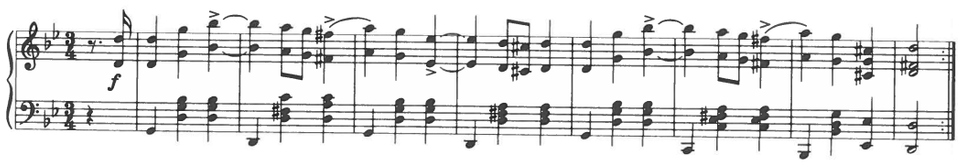
CHAPTER 27

The Augmented Sixth Chord

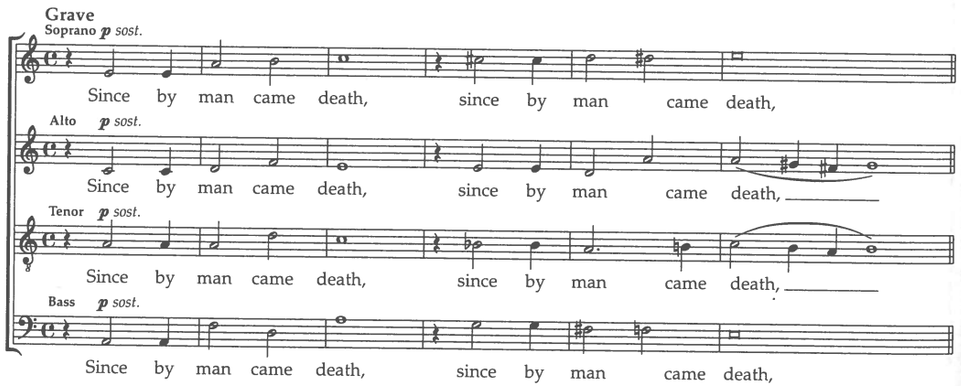
The two excerpts in Example 27.1 are from different style periods, yet they share several harmonic features. Listen to both excerpts, noting the similarities.

EXAMPLE 27.1

A. Schubert, Waltz in G minor, *Die letze Waltze*, op. 127, no. 12, D.146



B. Handel, "Since by Man Came Death," *Messiah*, HWV 56

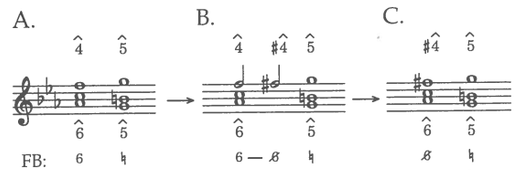


Both excerpts may be parsed into two sections. The eight-measure Schubert waltz divides neatly into two four-measure subphrases, each of which closes on a half cadence. The six-measure opening of "Since by Man Came Death" divides into two three-measure subphrases, in which the first section closes on the tonic and the second closes on a half cadence. But do the similarities end there? What, specific feature do you notice in common between the two strong half cadences closing the two excerpts?

The bass's movement from $\hat{6}$ to $\hat{5}$ at the end of each excerpt imples a phrygian cadence. Yet we learned the phrygian cadence as iv_6–V; in neither case does iv_6 accurately describe the second to last chord with its new chromaticism in the soprano. For each chord, the sixth above the bass ($\hat{4}$) is chromatically raised a half step to $\sharp\hat{4}$, which intensifies the ascent to $\hat{5}$ and mirrors in contrary motion the half-step descent of the bass. The resulting sonority is called an **augmented sixth chord,** a name taken from the characteristic interval between the bass $\hat{6}$ and the upper-voice $\sharp\hat{4}$.

Example 27.2 demonstrates the derivation of the augmented sixth chord from the phrygian cadence; first, a traditional phrygian cadence is presented in Example 27.2A. In 27.2B, the chromatic $F\sharp^5$ fills the space between F^5 and G^5, and the interval of an augmented sixth is created essentially as a by-product of passing motion. We use the figured bass +6 or $\hat{\phi}$ to indicate the raised sixth above the bass. Finally, Example 27.2C shows the augmented sixth chord as a harmonic entity, with no consonant preparation.

