

The Augmented Sixth Chord

There are three forms of the chord of the augmented sixth, which became common in the late 18th century and were used to good effect (but sparingly) by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. The chord leads to a perfect cadence (resolving onto Ic or V) and is built on the note a semitone above the dominant (the sixth note of a minor key or the flattened sixth of a major key.)

The chord has a root, a third, an augmented sixth, and one other note:

Root, 3rd, aug 6th + doubled 3rd
the 'Italian Sixth'
Root, 3rd, aug 6th + 4th
the 'French Sixth'
Root, 3rd, aug 6th + perfect 5th
the 'German Sixth'

The 'national' names of the different versions are traditional but are simply convenient labels. The German 6th is the most common, but sometimes the chord shifts between forms (see Mozart below).

Resolution - augmented intervals always tend to resolve 'outwards'

Italian 6th
V
French6th
V
German6th
Ic
V

Note that the German 6th usually goes to Ic before V to avoid consecutive 5ths.

Beethoven, 5th Symphony

Italian 6th

Mozart, C minor Piano Concerto

German 6th . . . Italian 6th

Haydn, String Quartet Op. 76 no 2

Italian 6th

N.B. Don't confuse the augmented 6th (e.g. Bb-D-F-G#) with the dominant 7th (e.g. Bb-D-F-Ab) They may sound the same when played alone, but the context and the 'spelling' will tell you the composer's intention. This ambiguity is a useful tool for modulation.