

UNIT 16: THE AUGMENTED SIXTH CHORD

The Augmented Sixth chord is an altered chord which contains an augmented sixth between the lowest sounding pitch and another above it. The chord retains its name even when the interval is inverted to a diminished third (see Example 16.4). The lowest sounding pitch is usually a major third below the tonic.

The three types of augmented sixth chords and their intervallic components are:

- ITALIAN: Major 3rd and Aug. 6th above the lowest sounding note
 GERMAN: Major 3rd and Aug. 6th and Perf. 5th (or Doubly Aug. 4) above the lowest sounding note
 FRENCH: Major 3rd and Aug. 6th and Aug. 4th above the lowest sounding note

Example 16.1

Ital. 6th Ger. 6th Ger. 6th Fr. 6th
 C Major

Same sound
 Different spellings
 There are two spellings
 used for the German 6th.

The augmented sixth chords generally resolve to a dominant or second inversion tonic with the augmented sixth interval expanding out to the octave. The German Sixth is followed by the second inversion tonic rather than a dominant in order to avoid parallel fifths. Altered tones are rarely doubled. No chord members are ever omitted.

Example 16.2

Avoid Acceptable

C Major: It. 6 V Ger. 6 V Ger. 6 I₄⁶ V Fr. 6 V

All three types of augmented sixth chords are found in major and minor mode, but, in the case of the German Sixth, the choice of spelling is determined by the mode. In major, the German Sixth is spelled with the Doubly Augmented 4th and in minor it is spelled with the Perfect 5th.

Example 16.3

The image shows two musical systems. The first system is for C minor, with a key signature of two flats and a common time signature. It features a German Sixth chord (i⁶₄) in the bass clef, consisting of notes G^b, B^b, D^b, and F^b. The second system is for C major, with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature. It features a German Sixth chord (I⁶₄) in the bass clef, consisting of notes G, B^b, D, and F^b. Both systems show the resolution of the German Sixth chord to a dominant triad (V).

C minor: Ger.6 i_4^6 V C Major: Ger.6 I_4^6 V

The augmented sixth chords appear in the Baroque but are used sparingly. Use increases in the Classic period by such composers as Haydn and Mozart. As with the other chromatic chords discussed in this study guide, the Augmented sixth chord reaches its zenith in the nineteenth century. They are more abundant and are used more liberally with less predictability in terms of preparation, resolution, and position of the chord itself.

The following excerpts from the literature illustrate its use by different composers.

Example 16.4 Tartini - Violin Sonata in G minor

The image shows a musical score for a violin and piano. The key signature is G minor (one flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The violin part is on the top staff, and the piano accompaniment is on the bottom two staves. The score shows a sequence of chords and melodic lines, including an augmented sixth chord.

G minor

A musical score for a piece titled 'Ital. 6'. It consists of three staves: a single treble clef staff at the top, and a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) below. The music is in a minor key and features a melodic line in the upper staff and a more rhythmic accompaniment in the lower staves. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

Ital. 6

Beethoven - Sonata in F minor, Op. 2, No. 1 (1st Mvt.)

A musical score for the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata in F minor, Op. 2, No. 1. It is a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The music is in F minor and begins with a prominent descending eighth-note scale in the right hand. The piece ends with a double bar line.

F minor

Ger. 6

Grieg - Ase's Death from Peer Gynt Suite

A musical score for 'Ase's Death' from Grieg's Peer Gynt Suite. It is a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The music is in B minor and features a complex, atmospheric texture with many chords and moving lines in both hands. The piece concludes with a double bar line.

B minor

Fr.6

Fr.6

Schubert - Winterreise, Op. 89, No. 11

E minor

Fr. 6 in root position

Finally, the augmented sixth chords are often used in modulation to closely related keys as well as to more distant ones. Because the German Sixth has the same sound as a major-minor seventh chord, it may be used to modulate enharmonically to a key whose tonic is one-half step away (see Example 16.5).

Example 16.5

F Major: I I⁶ ii v⁷
 E Major: Ger.6 I⁶/₄ V I

Drill 16.1

Spell the Italian 6th, German 6th (choose appropriate spelling), and French 6th in the keys of D minor, E minor, Eb Major, F Major, F# minor, Ab Major, and B minor.

Write in four parts observing the usual doubling. Resolve to the appropriate chord.

Drill 16.2

Identify the augmented sixth chords in the excerpt from Mozart's Sonata in D, K. 284.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the piano accompaniment of Mozart's Sonata in D, K. 284. Each system consists of a grand staff with a treble clef on the upper staff and a bass clef on the lower staff. The music is in 3/4 time and the key signature has one flat (B-flat). The first system spans four measures, and the second system spans four measures. Handwritten annotations are present throughout the score, including 'a' and 'b' above notes in the treble clef, and '7' and '4' below notes in the bass clef. The bass clef part features several chords with '7' or '4' written below them, indicating seventh or fourth intervals. The treble clef part contains melodic lines with various note values and rests.