## 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.

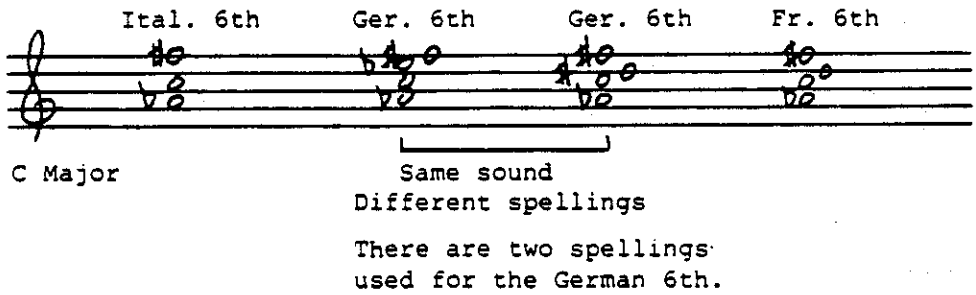
The three types of augmented sixth chords and their intervallic components are:

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

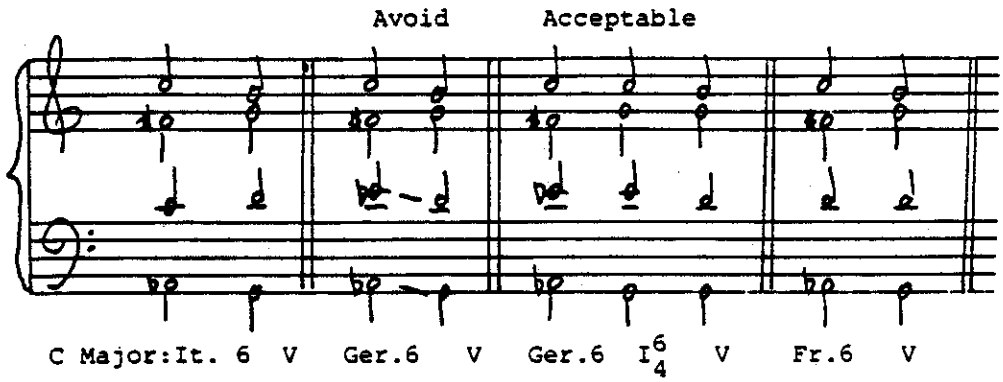
FRENCH: Major 3rd and Aug. 6th and Aug. 4th above the lowest sounding note

Example 16.1



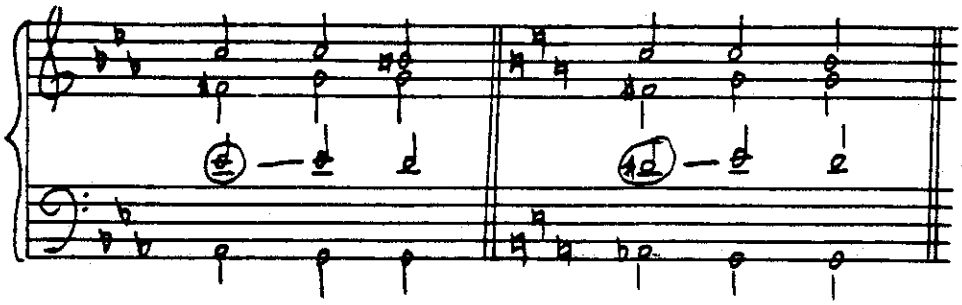

The augmented sixth chords generally resolve to a dominant or second inversion tonic with the augmented sixth interval expanding out to the octave. The German Sixth is followed by the second inversion tonic rather than a dominant in order to avoid parallel fifths. Altered tones are rarely doubled. No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

Example 16.2



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.

