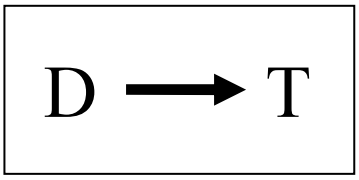
CHAPTER 17 - EXCEPTIONAL RESOLUTIONS

A dominant chord is said to perform an "Exceptional Resolution" when it does not lead exactly to the tonic chord that corresponds to it. The procedures for this are very varied. The most common ones are described in this chapter.

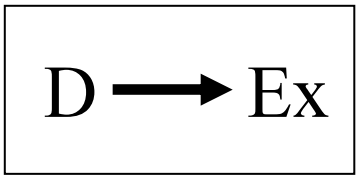
GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

- Dominant chords have a special energy which is released when they move to their tonic chord. This tension (Dominant) - relaxation (Tonic) pairing is often insistently repeated in tonal harmony, constitutes its essence and is what gives it its characteristic drive.

- However, this couple, which we can represent as D-T, is sometimes altered if D is not followed by its T. When this situation arises, we are faced with what we call **Exceptional Resolution**. We will refer to it schematically as D-Ex, where "Ex" represents the chord other than the tonic that usually follows the dominant.



Typical resolution



Exceptional resolution

There are many different procedures for making Exceptional Resolutions. Here we will simplify them by classifying them into two groups, A and B.

- GROUP A: includes those cases in which the **Ex chord is also a chord with dominant function**.

- GROUP B: includes those other cases in which the **Ex chord is not a dominant** (with the exception, of course, of the typical tonic resolution).

- Within each group there are, in turn, several types. We will label them with a number: A1, A2... B1, B2, etc...

- Finally, it should be pointed out that Exceptional Resolutions can involve the principal dominant of the key but also **secondary dominants**, both in the V and VII degree versions. The different types of Exceptional Resolutions are described below, ordered within each group from most to least frequent. The examples include cases with the VII degree and also with secondary dominants.

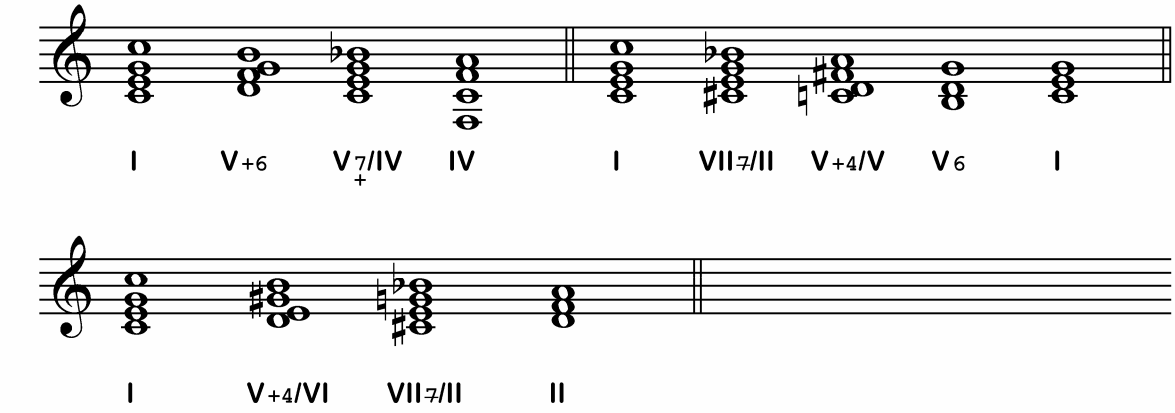
GROUP A (Ex is a dominant chord)

A1 - Ex IS THE TONIC CHORD, BUT WITH DOMINANT FUNCTION

- This is the most common of all the exceptional resolutions. In this case, the exceptional chord (Ex) is the tonic of the preceding dominant chord, but transformed in turn into another dominant chord. To transform it, the third of the chord is altered to make it major (if necessary), and the minor seventh is added.

- This can be seen in any of the three examples below, but we will focus on the second one. In this example, VII/II leads to V/V. That is, VII/D leads to a D chord, which is its "tonic". But instead of being a D minor chord (II degree in C major), it is a D major chord and it also has a 7th (D dominant 7th). That is why it is not a II degree, but a V/V.

