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In Defense of Augmented Intervals

ABSTRACT

Background

Certain intervals have a bad reputation. Augmented seconds and fourths particularly are targeted by theory teachers and textbooks as intervals students should avoid in their writing. But as I will show, not all augmented seconds and fourths deserve this bad reputation.

Many scholars have examined other musical ‘no-nos’, — Heinrich Schenker, Carl Schachter, and even Johannes Brahms himself, for example, have studied parallel fifths in tonal music — but none has yet looked at augmented intervals specifically.

Aims and repertoire studied

Augmented seconds in particular are noted for the ‘foreign’ or ‘exotic’ effect they may lend to a passage of music. But not all augmented seconds have this effect, and I will use examples from Bach, Beethoven, Schumann, and more to show what causes one augmented second to sound ‘exotic’, and what causes another to blend right into the composer’s usual, ‘Western’ harmony, and pass unnoticed.

Methods

I use structural, Schenkerian analysis, as well as formal and functional-tonal analysis to examine the passages in question.

Implications

In this poster, I will show that not all augmented seconds and fourths have the characteristic effect we are taught to expect. Specifically, I will show that not all augmented seconds lend a ‘foreign’ or ‘exotic’ effect to a passage, and that many augmented seconds are merely a byproduct of a harmonic or melodic event, and pass by totally unnoticed. I will then show what causes an augmented second to fall into one category or the other, and I will describe a number of different classes of ‘invisible’ or ‘integrated’ augmented seconds.

To take a particularly obvious example, augmented fourths are banned from melodic use in species counterpoint, and for good reason. But in free composition, the augmented fourth is used liberally, often without any characteristic effect — for example, in the arpeggiation of the dominant seventh chord. Another common use of the melodic augmented fourth in free composition is as a result of melodic figuration — an incomplete chromatic lower neighbor can turn a leap of a perfect fifth into a leap of an augmented fourth, followed by a minor second (think ‘Maria’, from Leonard Bernstein’s *West Side Story*).

Now, everyone knows that augmented fourths are used liberally in free composition. But many people would be surprised to hear that augmented seconds are used often as well,

commonly without the ‘exotic’ effect we’ve come to associate with the interval.

There’s even an augmented second in one of Bach’s chorales:



Ex. 1. Johann Sebastian Bach, Chorale No. 7, ‘Nun lob’, mein’ Seel’, den Herren’, mm. 19–22.

Here we simply have an augmented second resulting from a common-tone diminished seventh chord. The relative popularity of common-tone diminished chords integrates this augmented second completely into the chorale’s harmony. The augmented interval sounds not the slightest bit foreign to Bach’s usual harmony.

Another way to interpret the augmented second in this example is that it is the result of Bach’s avoidance of a cross relation. The G-natural in the bass on beat 3 of the first complete measure of the example poses the danger of creating a cross relation with the G in the alto on the first beat of the next measure, if that second G were raised according to common practice. Bach may have found that leaving the second G as a natural, and thus creating an augmented second, was more palatable than the cross relation between G-natural and G-sharp.

In examples such as this one, in which augmented seconds are integrated into the harmony, it is surely not the case that the composer decided to use an augmented second, and then chose a method by which to hide it. Rather, the augmented second is simply a byproduct of the intended melodic or harmonic event.

In the case of foreign-sounding augmented seconds, however, the augmented second is a tool used by composers. In these cases, I think it is likely that, after deciding to write a ‘foreign’-sounding piece or passage, the composer determined that using an augmented second would further this goal — and the augmented second does indeed prove to be a very effective tool for making a passage sound ‘foreign’.

However, when we are taught in theory classes, or by theory textbooks, to avoid augmented seconds, I think this advice is somewhat misguided. As my examples will show, there are many contexts in which an augmented second is not something to be avoided, but rather a relatively benign byproduct of various melodic or harmonic events, such as a mediant tonicization, or the arpeggiation of a diminished seventh chord. In these cases, the augmented second causes no harm. And if an augmented second does nonetheless stick out, announcing itself as something from a foreign culture, there are plenty of mitigating techniques one can use to reduce or eliminate this

effect. These mitigating techniques could be analyzed and taught.

The goal here will be to define characteristics that classify augmented seconds as sounding foreign or native in the context of Western tonality. From the examples, we will be able to infer a few distinctions: in the 'native' camp, we will find augmented seconds resulting from usual harmony such as common-tone diminished chords, diminished seventh chords, sudden changes of key, applied chords, third motions, etc. — essentially, notes which belong to two different scales; and in the 'foreign' camp, we will find augmented seconds with modal origins, those resulting from 'wrong' harmony, and, in general, anything that makes the augmented second sound like a scale step.

The two intervals I will examine, the augmented fourth and augmented second, don't deserve their bad reputation. Both are simply enlarged versions of ordinary intervals — the augmented second is essentially a modified step, while the augmented fourth is a modified leap. And as I will show, both intervals, if treated with care, can not only blend seamlessly into Western harmony, but can also be useful tools in voice leading, in the construction of melody and harmony, and in the writing of music itself. These two augmented intervals can sometimes lend color to a moment of music, but more often they are nothing more than inadvertent byproducts of rather benign bits of voice-leading, harmony, and melodic construction.

Keywords

Tonality
Interval theory
Chromaticism

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