
Prolongational and cadential progressions

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*In this and all other handouts, the key points I expect you to learn and remember are printed in **bold**.*

Prolongational progressions *begin* phrases; cadential progressions *end* phrases.

Prolongational progressions

A *prolongational progression* “prolongs” the tonic harmony by decorating it with an embellishing harmony or harmonies, and then returning back to the tonic. (You could also call it an “embellishing” or “decorating” progression.) Thus a **prolongational progression basically has a three-part structure**, like this:

Tonic—embellishing harmony/harmonies—tonic

Most often, **the embellishing harmony is an inverted dominant chord of some kind**. Some examples would be

I V6 I

I vii6 I6

I V4/2 I6

But the embellishing harmony does not strictly have to be a dominant, e.g.,

I IV6/4 I

It is also possible for there to be more than one embellishing harmony, as in the very common opening progression

I ii4/2 V6/5 I

Notice the smooth stepwise basslines in these progressions. **Smooth stepwise basslines are characteristic of prolongational progressions.**

Musically, prolongational progressions **establish a stable harmonic basis** from which the music can proceed.

Notes on prolongational progressions

The term “prolongational” originated with Schenkerian analysis, a prominent style of music-theoretic analysis. Beyond adopting the term “prolongational,” we won’t be using much Schenkerian analysis in this course.

Cadential progressions

Cadential progressions **bring sections of music to a close**.

In the repertoire we will study, by far **the most important cadential progressions** are

- **V-I cadences** (known as **authentic cadences**).

Very often, authentic cadences also feature a *predominant* chord (usually ii6/5, ii6/3, or IV) that proceeds to the V chord. When present, we treat this chord as also part of the cadential progression.

- **half cadences** (i.e., cadences that end on V). Unlike V-I cadences, half cadences can begin on many different chords. The most common half cadences are I-V and IV-V.

Cadential progressions use root position chords.

- **In an authentic cadence, both the V and I chords should be in root position.**
- **In a half cadence, the final V chord should be in root position.**

Notes on cadential progressions

Plagal cadences (i.e., IV-I cadences) are not very important in this style. When one does occur, it is usually as a “post-cadential” embellishment of an earlier V-I cadence.

You are probably also familiar with the *deceptive cadence*. This is an effective chord progression, but it is not really a “cadential progression” in the sense we are using the term here. This is because it does not bring a section to a close, but instead defers the close of the section. Following the deceptive cadence, the music will still make its way to a “true” cadential progression in order to bring the section to a close.

Summary

This table summarizes some of the key differences between prolongational and cadential progressions:

prolongational	cadential
at beginnings	at endings
harmonies often inverted	harmonies always in root position
bass usually stepwise	bass usually moves by leap