Altered Chords

Up to this point, all the chords we've been talking about have been built using only the notes in the current key. Essentially, this means no accidentals, with the exception of the raised sixth and seventh scale degrees in minor, which we consider to be part of the key.

Now that we've covered all the possible diatonic chords in tertial harmony, it's time to open the door to notes outside the key. These "altered chords" add a certain richness to the harmony by using one or more notes that are not in the key signature and thus require accidentals.

We'll be covering several categories of altered chords, each of which have their own unique rules for use. However, there are a few things that they all have in common!

First, every altered chord has to have at least one accidental... if it doesn't have any accidentals, then by definition it's a diatonic chord!

Second, altered chords can be easily used in place of their diatonic counterparts. In other words, you can add some pizzazz to a composition by replacing a diatonic chord with an altered chord that has the same root.

With few exceptions, altered chords can use the same basic root movements that we've been using.

Like the diatonic sevenths, however, the common root should only increase tension... don't move from an altered chord to its diatonic counterpart.

Lastly, when you use these chords in part-writing, you should, whenever possible, resolve the altered notes in the direction of their alteration.

So if a note has a flat, try to resolve it down by step or by leap.

And we generally avoid doubling altered notes, since doing so would tend to cause parallel octaves.