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!

_w/ 
1/3
Alter
d

Diatonic

**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.

**Likewise**, 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 tones 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.
Borrowed Chords

Altered chords use notes outside the scale as a means of adding a different "color" to the chord.

How does a composer decide which altered notes to use? In a major key, one possibility is using notes and chords from the parallel minor.

**FOR EXAMPLE, THE FOLLOWING CHORDS ARE DIATONIC CHORDS IN C MINOR:**

**Borrowed? Why call them that when major never brings them back?**

Hey, minor! I'll have them back by Tuesday this time. I promise!

But if we use them in a major key, they require accidentals and are therefore altered chords. We call these borrowed chords because they are borrowed from the parallel minor.

Some theorists refer to the use of these chords as mode mixture.

And, in fact, these six chords are the six most commonly used borrowed chords in the common practice period. (One of them, the major triad on the lowered mediant, or "flat three," was not used much by composers before the romantic era.)

All the usual part-writing rules apply to these chords. For example:

- **ii° 6**
  - The borrowed supertonic is a diminished triad, and is therefore always used in first inversion.

- **ii° vii° 7**
  - The borrowed seventh chords can be used in any inversion, but the seventh must be approached and resolved properly.

- **bIII**
  - It's usually best to resolve altered notes in the direction of their alteration, but doing so in the two altered root chords won't work.

- **bVI**
  - The leading-tone fully diminished seventh is the king of dominant function. Don't even think of resolving it to anything but tonic!

- **vii° 7**
  - Named for 24th-century explorer Jean-Luc Picard!*

Two of these chords, the "flat three" and "flat six," have altered tones as roots. We place a full-sized flat symbol before the roman numeral itself to indicate this altered root.

The picardy third is a major tonic chord at the end of a minor piece, so many theorists consider it a borrowed chord. Really, though, it's not adding chromatic variety... it's a last-minute modulation!

Wait... why? Since we double the root, moving both roots the same direction can often result in parallel octaves.

It's more important to avoid parallelism than to resolve the notes a certain way, so this use of contrary motion is better.

*Nope.
The Neapolitan Six

In addition to the altered root borrowed chords, there is another altered root chord that fits well with the borrowed chords, even though it is not actually borrowed from the parallel minor. That chord is a major triad built on the lowered second scale degree.

Since it's not a borrowed chord, this chord can be used in both major and minor.

There are a couple of interesting things about this chord. One is the fact that it is almost exclusively used in first inversion.

Seriously! Although this chord is extremely common in the common practice period, there are very few examples of it used in root position. Second inversion is even rarer.

The second interesting thing about the chord is its name: you might expect it to be called a "flat two," in keeping with the other altered root chords. But, in fact, this is the first of a few chords that have special names. This particular one is called the Neapolitan chord.

"Neapolitan" means "from Naples," referring to the city of Naples, Italy. The chord isn't actually from Naples, though; it was just associated with the operas written by Neapolitan composers like Alessandro Scarlatti.

Funny thing is, this chord was used pretty commonly before Scarlatti's time, in compositions far from the courts of Italy.

It's also worth noting that although nearly every theorist and theory textbook calls the chord a "Neapolitan sixth chord," it is more properly called a "Neapolitan six chord." That's because in the rare situations where it is used in root position, it is simply called the Neapolitan chord, and when it is found in second inversion, it's called the Neapolitan six-four.

Since we don't pronounce I\textsuperscript{6} as "one sixth," we shouldn't say "Neapolitan sixth" for N\textsuperscript{6}!
Secondary Dominants

There is a duality at the heart of common practice period harmonic progression. Like the ancient conflict of Jedi and Sith, it consists of forces that, at one level, work against each other... but at another, higher level, work together, creating energy that drives all else.

The progression of dominant moving to tonic is so strong, it would be nice to be able to use it to provide motion to chords other than tonic.

The answer, of course, is with secondary dominants.

Let's say we wanted to approach this vi chord. We could use one of the usual diatonic chords, the tonic, the subdominant, the mediant... but what if we're looking for a bit more tension and release?

If we pretend for a moment that the chord we're resolving to is a tonic chord, what would the corresponding dominant chord be? Altered, yes, but we're not afraid of those anymore:

- a: V i
- C: V vi

While we might have once called this a short modulation, it is really more like borrowing another key's dominant chord.

If we think of the V chord in the key as the primary dominant, V chords of related keys are secondary dominants.

Now, we're not just limited to the V chord: there are five chords with a dominant function!

V V7 vii° vii°7 vii°7

These chords often resolve to the chord "under the slash," but they can actually be approached and resolved using the basic root movements!

In major keys, the "x" above can be any diatonic chord other than tonic (obviously) or the leading-tone triad. Why? Because a diminished triad has a hard time acting like a temporary tonic chord.

In minor keys, the composers generally only used secondary dominants of iv and of v.

That duality, of course, is the relationship of dominant function and tonic. Dominant harmony typifies tension in the common practice period, and the tonic represents release. Its simplest form, the authentic cadence, has been ubiquitous in Western music for centuries.

