

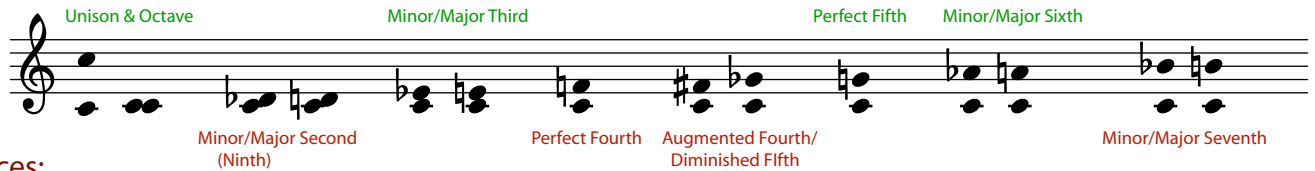
Suspensions

Last lesson I pointed out that certain intervals are always considered dissonant against the bass in tonal music, as shown below.

Basically these can be remembered as the second, seventh and fourth. (The tritone is also considered to be dissonant with any other voice regardless of its relation to the bass.)

Example 1

Consonances:



Dissonances:

To say that an interval is dissonant does not mean that it cannot be used, but it does mean that it needs to be prepared and resolved correctly.

Suspensions are a way of incorporating dissonances into the music, without breaking 'the rules'. Since there are three types of dissonance above the bass note (fourths, sevenths and seconds/ninths), there are also three categories of suspension:

The 4-3 Suspension

The 7-6 Suspension

The 9-8 Suspension

The name for these suspension describe their dissonance and correct resolution. As you can probably see from these names, each suspension resolves downwards by step to the nearest consonance - i.e. the 7th of a 7-6 suspension must resolve down by step to a 6th above the bass note.

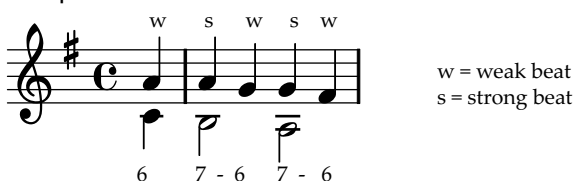
Using Suspensions

As I've now mentioned too many times, suspensions need to be prepared correctly and then, once they have sounded, resolved correctly, by moving away downwards by step. But what is preparation?

Preparation

In order to prepare a dissonant note, **it must sound first as a consonance**. Let's have a look at how to prepare a 7-6 suspension in simple two part counterpoint:

Example 2



Dissonances and Meter

As you may have noticed above, the consonant preparation happens on weak beats, (i.e. the 4th or 2nd beat of the bar in 4/4 time), and the dissonance itself is on a strong beat (beat 1 or 3). The resolution must then comes on a weaker beat than the suspension itself. This is an extremely important part of using suspensions correctly and effectively!

The use of any kind of dissonance in tonal music creates a strong emphasis on the beat in the bar that it sounds. When a suspension (or any other dissonance such as a 6/4 chord) is placed on a weak beat, the sense of pulse is disrupted, therefore it always best to remember the following guidelines when using a suspension:

- (i) The preparation must sound as a consonance (6th, 5th, 3rd or 8ve), on a weak beat;
- (ii) The sounding of the suspension (the dissonance) must take place on a strong beat;
- (iii) The resolution must be a move down by step to a consonance, and sound on a weaker beat than the suspension itself.

The main exception to this rule is when you want to emphasise a weak beat, but we'll look at that much later. Let's examine the other suspensions now.

Example 3



You'll notice in the 4-3 suspension above that these rules apply in exactly the same way. Here the bass approaches the D through a consonant passing note (a 5th beneath the G in the top voice). This is common, but not necessary.

