thus, among the scale degrees, it is the odd one out. It can't be the root of a consonant triad, and thus can't be approached by an applied dominant chord.

In general, we avoid root position diminished triads, unless they have an added suspension. But sequences present an exception: sequences have such an inherent logic that the diminished triad doesn't seem to jump out as inappropriate in the same way as it otherwise would. So notice, for example, that the first descending-fifths sequence above contains a root position triad.

On the other hand, the fact that diminished triads can't be approached by applied dominant chords can be awkward. One common solution is to simply skip over the diminished triad—often, we won't even notice (it's a sort of compositional sleight-of-hand). For example, if we wanted to continue the chromatic ascending 5–6 sequence above, we might do so like this (note how vii has been skipped over):



Similar considerations apply to ii in minor keys, which is also a diminished triad.