- In this chord connection it is typical that the leading tone of the first dominant chord moves to the 7th of the second dominant chord, as can be seen in the examples.



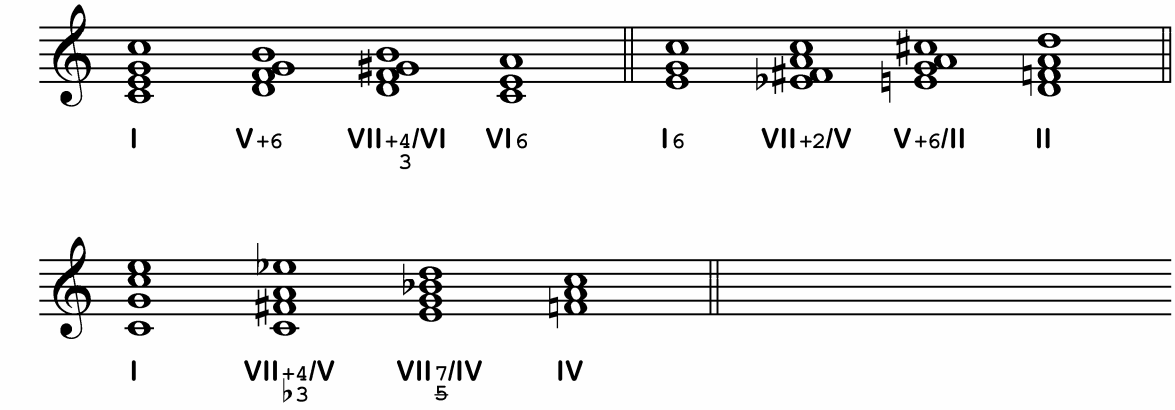
- The third example presents a special case. The V/VI would lead to an A minor chord. If we make the chord major and add a 7th to it, we would have a dominant for D.

- In the example, the V/VI actually leads to a dominant for D, but in its VII degree version. It follows the logic (and the sound perception!) that a VII degree can be interpreted as a V degree with a missing root. In this case the missing root would be the note A, but even so this VII can be interpreted aurally close to the expected “tonic” or resolution chord of V/VI.

- This set of exceptional resolutions of type A1 are the most frequent of all and the most convincing to the ear. Even if their connection is not particularly careful, or if they occur rather quickly or abruptly, the ear usually accepts them without hesitation.

A2 - Ex DOES NOT MATCH THE EXPECTED TONIC

In this group, two dominants are connected to each other without any Dominant-Tonic relationship, as is the case in the previous group. This is illustrated by the following examples:



Such resolutions are more abrupt to the ear than those of the previous group. But there are three "tricks" to make them convincing:

- Try to make the voice-leading as smooth as possible, keeping common notes and with stepwise movements.

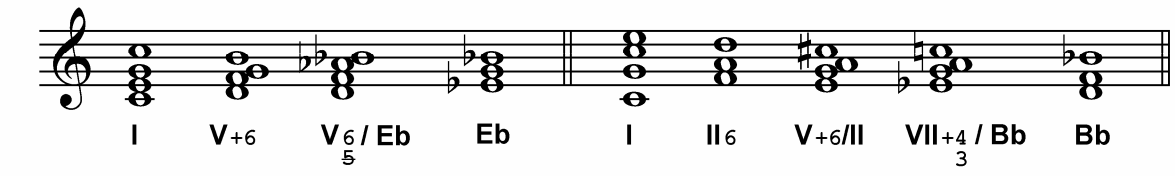
- Keep chromatic lines in the same voice. As an example, in the second case above you can see the movement C-C#-D in the upper voice.

- Increase the length of the two chords forming the exceptional resolution.

