

The Leading-Tone Chord (vii°)

By its very nature, the leading-tone triad exhibits some unusual characteristics. First, its root should never be doubled because it is, of course, the leading-tone — an inherently unstable note. Instead, we almost always double the third of the chord because this is the only chord member that is consonant with both of the other chord members. Second, the leading-tone triad is rarely found in root position because, as a general rule, we dislike the sound of root-position diminished triads. Instead, the chord is almost invariably used in first inversion. Placing the third in the bass softens the chord's dissonance because each upper voice will be consonant with the bass.

The $vii^{\circ 6}$ chord is used frequently, often as a passing chord. Its weak dominant function makes it ideal for leading to the tonic chord (either in root position or in first inversion) in the middle of a phrase, but inappropriate for a strong cadence. The leading-tone triad is strongly associated with smooth bass lines (although small leaps are not impossible), and it is most likely to be found between two tonic chords. Like the passing V_4^6 , its most common role is leading between I and I^6 ; notice that $vii^{\circ 6}$ and V_4^6 differ by only one note. It is likely to fall on a metrically weak beat, and it is often found in the middle of a voice exchange.

Below are several examples of good harmonic progressions incorporating the leading-tone triad. Example a demonstrates the chord's most typical use, passing between different inversions of the tonic triad. Example b demonstrates the chord's use as a weak dominant. (Notice that using V rather than $vii^{\circ 6}$ here would cause serious voice-leading problems!) As shown in example c, $vii^{\circ 6}$ can also occur between two identical (or virtually identical) tonic chords. (This role is often described as a "neighboring chord" because the pattern involves voices that step away and step back again.) Finally, example d demonstrates a small voice-leading concern associated with $vii^{\circ 6}$: the motion from a diminished fifth to a perfect fifth between two upper voices (in this case, the alto and tenor). When the voices creating a P5 with one another also create a perfect interval with the bass, the perfect interval stands out more, and composers tend to avoid this effect. Many composers would rather double the third of a tonic triad than write d5-P5 under these circumstances. Fortunately, you don't have to make this choice: by using a passing $\hat{6}$ chord instead, the situation is avoided entirely.

No parallel fifths in the inner voices: G[#]-D is a diminished fifth!

a) A: I vii^{°6} I⁶ vii^{°6} I

IV-V would be very difficult to part-write with this melody!

b) A: i IV vii^{°6} I⁶

Parallel motion into P4 is never a problem.

c) a: i vii^{°6} i

Inner voice motion from d5-P5 is undesirable.

Resolving d5 leads to doubled third (acceptable).

Using an equivalent chord avoids the problem.

d) a: i⁶ vii^{°6} i i⁶ vii^{°6} i i⁶ P₄⁶ i