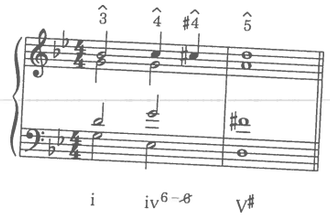
EXAMPLE 27.2



Functions, Voice Leading, and Types of Augmented Sixth Chords

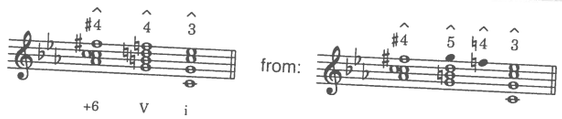
Like most of the other chromatic chords we have studied, such as the Neapolitan, the augmented sixth chord functions primarily as a predominant harmony. In addition, it occurs more frequently in minor-mode pieces (again like the Neapolitan), where its characteristic $\flat\hat{6}$–$\hat{5}$ bass motion is diatonic. Because the augmented sixth chord is derived from the phrygian cadence, it moves to V in like manner. Example 27.3 illustrates the characteristic voice leading: $\flat\hat{6}$ is in the bass and falls by half step to $\hat{5}$, and $\hat{4}$—the augmented sixth above the bass, often found in the soprano—ascends to $\hat{5}$. Notice that the remaining inner voices double $\hat{1}$ (the third above the bass) and move in contrary motion, the exact voice leading used in the phrygian cadence.

EXAMPLE 27.3



When the augmented sixth chord moves to V_7, the voice leading implies a progression in which $\sharp\hat{4}$ resolves to $\hat{5}$ and is followed by $\flat\hat{4}$, which passes to $\hat{3}$ (see Example 27.4B). The $\hat{5}$ is often elided, however, in which case $\sharp\hat{4}$ falls directly to $\flat\hat{4}$ (the seventh of V_7). See Example 27.4A.

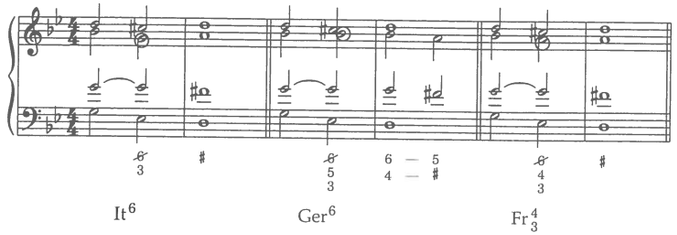
EXAMPLE 27.4



Three common yet closely related types of augmented sixth chords appear in near-equal frequency in common-practice music. As Example 27.5 shows, all three types contain the scale degrees noted in the previous examples: $\flat\hat{6}$ (in the bass), $\sharp\hat{4}$ (the augmented sixth above the bass), and $\hat{1}$ (the third above the bass). The circled notes (in this case, located in the alto voice) indicate the subtle differences in construction among the three types of augmented sixth chords. Note the absence of roman numerals to describe these contrapuntal sonorities: it is common to represent them using figured bass, preceded by a long-standing tradition of names drawn from European regional geography.

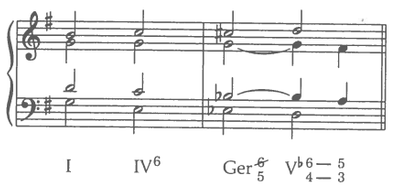
The simplest type of augmented sixth chord is the **Italian augmented sixth chord** (labeled "It_6") shown in Example 27.5A. It is built only out of the materials listed above: $\flat\hat{6}$, $\sharp\hat{4}$, and $\hat{1}$, and contains a doubled third ($\hat{1}$) above the bass. The figured bass is $\frac{6}{3}$. The **German augmented sixth chord** ("Ger^6_5"), shown in Example 27.5B, is different from the Italian in that it adds a perfect fifth above the bass. Thus, it contains four different pitches and is described by the figured bass $\frac{6}{5}$. The **French augmented sixth chord** ("Fr^4_3"), shown in Example 27.5C, contains an augmented fourth, which makes this pitch occur a semitone below the fourth tone of a German$^6_5$. The figured bass is $\frac{6}{4}_3$.

EXAMPLE 27.5



Example 27.5 also illustrates how augmented six chords of all varieties resolve in G minor. Although augmented sixth chords tend to occur more often in the minor mode, they do sometimes occur in the major mode. Be aware, however, that at least one additional chromatic alteration is necessary for them to appear in major: $\hat{6}$ (in the bass) must be lowered to $\flat\hat{6}$. This holds for all three species of augmented sixth chords. In the special case of the Ger$^6_5$, $\hat{3}$ must also be lowered (see Example 27.6).