A3 - Ex IS NOT A DOMINANT CHORD BELONGING TO THE KEY

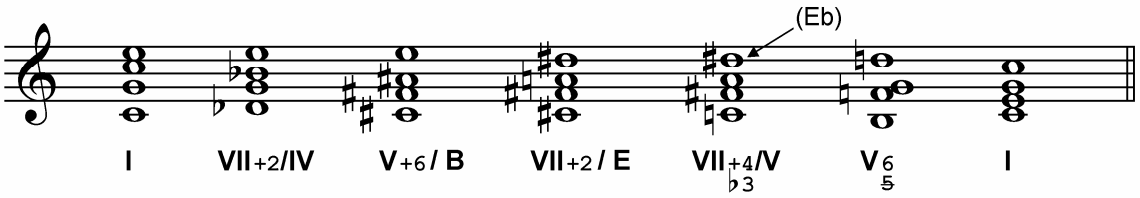
By "Dominant belonging to the key" we mean, for the present purpose, the set comprising the main dominant and all the secondary dominants of that key. That is, V, V/V, V/II, V/IV and V/VI.

This case (A3) includes those situations in which Ex does not coincide at all with any of these dominants. Therefore, as can be seen in the following example, it cannot be analysed as a secondary dominant, so we simply indicate which chord it is the dominant of.

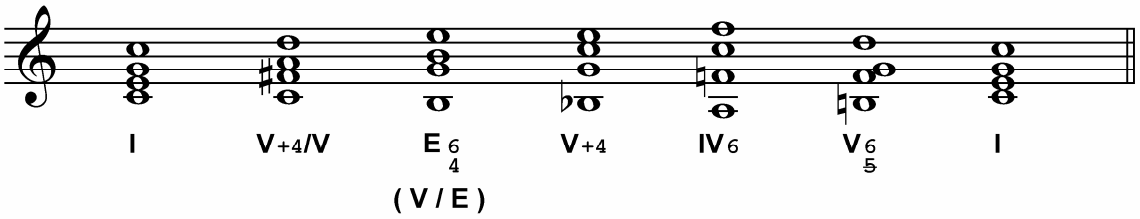


This kind of resolution is usually the most difficult of all for the ear. For this reason, and in order to soften them, the voice-leading procedures indicated above must be applied to the greatest extent possible.

Exceptional resolutions of this kind would, in principle, lead to modulating to a distant key, as can be seen in the previous example. However, it is possible, and does happen in the musical repertory, to make a chain of several resolutions in a row. In this way, as shown below, it is possible to return to the starting key after the chain of exceptional resolutions.



Finally, a remark that can be applied to all types. Triad chords in 2nd inversion are also used in chains of exceptional resolutions. In this situation, the ear interprets the chord as if it were a cadential 6/4, i.e. as a Dominant. It is therefore susceptible to being a chord in which an exceptional resolution is made. Or, on the contrary, it can be the cadential 6/4 the chord with dominant function which performs an exceptional resolution into the next chord. Both situations can be seen in the following example:

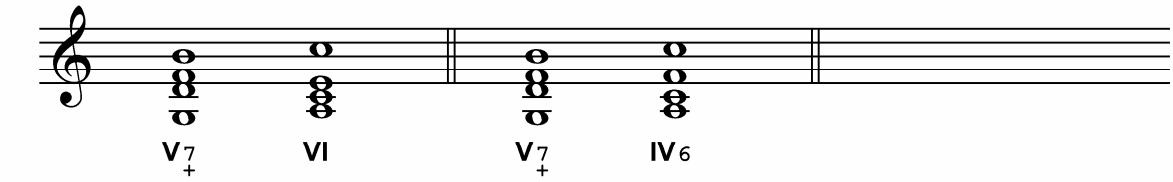


GROUP B (Ex is NOT a Dominant Chord)

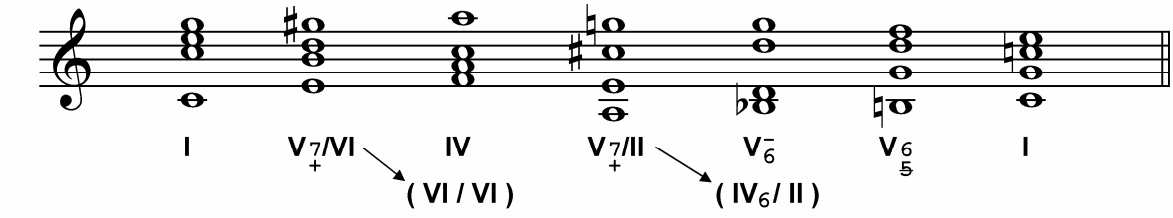
B1 - Ex IS VI OR IV6

Indeed, the V-VI progression can be considered as a certain exceptional resolution, as the Dominant chord does not really resolve into its authentic Tonic. In principle, this is a basic procedure that would not require further comment. However, there are some nuances that do require it.