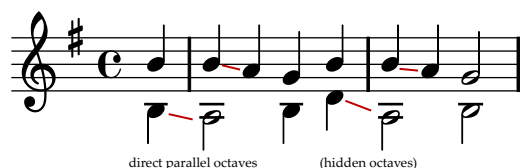
Example 4



The 9-8 suspension has one extra rule to remember, because it involves the use of the octave and parallels can be created: you must always approach the 9-8 suspension in parallel motion. I.e. the bass voice must approach the suspension from below. Even if it is approach from above and leaps down, you will create what are known as hidden octaves, which are not allowed between outer voices:

Example 5

Bad:



You might also be wondering why it is called the 9-8 suspension and not 2-1. While 2-1 is possible, it puts the parts very close together, and certainly when writing for keyboard, can be ineffective. The term 2-1 suspension is usually reserved for suspensions that occur in the bass (although it's not really a good name): we'll look at these next lesson.

Another question you may ask is, 'should I tie my suspensions?' Unfortunately it's difficult to answer that question. Different composers tend to do different things, and it's hard to come up with any rules, like when writing string quartets in the style of Mozart, always tie the suspensions etc., because they just wouldn't be true. The best thing to do is use your judgement and taste, sometimes it will be appropriate and at other times it won't, and it may well change within the same piece.

Suspensions in four-part harmony

Now it's time to look at how to fit them in to the music when more voices are sounding.

The first rule when writing suspensions in four part harmony, is that the resolution note must be consonant with the chord supporting it. Here are some examples:

Example 6

Example 6 shows three suspensions in four-part harmony. The notation is in C major, common time. The first suspension is a 7-6 suspension in the alto voice, with the 7th (F) resolving to the 6th (E). The second is a 9-8 suspension in the alto voice, with the 9th (G) resolving to the 8th (F). The third is a 4-3 suspension in the tenor voice, with the 4th (D) resolving to the 3rd (C). Above the notes are labels 'w' for whole notes and 's' for suspension notes.

7 - 6 9 - 8 4 - 3 (suspension in tenor)

From the above you should also see that the resolution note should not be present at the same time as the suspension (except in the case of the 9-8 suspension, when it should always be sounding). Also note that the suspension can sound in any voice above the bass. (Bass suspensions do exist but we'll come back to these.)

Example 7

Example 7 shows two types of double suspensions. Part i) shows a 9-8 suspension in the alto voice and a 7-6 suspension in the tenor voice. Part ii) shows a 9-8 suspension in the alto voice and a 2-1 suspension in the tenor voice. The notation is in C major, common time.

i) ii)

9 - 8 (in alto)
7 - 6 (in tenor) 2 - 1 (tenor)

It is also possible to resolve the suspension onto another chord, as long as the **resolution note is consonant with this new chord**.

Example 8

Example 8 shows a suspension resolving to a new chord. The notation is in C major, common time. The first suspension is a 7-6 suspension in the alto voice, with the 7th (F) resolving to the 6th (E). The second is a 9-8 suspension in the alto voice, with the 9th (G) resolving to the 8th (F). The third is a 4-3 suspension in the tenor voice, with the 4th (D) resolving to the 3rd (C). Above the notes are labels 'w' for whole notes and 's' for suspension notes.

7 9 4

Example 7 i) is a double suspension. These are also acceptable and very expressive. Triple suspensions are also possible, but less common. Don't neglect the following suspension, it may sound a little 'ugly' but it is often found in Bach's music and can be very expressive.

Example 9

Example 9 shows a 9-8 suspension in the alto voice. The notation is in C major, common time.

9 - 8

Also note that **the chord containing the suspension has to be in root position**, except in the case of the 7-6 suspension. The 7 - 6 suspension can be inverted into 6/5 and 4/2 (and even sometimes 6/4/3) position, but remember that it still has to be prepared and resolved correctly. In these situations, it may often resolve onto another chord.

Example 10

Remember the trick we learnt with vii6/3 passing between I and I6/3? You can use a 7-6 suspension here, which adds interest to the progression.

Example 11

When moving in the upwards direction you can also use 9/8 suspension. In fact, you can use both at the same time!

This brings us to another important point. In example 11 the bass moves by step, and it's very easy to create suspensions above this bass line. In fact, whenever you are given a single to harmonise (or add counterpoint to), and it moves by step, it is always possible to create a suspension, and if continues to move by step it's possible to create a series of suspen

Example 12

i) Moving down by step

ii) Moving up by step

As we saw before 7 - 6 suspensions can be inverted. Here is what they look like underneath the part moving by step.

Example 13