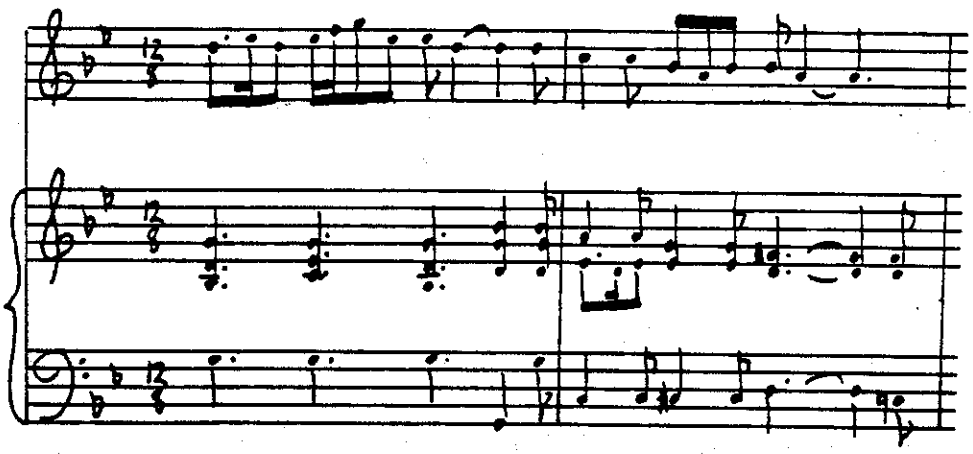
Example 16.3



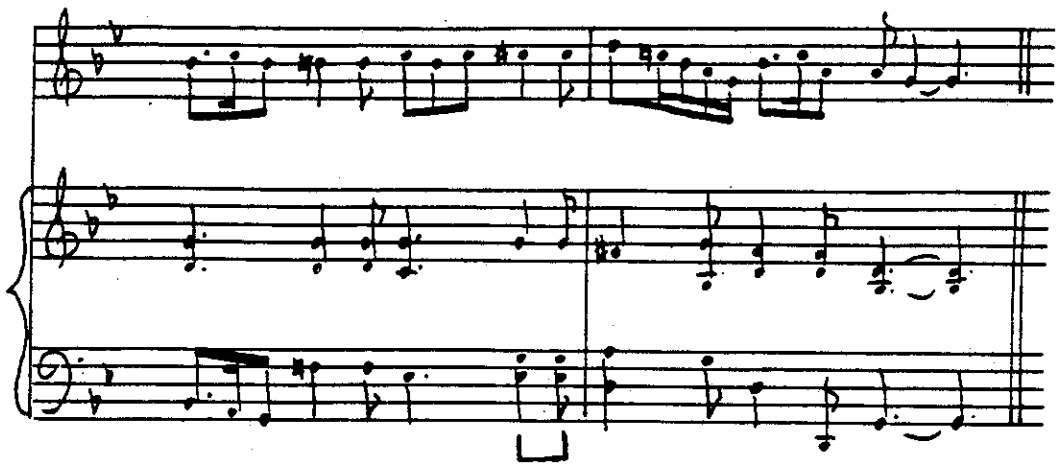

The augmented sixth chords appear in the Baroque but are used sparingly. Use increases in the Classic period by such composers as Haydn and Mozart. As with the other chromatic chords discussed in this study guide, the Augmented sixth chord reaches its zenith in the nineteenth century. They are more abundant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

