

The Subtonic Chord (VII)

In minor keys, the two distinct forms of $\hat{7}$ in minor keys produce two distinct triads: the leading-tone is the root of a diminished triad (vii°), whereas the subtonic is the root of a major triad (VII). These two triads could not be more different, because they exhibit exactly the same tendencies as their respective roots: the leading-tone chord pulls *toward* the tonic, while the subtonic chord pulls *away* from the tonic.

The most likely resolution of VII is III, because in the key of III (that is, the relative major) VII would be the dominant. For instance, the VII chord in A minor is a G-major triad, and the III chord in A minor is a C-major triad. The expected VII – III motion in A minor is identical to the typical V – I resolution in C major. (In fact, this harmonic motion is so strong and so familiar that it is easy to modulate to the relative major — sometimes even unintentionally — simply by using a subtonic chord and resolving it correctly.) If we keep this fact in mind, the doubling principle is easy to understand: do not double the third of the VII chord, because it acts like a leading-tone. When VII is in root position, it is best to double the root; when VII is in first inversion, doubling either the root or the fifth is acceptable. (Notice that doubling the root of VII is *not* doubling the leading-tone, it is doubling the subtonic!) VII^6 will also resolve to III, just as V^6 resolves to I.

Although part-writing the resolution of VII is usually easy, approaching VII can be difficult. The chord that appears immediately before VII is usually the tonic, and stepwise root motion carries with it an inherent danger of parallel fifths and octaves (as we have seen before with I – ii and IV – V, for instance). Contrary motion in the outer voices makes the part-writing significantly easier when both chords are in root position, but you should always proofread especially carefully around i – VII progressions. The example below illustrates some problems to avoid.

Parallel octaves and parallel fifths with bass
Unresolved tendency tone in soprano (C# wants to lead to D)
Doubled tendency tone (C#) and parallel fifths with bass
Parallel fifths between inner voices

a) b: i VII III i VII III i VII III i VII⁶ III

Examples b-d illustrate good part-writing incorporating the subtonic triad. Observe in example b that all chords containing the leading-tone (F^\sharp) resolve to the tonic, whereas all chords containing the subtonic (F^\flat) do not. The subtonic marks our first serious departure from the tonic; notice how the end of tonic expansion makes the III chord sound like an important harmonic event. Contrary motion in the outer voices makes the i – VII progression in this example easy to part-write.

b) g: i $\frac{5}{3}$ – $\frac{6}{4}$ – $\frac{5}{3}$ vii^{o6} i⁶ V⁶ i VII III ii^{o6} V⁶ $\frac{6}{4}$ – $\frac{5}{3}$ i (iv) I

Examples c and d include the subtonic triad in first inversion. Parallel motion in the outer voices (which would have been disastrous in a $i - VII$ progression) is possible when using VII^6 . You should be especially careful with the upper voice doubling the tonic's root, because this voice is almost sure to be involved in any forbidden parallels. (Refer back to example a if you don't see why this is true.)

c) g: i VII⁶ III iv V⁶₄₋₃

d) g: i VII⁶ III VI ii^{o6} V

Although VII typically resolves to III, other resolutions are possible. As shown in example e, sometimes VII leads to iv^6 , which in turn leads to V or V^7 . (This progression is most likely to be heard in Baroque music. In fact, the motion from VII – iv^6 will prompt experienced listeners to expect a Phrygian cadence next.) As shown in example f, it is also possible for VII to move directly to V^6 or V^6_5 , which will in turn lead to the tonic. The overall effect is simply tonic expansion because the progression is very weak.

e) c: i VII iv^6 V

f) c: i VII V⁶₅ i