



The Augmented Sixth Chord



The augmented sixth chord is usually formed between the sixth degree of the (usually minor) scale and the raised fourth degree. For instance, in the example above (in C minor), the bass note is the sixth degree of the scale A-flat whilst the treble note is the raised fourth degree F-sharp.

The chord has a similar function to IVb, leading very strongly to the dominant (V), but the raised fourth gives it that chromatic, markedly dissonant, rather more exotic feel. The resolution to the dominant is so strong because both parts are 'pulled' outwards, the treble resolving up a semitone, the bass down a semitone onto an octave. This outwards resolution by semitone to an octave is a good 'signal' for identifying the chord.

Although they are most common in minor keys, they can be realised in the major by using the parallel minor scale.

Variations

There are three particular 'flavours' of augmented sixth. You do not have to know these for the purposes of A2, but they are described here for the interested student:

Italian Sixth

The plainest version (and thus most similar to IVb), the 'Italian Sixth' uses only three notes (i.e., in four parts, one will be doubled, usually the tonic) the sixth, the tonic and the raised fourth.



French Sixth

Similar to the Italian flavour, but adds the super-tonic. These four notes can all be found in the whole tone scale formed from the tonic, and the popularity of this scale in 19th century France gave rise to this flavour of sixth being termed the 'French' sixth. The presence of the tonic in both chords (i.e. one part not moving) is a useful 'signal' for the identification of this type of chord.



German Sixth

This variant adds the minor third to the Italian Sixth, so all lower three parts resolve downwards (a useful 'signal' for identification). Note the danger of parallel fifths in this case, which are often 'mended' through the use of a suspension on the resolution.