The first nuance has to do with a variant of the V-VI progression. This is the **V-IV6** progression. This connection is remarkably similar in sonority to the previous one, differing only by one note, and appears relatively frequently in the musical literature, especially in deceptive cadences resting on IV6. We can see the progression below, in which it is usual to double the fifth of the IV6 chord in order to reinforce the somewhat "tonic" role that it would be performing:



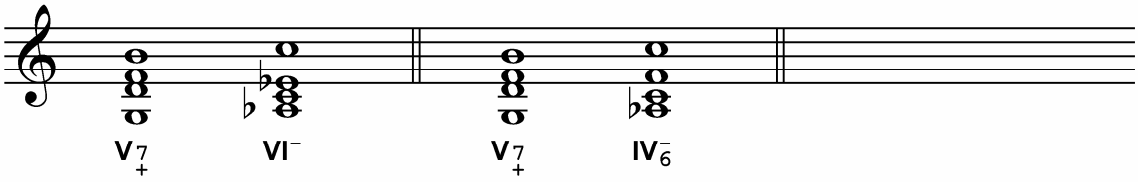
And the second nuance is related to secondary dominants. Because a secondary dominant can also resolve on its VI or its IV6, an apparently unjustified progression arises which in fact can be explained by this exceptional resolution, as shown in the example:



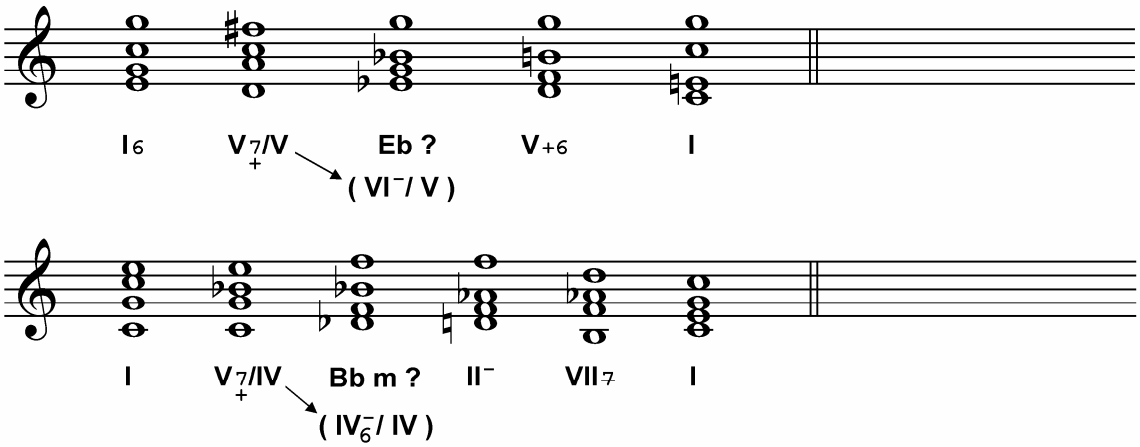
As shown in the examples, these procedures are only applied with dominant chords in their V7 version and in root position, never as a VII degree.

B2 - Ex IS VI OR IV6 OF THE PARALLEL MINOR KEY

Practically the same options described in the previous section apply if a Dominant leads to the VI or IV6 of the parallel minor key (which we label as VI^{-} and IV_6^{-}, see Chapter 16: section 3). For the main Dominant of the key, the link would be as follows:

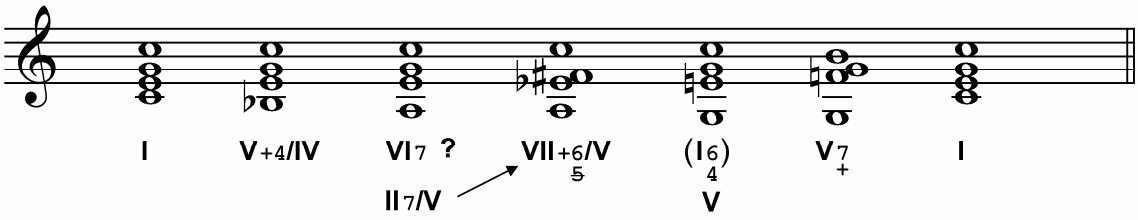


And for secondary dominants the logic is also similar, as can be seen in the following examples:



