

The Augmented Sixth Chord

The augmented sixth chord was born in the Baroque period but occurs with greater frequency in the Romantic period. The aug. sixth chord may be understood as being derived from chromatic alterations of the $ii^{\circ}7$ or $iv7$ chords. They do not function as subdominants, however, but function as predominants.

All augmented sixth chords contain the interval of an augmented sixth, specifically scale degrees $b6$ and $\#4$ which frame the dominant. The interval of the augmented sixth resolves outwards to an octave. The tonic also appears in every augmented sixth chord.

There are three different "flavors" of augmented sixth chords: Italian, French, and German. They each include the augmented sixth, the tonic, and one other note as follows:

Italian : double the tonic French - add the supertonic German : add the mediant.

c minor: It+6 Fr+6 Gr+6

Progression: To avoid parallel fifths, the Gr+6 should resolve to i_4^{\flat} before progressing to V.

It+6 ----- V or i_4^{\flat}
 Fr+6 ----- V or i_4^{\flat}
 Gr+6 ----- i_4^{\flat} then to V

c minor: It+6 Fr+6 Gr+6

Resolution: The interval of the augmented sixth resolves outwards. Common tones and stepwise motion should be used in the remaining voices. When the following chord is a $V7$, $\#4$ should progress to natural 4 (the 7th of the $V7$):

c minor: It+6 V_7

The Individual Augmented Sixth Chords

Italian - Derived from the progression $i \text{ --- } iv_6 \text{ --- } V$. In order to intensify or embellish the melodic/harmonic progression to V , the root is altered and raised up a half-step creating a leading-tone relation to the dominant. By doing so, there is an added emphasis upon the dominant. This technique is particularly useful when approaching a half cadence. The aug. 6th chord is frequently used in this role.

The musical notation shows a progression in a minor key (one flat). The first measure contains the tonic triad i (C3, E3, G3) and the subdominant in first inversion iv_6 (F3, A3, C4). The second measure contains the dominant triad V (G3, B3, D4). The third measure contains the tonic triad i (C3, E3, G3) and the subdominant in first inversion iv_6 (F3, A3, C4). The fourth measure contains the Italian augmented sixth chord $It+6$ (B3, D4, F#4, A3) and the dominant triad V (G3, B3, D4). The fifth measure contains the dominant triad V (G3, B3, D4).

French - Derived from the progression $ii^{\sigma_3} \text{ --- } V$. When the third of the ii^{σ_3} is raised the $Fr+6$ is produced. It should be noted that the $Fr+6$ is derived from a dissonant chord, while the $It+6$ is derived from a consonant chord. The $Fr+6$ will therefore have a little more "bite."

The musical notation shows a progression in a minor key (one flat). The first measure contains the supertonic in first inversion ii^{σ_3} (D3, F3, A3) and the dominant triad V (G3, B3, D4). The second measure contains the tonic triad i (C3, E3, G3). The third measure contains the supertonic in first inversion ii^{σ_3} (D3, F3, A3) and the French augmented sixth chord $Fr+6$ (D3, F3, A3, C4). The fourth measure contains the dominant triad V (G3, B3, D4) and the tonic triad i (C3, E3, G3). The fifth measure contains the tonic triad i (C3, E3, G3).

German - Derived from the progression $iv_6^{\flat} \text{ --- } i_4^{\flat}$. When the root of the iv_6^{\flat} is raised the $Gr+6$ is produced. As mentioned above, the $Gr+6$ should progress to i_4^{\flat} before going to V in order to avoid the parallel perfect fifths that would result. The parallelism may also be avoided by progressing to V_7/V before going to V or by employing an accented 6-5 suspension.

The musical notation shows a progression in a minor key (one flat). The first measure contains the subdominant in first inversion iv_6^{\flat} (F3, A3, C4) and the tonic in first inversion i_4^{\flat} (C3, E3, G3). The second measure contains the dominant triad V (G3, B3, D4). The third measure contains the subdominant in first inversion iv_6^{\flat} (F3, A3, C4) and the German augmented sixth chord $Gr+6$ (F3, A3, C4, D4). The fourth measure contains the tonic in first inversion i_4^{\flat} (C3, E3, G3) and the dominant triad V (G3, B3, D4). The fifth measure contains the dominant triad V (G3, B3, D4).

The German chord is an interesting case because its quality is that of a major-minor 7th chord (although it doesn't resolve like one in its conventional use). Composers exploited the possibility of using a $Gr+6$ as a pivot chord in a modulation. For instance, the $Gr+6$ could become a V_7 just by resolving the augmented sixth, now enharmonically reinterpreted as a minor 7th, inward. A V_7 may also be reinterpreted as a $Gr+6$ as well. Either way, a modulation would be produced.

Enharmonic German - One final possibility is the enharmonic German sixth. This chord only appears in major keys. It sounds and is spelled exactly like the regular German sixth with one exception. The lowered mediant scale degree is now replaced with its enharmonic equivalent, the raised supertonic scale degree. When the Gr+6 resolves to I_4^6 in a major key, the raised supertonic becomes a leading-tone to the mediant. The raised supertonic scale degree shows this leading-tone relationship better than the lowered mediant. In major keys, the augmented sixth chord is accompanied by mode mixture.

cross relation

Gr+6
 I_4^6
V
enh. Gr+6
 I_4^6
V

not used in major

Exceptions to the conventional uses of the augmented sixth chord:

- (1) The chord may appear in a different position/inversion.
- (2) The augmented sixth may be inverted to a diminished third.
- (3) There may be added notes.
- (4) The augmented sixth may resolve to notes other than the dominant (the tonic and mediant scale degrees are most frequent).
- (5) The augmented sixth may resolve not only to the root of a chord, but to the third or fifth as well.

Spelling Convention Augmented Sixth Chords

- (1) Determine the key and find the dominant scale degree.
- (2) Frame the dominant scale degree by half-steps above and below. This will be the augmented sixth.
- (3) Find the tonic and include it with the augmented sixth.
- (4) Decide on the flavor of augmented sixth chord and add the appropriate note.