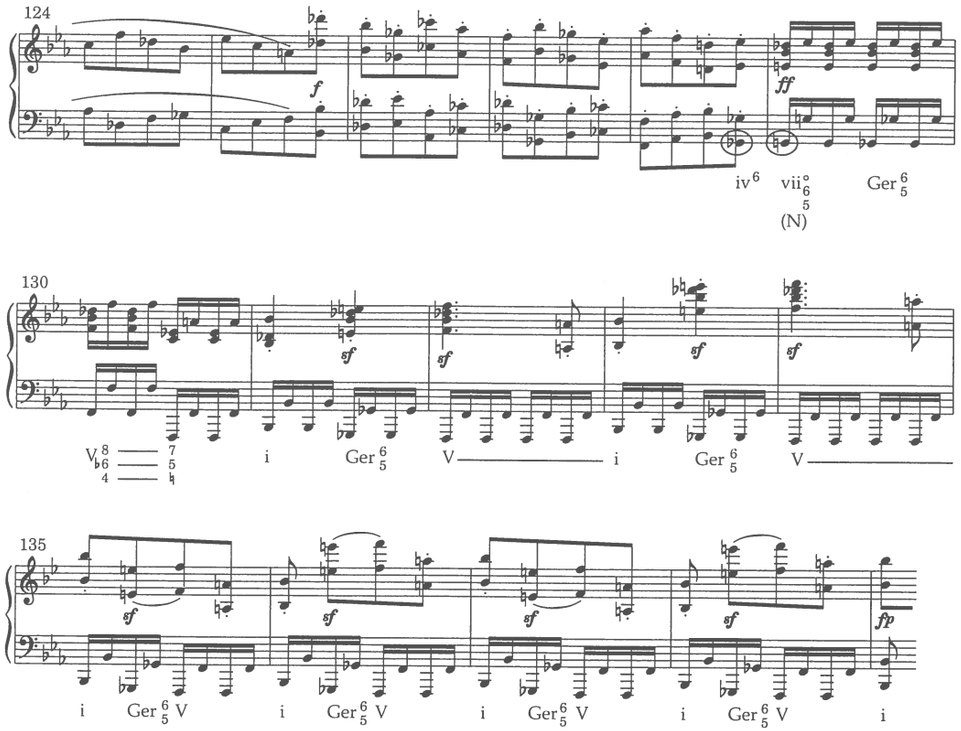
EXAMPLE 27.6



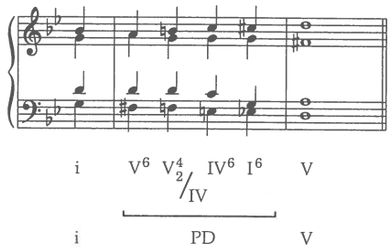
As we saw in the derivation of augmented sixth chords from the predominant iv_6, augmented sixth chords frequently combine with other pre-dominant harmonies to expand the pre-dominant function. Given that its outer voices are so goal-directed toward $\hat{5}$, the augmented sixth (if it appears) is usually the last event before the dominant, following either $iv_{(6)}$ or VI. In Example 27.7 Beethoven drives home the arrival in B♭ minor by moving from a iv_6 to a Ger$^6_5$ in mm. 129–30, with the vii°$^6_5$ appearing as a brief neighbor. The Ger$^6_5$–V motion is then reiterated seven times in the following nine measures and highlighted by the *sf* marking.

Augmented sixth chords often appear in chromaticized bass descents as the final step before the dominant (Example 27.8).

EXAMPLE 27.7 **Beethoven, Piano Sonata no. 13 in E♭ major, op. 27, no. 1,** ***Allegro vivace***



EXAMPLE 27.8



Hearing the Augmented Sixth Chord

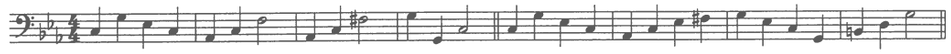
In becoming acquainted with the use of augmented sixth chords in common-practice music, it will be useful for you to be able to determine aurally where augmented sixths occur in music. Of the three types of augmented sixth chord, the French augmented sixth is the easiest to identify because of its distinctive sound. Try to hear the two tritones of the chord, or the major-second clash of the inner pitches. A more subtle tactic is to try and determine if you can hear one of the inner pitches held as a common tone on arrival on the dominant (this is $\hat{2}$.) It is a bit more difficult to distinguish the Italian from the German augmented sixth chord because they sound so similar. A starting point is to recognize that the It^{6}_{3} is the simplest of the three chords and thus will sound a bit less full than the Ger^{6}_{5}. However, the chords often resolve in a manner that allows you to tell one from the other. The Italian augmented sixth often moves directly to V in root position, but the German augmented sixth usually resolves to a cadential six-four chord in order to avoid the parallel fifths that would occur between the perfect fifth of the Ger^{6}_{5}, built on $\flat\hat{6}$ and $\flat\hat{3}$, and the perfect fifth of the V, built on $\hat{5}$ and $\hat{2}$ (refer back to Example 27.5).