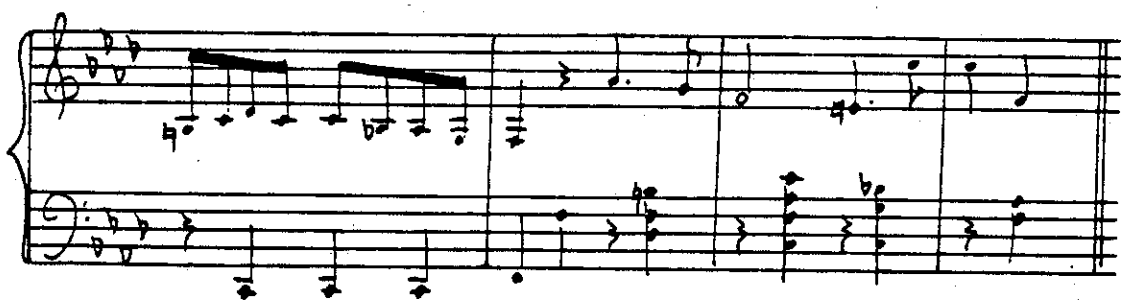


G minor



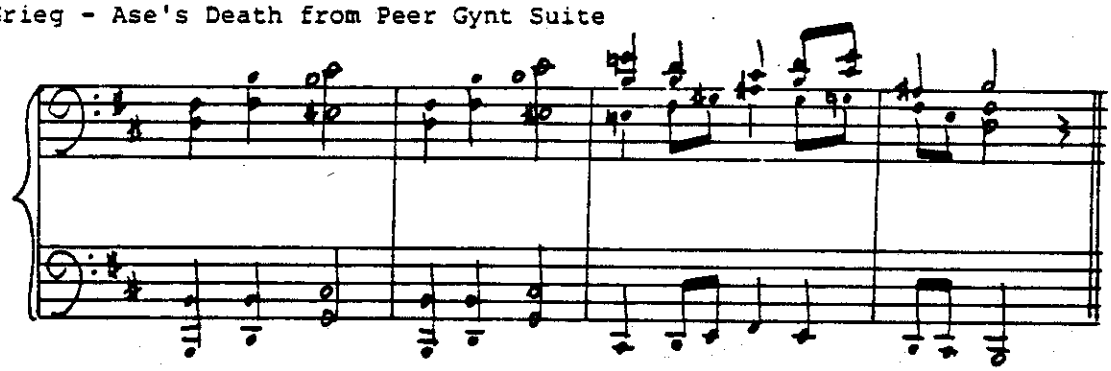
Ital. 6

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



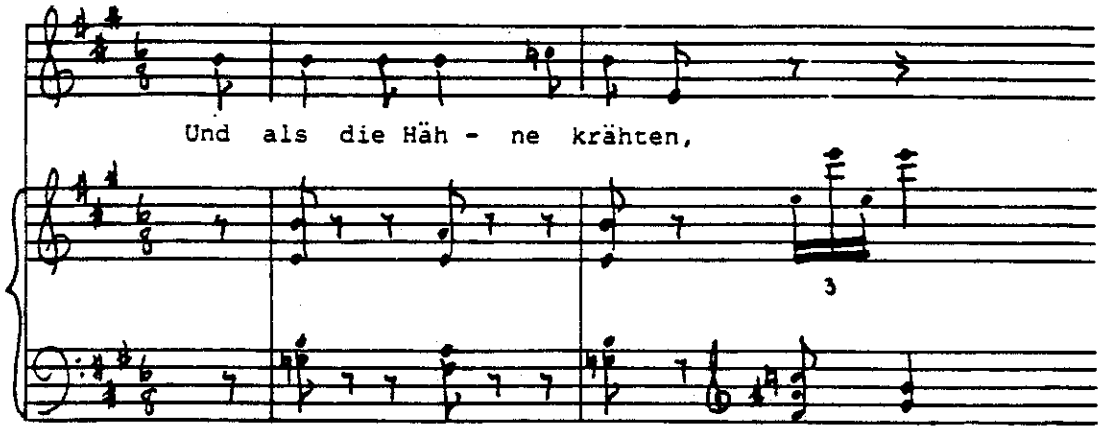
F minor Ger. 6

Grieg - Ase's Death from Peer Gynt Suite