But that's crazy talk, though, isn't it? I mean, how could we control that magic and make it obey our compositional whim?
Augmented Sixth Chords

LIKE THAT MOMENT OF INCREDIBLE TENSION JUST BEFORE THE HERO FINALLY KISSES THE LEADING LADY, THE HALF-STEP IS THE GO-TO INTERVAL FOR CREATING TENSION IN MUSIC OF THE COMMON PRACTICE PERIOD. IT DRIVES THE ENTIRE STYLE!

IF ONE HALF-STEP CAN CREATE SUCH STRONG TENSION, HOW ABOUT TWO HALF-STEP SOUNDS 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 HALF STEP BELOW THE TOP NOTE,

...AND A HALF STEP 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.

IF WE JUST USE THREE NOTES AND DOUBLE THE TONIC, WE GET THE ITALIAN AUGMENTED SIXTH.

IF WE ADD THE SECOND SCALE DEGREE INSTEAD OF DOUBLING THE TONIC, WE GET THE FRENCH AUGMENTED SIXTH.

AND IF WE REPLACE THE SECOND SCALE DEGREE WITH THE LOWERED THIRD SCALE DEGREE, WE GET THE GERMAN AUGMENTED SIXTH.

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 TRANPOSED 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!
Altered and Enharmonic Modulation

**Altered Common Chord Modulation** is easy: remember diatonic common chord modulation, where we used a chord that was diatonic in both the old and new keys?

Now, in both diatonic modulation and altered modulation, we have one chord that plays two different roles, one for each key. But the chord type doesn't change... if it was a major chord in the old key, it's still a major chord in the new key.

...but what if the chord type did change?

In enharmonic modulation, we respell a chord enharmonically so the chord type itself is different in the old and new keys.

Evert notice that the German augmented sixth chord is just like a major-minor seventh chord with the seventh respelled enharmonically?

BEETHOVEN DID!

We can take advantage of this and use it as a pivot chord... where it acts like a German augmented sixth in one key but like a V7 (or a V7/x secondary dominant) in the other key!

Fully diminished seventh chords are cool for a lot of reasons, and one of them is that they are equidistant chords: inverting a fully diminished seventh yields another root-position fully diminished seventh chord.

Meaning that a fully diminished leading tone seventh chord can be a pivot chord into three other possible keys:

*Note that the pivot chord above is approached like a dominant seventh, but resolved like an augmented sixth chord!*
Secondary Subdominants

After learning about secondary dominants, you might wonder if it's possible to extend the concept to other chords. For example, if we can use a dominant function chord from a related key, what about a subdominant function chord from a related key, like IV of V?

Well, the answer is yes, and the chords that result are called secondary subdominants. But before we talk about them, you need to understand a few things.

First of all, the very existence of these chords is debatable.

What one theorist might call a secondary subdominant:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{C:} \\
\frac{\text{ii}^7}{V} \quad \frac{V_2}{V} \quad V^6 \quad I
\end{array}
\]

Another might call a short modulation:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{G:} \\
\frac{\text{ii}^7}{V} \quad \frac{V_2}{V} \quad I^6 \\
\end{array}
\]

Keeping these things in mind, let's look at the possibilities: what are all the subdominant function chords we've encountered?

First, there are the diatonic triads:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{ii} \quad \text{IV}
\end{array}
\]

Next, the diatonic seventh chords:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\frac{\text{ii}^7}{V} \quad \frac{IV^7}{V}
\end{array}
\]

And, lastly, a few borrowed chords:

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\text{ii}^6 \quad \text{iv}
\end{array}
\]

So a secondary subdominant can have any subdominant function chord above the slash, and a IV or V below the slash.

However, the most commonly found secondary subdominants are those that use the half-diminished supertonic seventh.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\frac{\text{ii}^7}{IV} \quad \frac{iv}{V}
\end{array}
\]

To approach these chords, use any of the basic root movements, which are awesome.

The most common way to resolve secondary subdominants is to the corresponding secondary dominant.

\[
\begin{array}{c}
\frac{\text{ii}^7}{V} \quad \frac{V^7}{V}
\end{array}
\]

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The music of the Baroque, Classical and Romantic eras share a consistent use of harmony and counterpoint, enough to cause theorists and historians to group them together as the "Common Practice Period."

However, the music of the Romantic era employed some interesting techniques that set it apart from the Baroque and Classical eras...

...and foreshadow some of the big changes coming in the twentieth century!

Another technique that is unique to the Romantic era is the resolution of an augmented sixth chord to a dominant seventh chord rather than a dominant triad, causing the interval of the augmented sixth to resolve obliquely instead of moving outward to the octave.

Finally, Romantic era composers would sometimes use a particular type of chord progression that had the effect of suspending tonality for a portion of the piece. By temporarily removing the feeling of being in a certain key, the composer could easily modulate to a distant key!

This technique is called Third Relations because it involves moving by root movements of a major or minor third without respect to key signature.

For example...

Here, we're just moving down by thirds...

...which obscures any sense of key we had...

...and then turning the gravity back on... but in a different direction!

If you think of tonality like being in a room...

...Third Relations are like turning off the gravity in the room for a bit...

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