Augmented Sixth Chords

Like that moment of incredible tension just before the hero finally kisses the leading lady, the semitone is the go-to interval for creating tension in music of the common practice period. It drives the entire style!

If one semitone can create such strong tension, how about two semitones sounding simultaneously? Let's get creative here for a minute to find a cool new way to approach a diatonic chord. In this case, we'll use them to approach the dominant triad.

First, we'll start with the doubled root of a V chord...

...and approach that octave with a semitone below the top note...

...and a semitone above the bottom note...

...and, finally, add the tonic as the third note.

The result is a new chord, one we call the augmented sixth chord, after the interval created by the top and bottom notes.

Augmented sixth chords are predominant chords, meaning they are used to approach dominant chords. They are usually used to approach dominant triads, not dominant sevenths, because of the doubled roots present in dominant triads.

However, they also often approach tonic chords in second inversion, which also contain a doubled fifth scale degree.

Rarely, augmented sixth chords are found transposed down a perfect fifth, analyzed as "on flat two," and used to approach a tonic chord in root position.

And, finally, when resolving the German augmented sixth chord to a dominant triad, you might find yourself writing parallel fifths... but it's perfectly okay! Mozart did it all the time!