B minor Fr.6 Fr.6

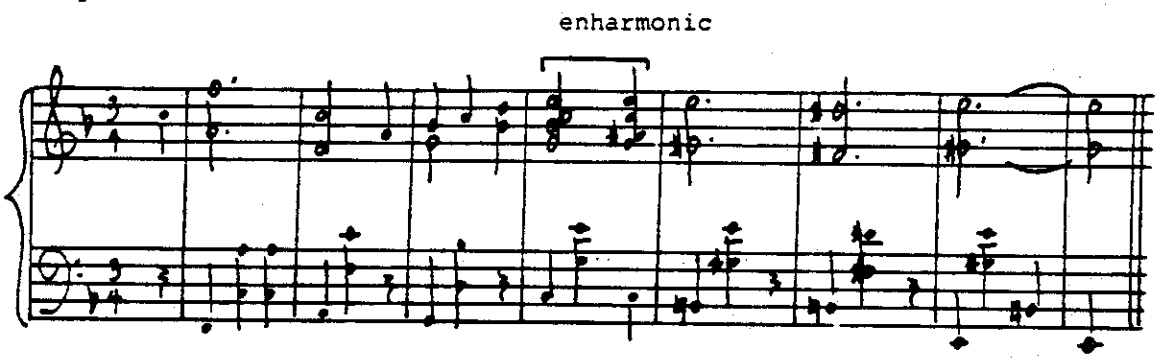
Schubert - Winterreise, Op. 89, No. 11




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).

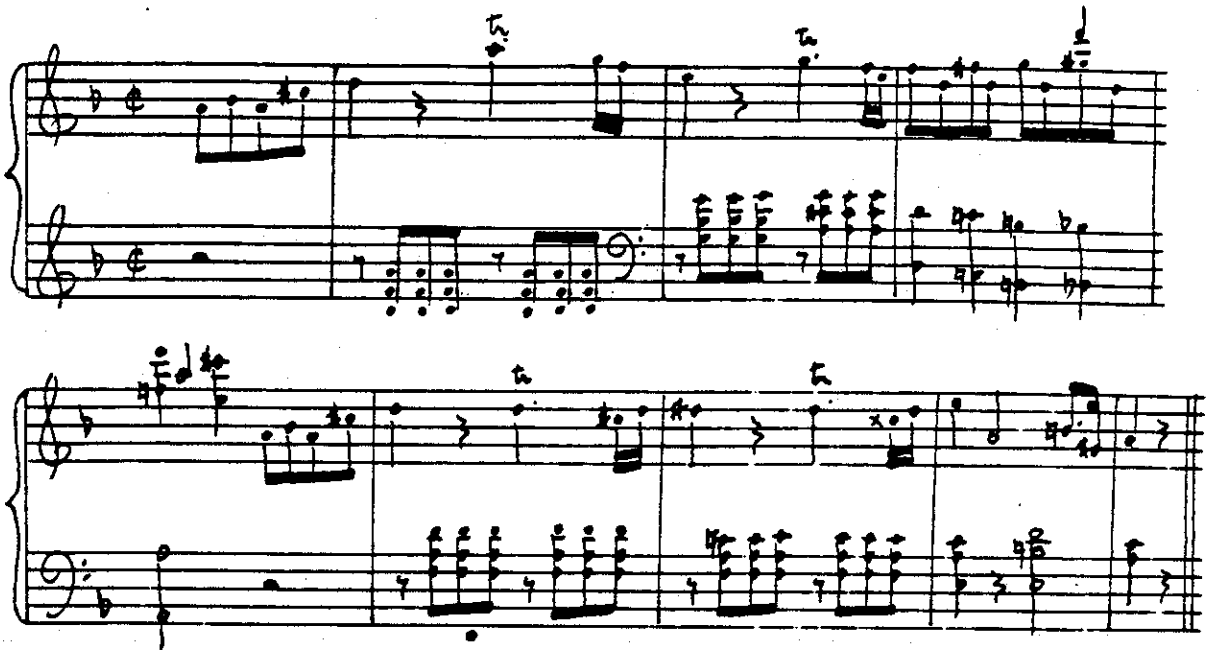
Example 16.5




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.