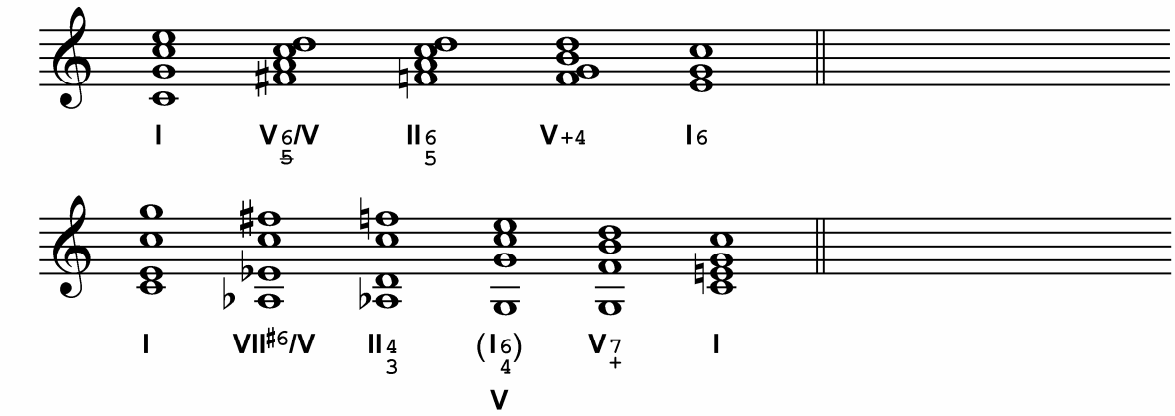
B3 - Ex IS A MINOR 7TH CHORD

A minor chord, with or without a 7th, can never have a dominant function. To make a convincing exceptional resolution of this type, it is only necessary to apply the voice-leading recommendations given in point A2. The example below shows the connection between V/IV and VI7:



B4 - V/V (OR VII/V) LEADS TO II7

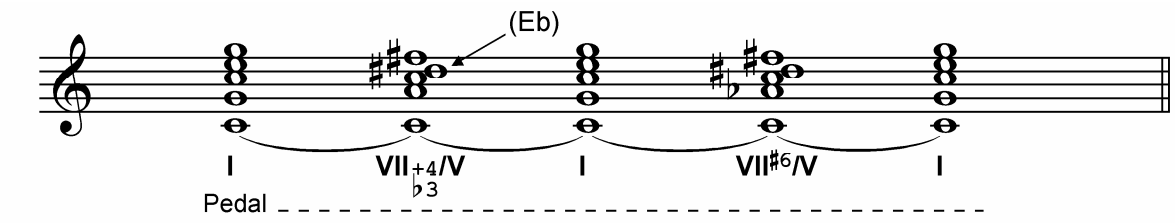
A rather frequent case of the exceptional resolution described in the previous point consists in the progression from the Dominant of the Dominant to II7. The Dominant of the Dominant can be found in any of its versions: V/V or VII/V (also possible with augmented 6th). The II7 can also appear in its modal mixture version (borrowed from the parallel minor key). Here are a couple of examples:



The effect of this exceptional resolution is as if the Dominant of the Dominant suddenly loses its strength. This lost strength is then restored if the resulting Subdominant chord moves to the Dominant, which is the most common situation, as can be seen in the examples.