EXERCISE INTERLUDE

27.1 Singing

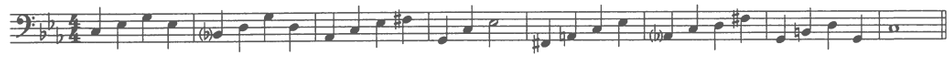
Using solfège or scale degrees, sing the following progressions that incorporate the augmented sixth chord. Analyze the harmonic progressions in each example. The harmonic rhythm is generally one chord per measure.

A.

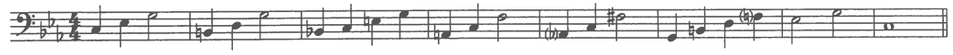


B.

C.



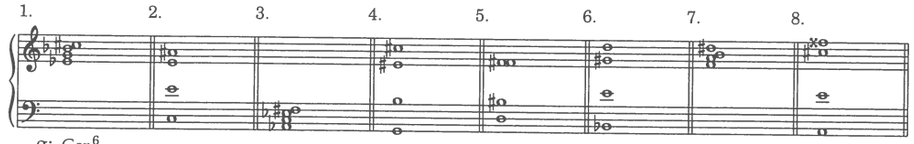
D.



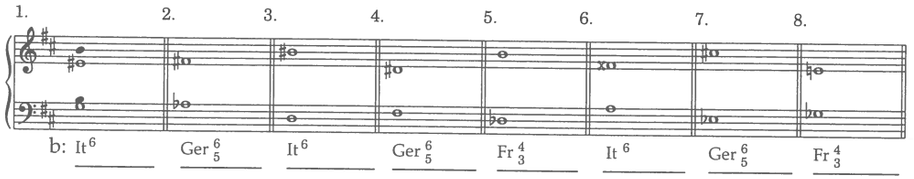
27.2 Identification of Augmented Sixth Chords

Complete the tasks below as required.

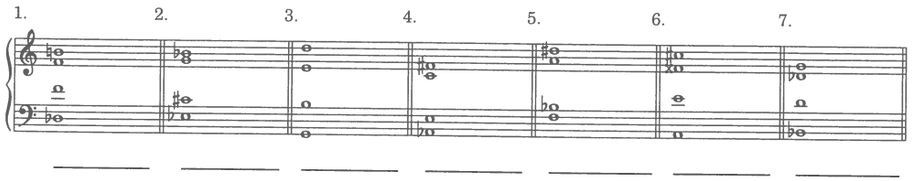
A. Determine the key in which each of the augmented sixth chords would function, then identify the type of augmented sixth chord that is notated.



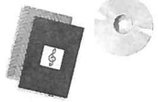
B. For each augmented sixth interval below, label the minor key in which it would function as a pre-dominant and provide a key signature. Then, add the missing chordal members to complete the sonorities as specified (the first one is completed for you).



C. Assuming the bass is correct, determine the key and the type of augmented sixth chord that is notated and correct any spelling errors.



27.3 Aural Detection of Augmented Sixth Chords



WORKBOOK 27.1

These progressions may or may not use the augmented sixth chord as a pre-dominant. Mark "Y" (yes) or "N" (no), depending on whether or not you hear an augmented sixth.

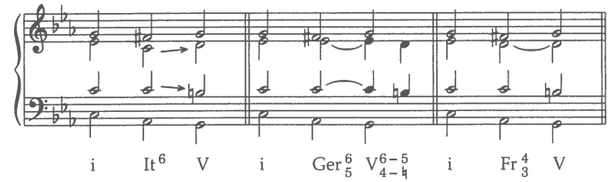
A. ___ B. ___ C. ___ D. ___ E. ___ F. ___ G. ___ H. ___

Writing Augmented Sixth Chords

The part-writing rules for augmented sixth chords are similar to those for writing vii°$_7$ chords: the characteristic sonorities are composed of tones that have specific tendencies and thus are not appropriate for doubling. Because

two of the three types of augmented sixth chords contain four different pitches—the Fr$^{4}_{3}$ and Ger$^{6}_{5}$—these at least present no doubling problems: for them to exist, all four tones must be sounding. For the remaining type containing only three different pitches, the It$_6$, always double the third above the bass (1̂) rather than the tendency tones (♭6̂ or ♯4̂). The voice leading of the It$_6$ is shown in Example 27.9A, where it proceeds to a root-position V (it would also be possible to move to V$_7$ or a cadential six-four). The Ger$^{6}_{5}$ should move to the cadential six-four in order to offset the parallel fifths that would occur with a direct move to V, as shown in Example 27.9B. Note that in the French augmented sixth, illustrated in Example 27.9C, 2̂ is held as a common tone with V, where it becomes the chordal fifth.

