The Dominant Seventh

The Dominant Seventh is the diatonic seventh chord built on the fifth scale degree. We already discussed diatonic seventh chords... why give this one all this special attention?

For one thing, the dominant seventh is, by far, the most common seventh chord used by the composers of the common practice period.

But another reason for spending a little extra time with it is the fact that there are a few things that apply to it that don't apply to the other diatonic seventh chords.

The reason these are often confused is that in popular and jazz theory, the term “dominant” is used to label the chord's type instead of the chord's role.

First, a note on terminology:

The terms “major-minor seventh” and “dominant seventh” are not interchangeable! “Major-minor seventh” is the chord's type, and “dominant seventh” is the role the chord plays in the context of a particular key.

It's just a major-minor seventh... until it's placed in a particular key!

The other important thing to know about the dominant seventh chord is that common practice period composers would sometimes use some non-standard ways of resolving the seventh!

The Ornamental Resolution

In this resolution, the seventh is still resolved down by step, but it takes an ornamental "detour" before getting there.

The Ornament can be any shape or length, but it must resolve to the note down a step from the seventh of the seventh chord.

If the bass voice gets it, he resolves it immediately, ending the fun for everyone.

The Transferred Resolution

This is the "hot potato" resolution: instead of being resolved down by step in the same voice, the seventh is passed to another voice in another dominant seventh chord.

The seventh still needs to resolve down by step by whatever voice is the last to have it.

The Delayed Resolution

Here, the resolution of the seventh is delayed by moving to some other chord (usually the subdominant) and having the seventh of the chord hold out until the dominant seventh returns.

After the V7 returns, the voice that has the seventh should still resolve it appropriately!

The Bass Resolution

In this resolution, the seventh of the chord is still resolved down by step, but the note it resolves to appears in the bass voice.

The voice that had the seventh resolves up, usually by step.