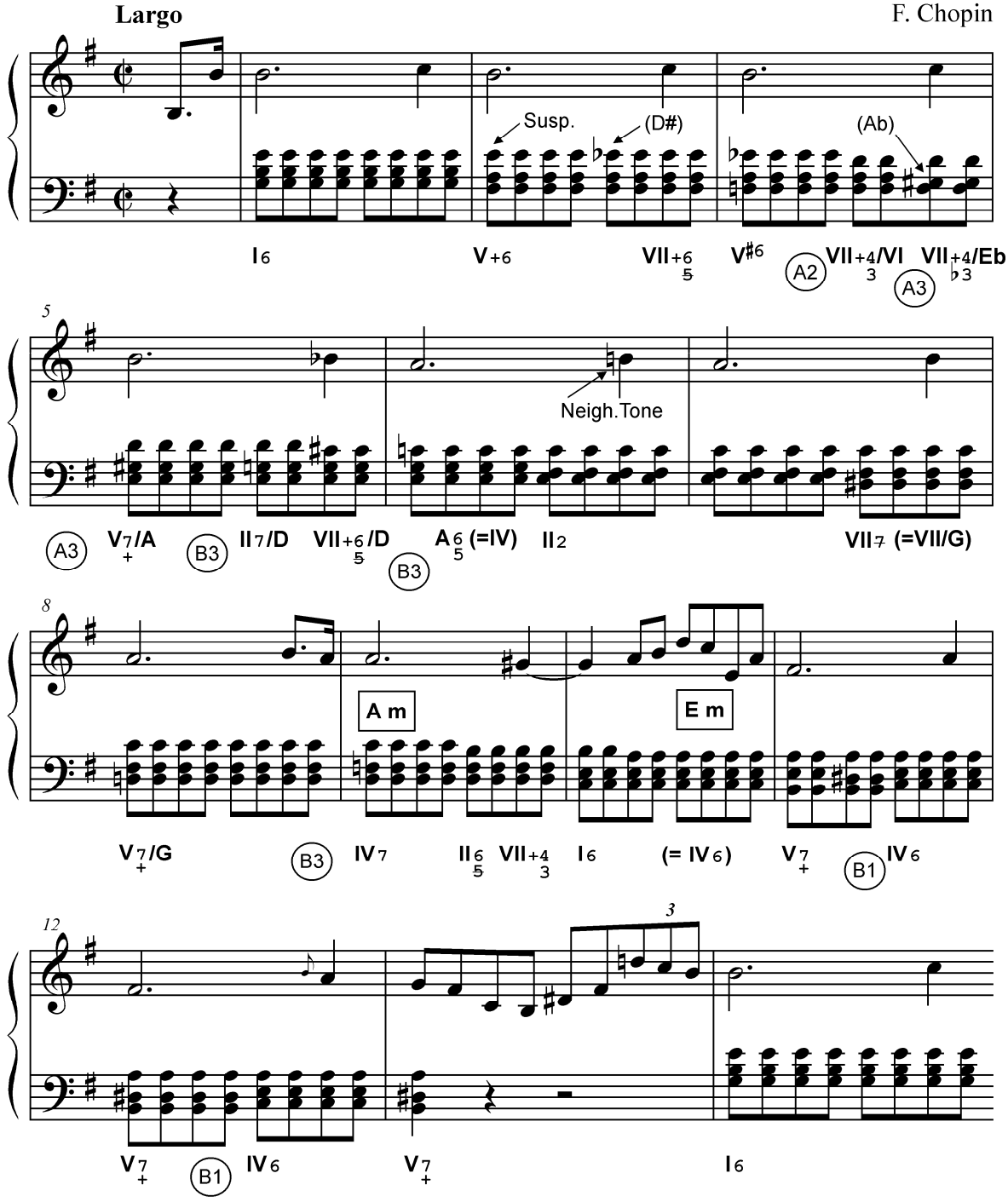
B5 - VII/V LEADS TO TONIC OVER A TONIC PEDAL

This resolution appears when VII/V leads to I over a Tonic Pedal. Its origin and its aural effect are to be found in the progression from VII/V to the "I" as a cadential 6/4. However, since in this case the Tonic chord is in root position instead of in 2nd inversion, it lacks any Dominant quality. The effect is peculiar, as the VII/V chord loses all its energy by leading directly to I:



