ENHARMONIC SPELLING

Enharmonic spelling is the practice of rewriting a note so that it looks different on paper but would be played by the same key on a piano (for instance, C♯ and D♭). Although modern musicians may think of these pitches as equivalent, the practice of enharmonic spelling was unusual before the rise of equal temperament because two such pitches might not be exactly the same. (In keeping with this earlier tradition, string players and singers are often advised to perform sharp notes slightly higher and flat notes slightly lower.) It is useful to differentiate recognize three forms of enharmonic spelling: respelling for the sake of convenience, misspelling, and modulation through reinterpretation.

Respelling for the sake of convenience

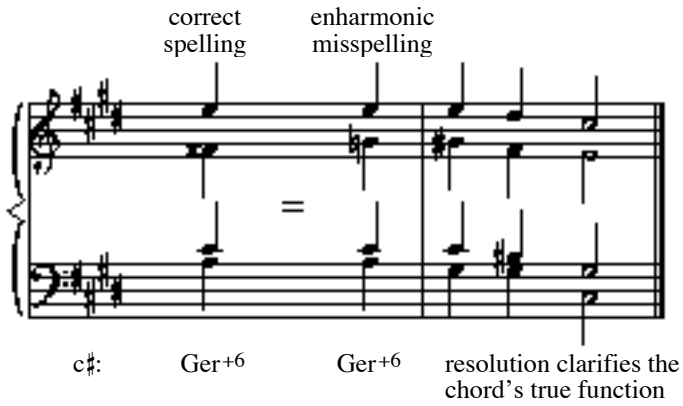
Sometimes a composer wants to modulate according to a particular key relationship. For instance, perhaps there is a prominent motive involving ♭$\hat{6}$ so it seems desirable to modulate to the key of ♭VI. Usually this is easy: if the composition begins in D, the music can simply modulate to B♭. However, what if the composition begins in D♭? Suddenly we are faced with the prospect of modulating to B𝄫 — a key that few, if any, performers would like to read for any length of time. Clearly it would be advantageous in this case to respell B𝄫 as A. (Despite the respelling, it is still customary to identify A as ♭VI.) Similarly, suppose that the composition emphasizes rising major thirds, so the composer decides to modulate from I to III. There's no problem modulating from E♭ to G, but if we start in E we certainly wouldn't want to end up in G♯. We'd much rather respell the passage in A♭ (which, as before, we would identify as III despite its spelling).

These cases are fairly easy to recognize: there is generally a key change where flats are replaced by sharps, or vice versa. The passage tends to be relatively long (otherwise the spelling change probably wouldn't be worth the effort), and usually all notes of the passage are respelled. Notice that the spelling change is strictly for the sake of convenience; it is not technically necessary, and it will not affect your analysis.

Misspelling

Sometimes a composer enharmonically respells *part* of a chord — often only a single note. The respelled note is typically less common than its enharmonic replacement (for instance, E♯ may be replaced by the more familiar F), so presumably the change is intended to facilitate reading by the performer.

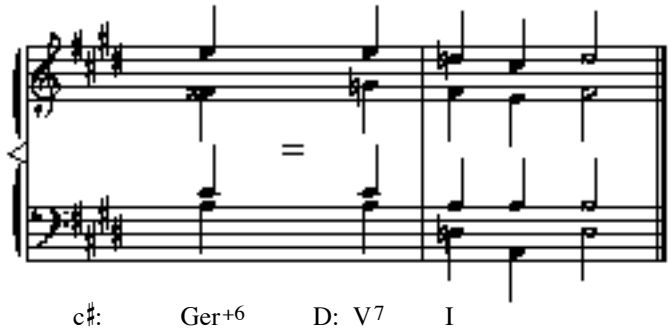
Although this seems like a simple idea, enharmonically respelling part of a chord can cause analytical confusion because the chord structure looks significantly different. Consider, for instance, a German augmented-sixth chord in C♯ minor, as shown on the next page. Spelled correctly, the chord should contain an F𝄪, but a composer might choose to write the more common G♮ instead. Suddenly the chord appears to be a dominant seventh rather than an augmented sixth! However, we can tell by the chord's resolution that it is, in fact, a misspelled Ger^{+6}. Notice that the G♮ goes up to G♯, just as the correct F𝄪 would have resolved. Had the G been a legitimate seventh, it would have resolved down by step (presumably to F♯).



Enharmonic misspelling probably wouldn't bother us as much if it were more common. Most composers prefer to spell chords correctly (thus reflecting their true function and resolution tendencies) even if this requires double sharps or double flats. A few composers (such as Chopin), however, were more casual about their spelling.

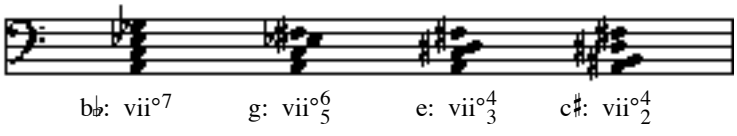
Modulation through enharmonic reinterpretation

As we saw above, a German augmented-sixth chord might be misspelled as a dominant seventh chord. However, what if the chord in question had truly resolved as a dominant seventh?



A composer might modulate from C♯ minor to the remote key of D major using this chord as a pivot. Unlike most pivot chords, notice that the chord cannot be spelled correctly in both the old and the new key: the composer must choose between F𝄪 and G♮. Although these spellings are equally correct under the circumstances, composers usually prefer to show how the chord works in the new key so that the resolution looks appropriate.

The chord that is most often exploited for the purposes of modulation through enharmonic reinterpretation is the fully diminished seventh chord (vii°7). Because this chord is entirely symmetrical (chord members are consistently separated by exactly three half steps), it can be respelled with *any* chord member as the root and resolved accordingly.



Notice that when a chord is enharmonically reinterpreted in another key, the figures always change. Conversely, if your pivot chord uses different figures in the old key and the new key, there must have been an enharmonic reinterpretation.