EXAMPLE 27.9

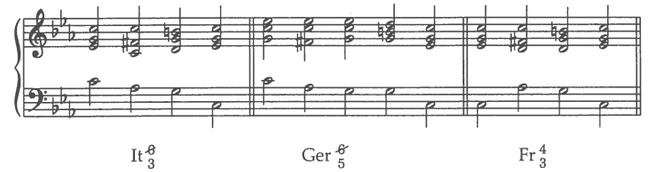


EXERCISE INTERLUDE

27.4 Keyboard: Augmented Sixth Chord Models

Play the four-voice augmented sixth chord models as written and in minor and major keys up to and including two sharps and two flats.

WORKBOOK 27.2-12

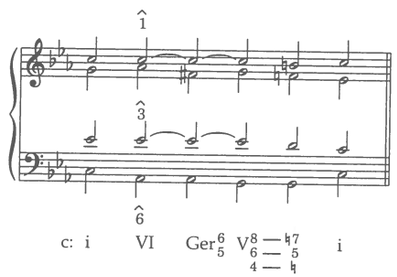


♭VI and the Augmented Sixth Chord

In Chapter 25 we learned that both VI in minor and ♭VI in major can be prolonged to such a degree that they can occupy the better part of an entire section of music. In either case, (♭)VI often moves to a pre-dominant, thus participating in a pre-dominant complex that sets up a V to go to tonic. Often, however, composers want to lead ♭VI directly to V in order to take advantage of the dramatic half-step motion (♭)6̂–5̂ in the bass. But leading (♭)VI directly to V results in voice-leading problems of octaves and fifths. To avoid

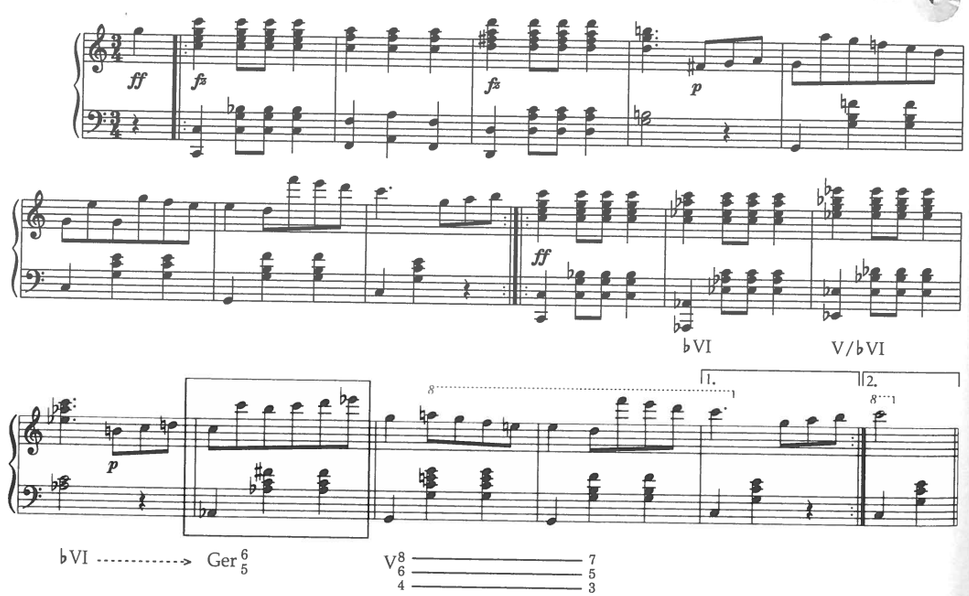
these problems and to intensify the motion to V, composers regularly convert (♭)VI into a German sixth chord, because the two chords share three of four scale degrees (1̂, 3̂, 6̂). This procedure of turning ♭VI into Ger$^{6}_{5}$ is shown in the second and third chords of Example 27.10.

EXAMPLE 27.10



A second instance of this process is given in Example 27.11, in which a tonicized ♭VI in mm. 10–12 is converted to and destabilized by a Ger$^{6}_{5}$ (m. 13), which can then move smoothly to V in m. 14.

EXAMPLE 27.11 Schubert, Waltz in C major, *Valses sentimentales*, D. 779, no. 16



EXERCISE INTERLUDE

27.5 Analysis

Listen to the excerpts below, in which (♭)VI is converted into an augmented sixth chord. As is done in Example 27.11, label the expanded submediant and circle and label the type of augmented sixth chord that follows. On a separate page, answer the questions that follow in a sentence or two.

A. Beethoven, Andante in F major, WoO 57

What sequence is implied in this excerpt's beginning? What harmony is prolonged in mm. 2–4?