MUSI 402 Handout No. 18 November 30, 2021

More about half cadences

Malcolm Sailor

So far in this class, the only guidance I've given you concerning half cadences is that the final harmony should be a root-position dominant triad (i.e., not a seventh chord) on a strong beat.

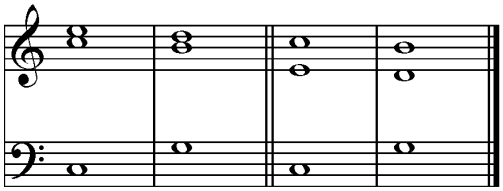
If I haven't said more it's because, in fact, the above is the only firm rule one can give concerning half cadences.

Nevertheless, certain half cadential formulas occur much more often than others, and I would encourage you to try using these in your work.

The latter part of this handout addresses the question: if all we need for a half cadence is a root-position dominant on a strong beat, is every metrically strong root-position dominant a half cadence?

Half cadential formulas

I–V The simplest half-cadence formula is probably also the most common. It can be used in the major or minor mode. The top voice will usually cadence on $\hat{2}$ or $\hat{7}$. ($\hat{2}$ will make a perfect fifth with the bass, but since this is a cadential arrival, we're happy to have a perfect consonance here.)



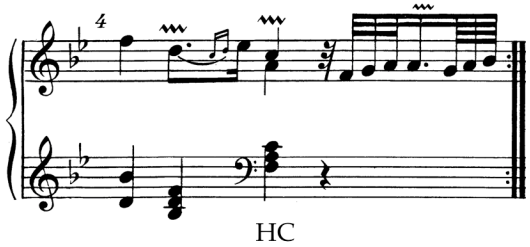
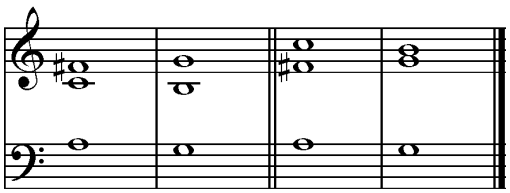


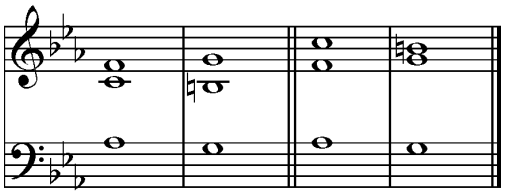
Figure 1

The next two formulas can be seen as the major and minor versions of a more general formula. Note that in both cases, there is a 6th that expands to an octave. Note also, that in both cases, the 6th is a ***major 6th****. In the first case, the 6th is major because the upper note is raised; in the second case, it is major because the bottom note is "lowered".*

vii°6/V–V This cadence harks back to the Renaissance notion of a cadence as a major 6th followed by an octave. (Sometimes, people call this a "contrapuntal cadence.") It can be seen as the "major" version of the next cadence. In two parts, the top voice will almost always have $\#\hat{4}$; in three parts, $\#\hat{4}$ can be in either of the upper voices. **More often than not, a $\widehat{7}$–$\hat{6}$ suspension is used with this cadence.** Figure 4 below is an example of this half cadence.



iv6–V This cadence is known as the **Phrygian cadence**. It also harks back to the Renaissance notion of a cadence. It is used in the minor mode. It can be seen as the "minor" version of the preceding cadence. **Note that the bass descends a half-step to $\hat{5}$.** In two parts, the top voice will have $\hat{4}$. **More often than not, a $\widehat{7}$–$\hat{6}$ suspension is used with this cadence.**



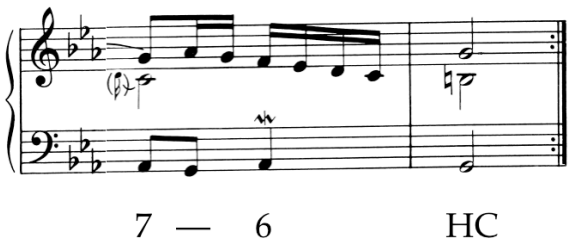


Figure 2: Bach, Capriccio, Partita in C minor

What makes a half cadence?

If all we need for a half cadence is a root-position dominant on a strong beat, what is the difference between a half cadence and any other metrically strong root-position V chord?

Like many questions in music theory, there is no hard and fast answer to this question. There are passages where people can reasonably disagree about whether there is a half cadence or not. (There is even an academic music theory article about how "slippery" the half cadence can be.[1]) Nevertheless, *most* cases are more clear-cut.

Remember, a "cadence" is a *close*; that is to say, if we are going to call a certain musical moment a "cadence," we are asserting that it sounds like some sort of a conclusion to what has come before. Thus, a half cadence is an arrival on a root-position that *sounds like a close*.[2]

How can we make a dominant arrival sound like a close?

One obvious way is simply to stop the music altogether on a long held chord. The Bach and Handel examples above, which come from the ends of the first reprises in binary form pieces, both do this. But in fugues and other contrapuntal pieces in this style, the rhythmic texture is not usually interrupted in this way.

Thus a more idiomatic way of achieving a half cadence in a fugue is to have some voices stop their activity, while the remaining voice (or voices) provides a "lead-in" to the ensuing music (typically by embellishing the dominant chord in some way). The following example by Handel illustrates; note how the bass voice stops, while the melody decorates the notes of the C major chord with passing tones. The fact that the harmonic rhythm slows down at the dominant arrival also contributes to the sense of a half cadence.

[1] L. Poundie Burstein, 2014, "The Half Cadence and Other Such Slippery Events." *Music Theory Spectrum* 37 (1): 1–25.

[2] But keep in mind that a half cadence is only ever a *temporary* close, since the dominant always "wants" resolution; this is why the half cadence is effective for ending one section of music in a way that leaves us anticipating the next.

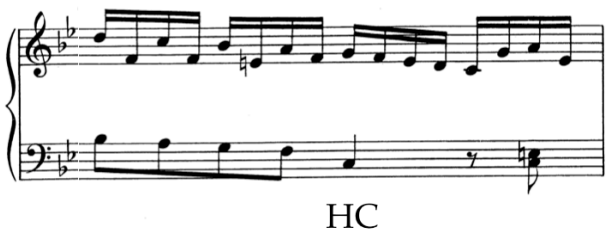


Figure 3: Handel, Keyboard Suite in B-flat, Allemande. (This excerpt is in F major.)

The next example, from Bach, is similar, but a little more complicated: first, the melody decorates its arrival on the dominant harmony. Then, the bass has a lead-in to the next measure. Note again how the harmonic rhythm slows down at the dominant arrival.

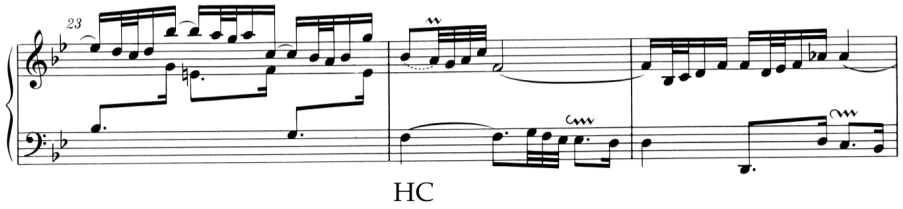


Figure 4: Bach, Partita no. 1 in B-flat, Sarabande