Exceptional Resolutions in Music Literature

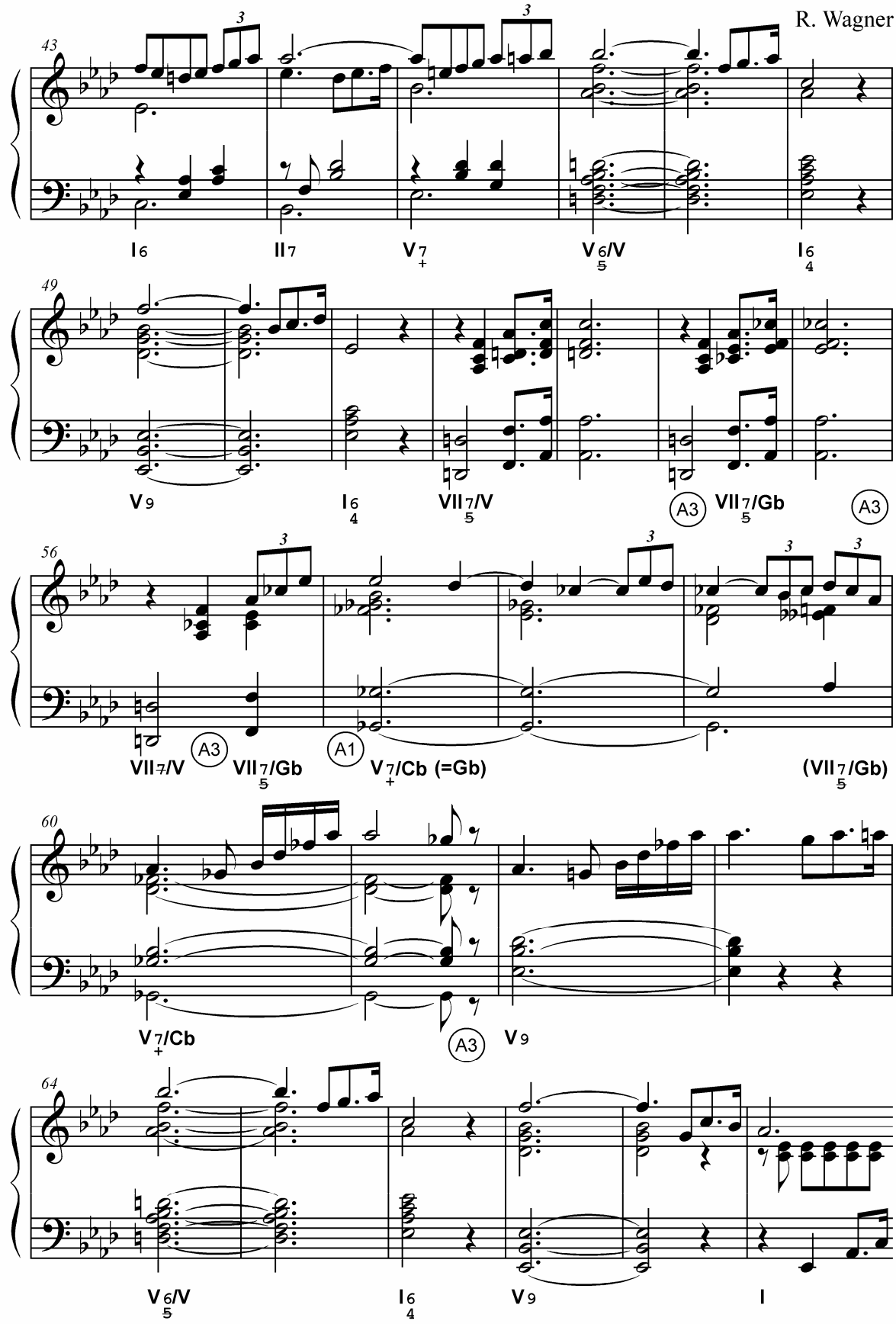
Exceptional resolutions appear in musical literature from the beginnings of tonality. Bach himself makes regular use of them, but it is in the Romantic and especially the Post-Romanticism period that they are used intensively.



As an example, we present here two fragments corresponding to two major composers of the romantic period, Chopin and Wagner. The first of them shows the first half of Chopin's Prelude for piano in **Em**, particularly relevant with regard to the use of exceptional resolutions.

The first conventional Dominant-Tonic resolution in the main key does not take place until measure 14. Prior to this, there is a chain of exceptional resolutions, the type of which is marked with a circle. Initially, those of **Type A** predominate (the resolution chord is another dominant), followed later by those of **Type B** (the resolution chord is not a dominant).

