

Diminished Seventh Chords

The diminished seventh is a chord made up of minor thirds. Because every interval is a minor third, all the inversions sound the same. There are only three possible diminished sevenths, although they may appear different in notation. Use your ears to spot them - it's quicker! The accidentals will tell you which key the composer has in mind.

could be written as:

The diminished seventh can be found as chord VII7 in a minor key. Here it resolves to chord I letting the outer parts move inwards.

VII7 in C minor or VII7 in D minor or VII7 in G minor

The diminished seventh can also be found just before chord V at a perfect cadence. Only one note has to move to make it into a dominant seventh.

D minor

V7b I

If you move a different note, you can form a dominant seventh in another key. This makes it possible to modulate quickly to a remote key. The next example starts with the same diminished seventh (C#-E-G-Bb) rewritten as C#-E-G-A#. The sound does not change, but the chord can move easily to B major or minor.

(same chord rewritten) B major (or minor)

In the examples below, the same chord moves to three further keys.

Slightly different - outer notes move outwards

D minor Ab major (or minor) D minor F major (or minor) D minor Ic V E major (or minor)

In the romantic period, the diminished seventh chord often appears for emotional effect as a purely chromatic chord, without being related to the prevailing key.