In the following example, **Type A** is the absolute protagonist. It is an excerpt from a piano piece by Richard Wagner, "Ankunft bei den schwarzen Schwänen" ("Arrival with the black swans") WWV 95, in **Ab Major**. Prior to this, a harmonic "excursion" takes place in which different exceptional resolutions are linked together, as the analysis of the score shows. During this excursion, an allusion is made to the keys of **Gb** and **Cb**. Neither of them is really confirmed, as only their dominants appear, which are stressed several times, but without clearly resolving into their respective tonics.

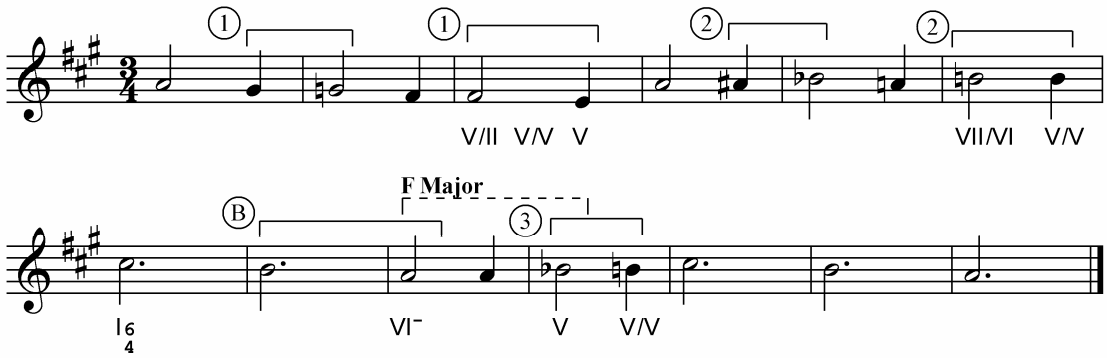

R. Wagner
43
I6
II7
V7+
V6/V 5
I6 4
49
V9
I6 4
VII7/V 5
A3
VII7/Gb 5
A3
56
VII7/V
A3
VII7/Gb 5
A1
V7+/Cb (=Gb)
(VII7/Gb) 5
60
V7+/Cb
A3
V9
64
V6/V 5
I6 4
V9
I

Suggested Exercises

- Harmonise the following soprano lines, applying the exceptional resolutions of the type indicated by the numbers. All those with only numbers correspond to Group A (a Dominant connects with another Dominant). The only one marked with the letter B corresponds to type B2.

- In exercise No. 3, add at least another 8 bars, in which the music modulates back to the original key, and in which exceptional resolutions are used.

1.



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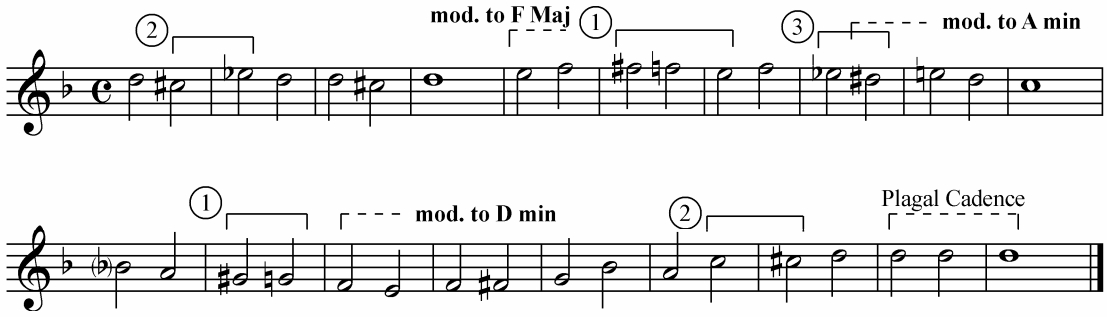
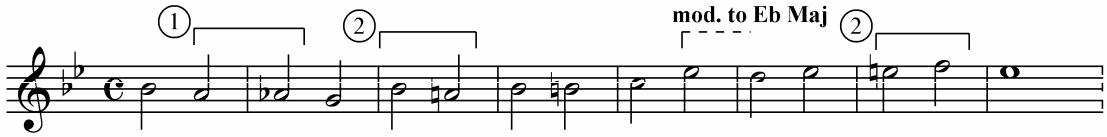
3.