

The Evolution of the Augmented Sixth From Monteverdi to Mahler

Throughout the history of Western classical music, various musical techniques have emerged and evolved. One fascinating example is the augmented sixth chord, a harmonic device that adds tension and color to compositions. From its origins in the works of Claudio Monteverdi to its utilization by Gustav Mahler, the augmented sixth has undergone a remarkable journey, adapting and transforming over the centuries.

The augmented sixth chord, also known as the Italian sixth, French sixth, or German sixth, is a chord that typically appears in the context of a dominant harmony. It is characterized by an augmented sixth interval between two notes within the chord and a dominant function.

Monteverdi's Early Exploration

Claudio Monteverdi, a celebrated Italian Renaissance composer, is often regarded as the pioneer of the augmented sixth chord. In his vocal compositions, such as madrigals and operas, Monteverdi experimented with harmonic progressions that contained tritones and the augmented sixth interval. These dissonant and expressive chords added a sense of dramatic tension to his works, heightening the emotional impact on the listener.

A Chord in Time: The Evolution of the Augmented Sixth from Monteverdi to Mahler

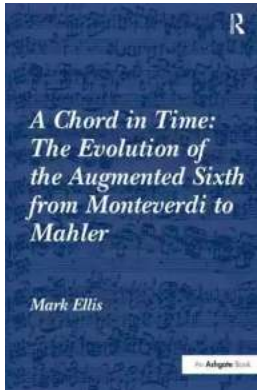
by Ken Saul (1st Edition, Kindle Edition)

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Monteverdi's innovative use of the augmented sixth chord can be heard in his famous opera "L'Orfeo." In the aria "Possente spirito," the augmented sixth chord appears during the phrase "Ascend to the heavens." This poignant moment showcases Monteverdi's mastery in employing harmonic techniques to reflect the emotional depth of the narrative.

The Age of J.S. Bach and the Augmented Sixth

The next significant development in the evolution of the augmented sixth chord came during the Baroque period, with composers like Johann Sebastian Bach. While Bach is not commonly associated with the augmented sixth, his works contain harmonic progressions that foreshadow its later usage.

In Bach's cantata "Wachet auf, ruft uns die Stimme," the closing chorale features a chord progression that includes an enharmonically disguised augmented sixth interval. Bach's exquisite manipulation of harmonic language demonstrates his profound understanding of the expressive potential it offers.

The Romantic Era and the Expanded Palette

As the Classical era gave way to the Romantic period, musical language expanded, and composers sought new ways to express complex emotions. This era saw the augmented sixth chord being employed by composers such as Ludwig van Beethoven and Richard Wagner.

Beethoven, in his Piano Sonata No. 21, op. 53, known as the "Waldstein Sonata," used augmented sixth chords to inject elements of drama and tension into his music. The opening movement showcases Beethoven's ability to manipulate harmony for emotional effect, with the augmented sixth chord augmenting the sense of anticipation in the listener.

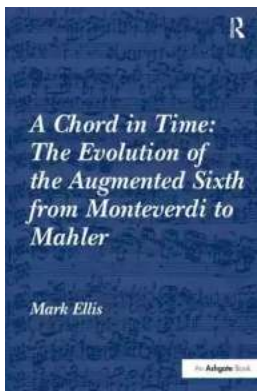
Richard Wagner, a revolutionary composer of the Romantic era, extensively utilized the augmented sixth chord in his operas. In his groundbreaking work "Tristan und Isolde," the augmented sixth chord appears throughout the score, creating an unparalleled sense of yearning and desire in the music.

Mahler and the Augmented Sixth

As the Romantic period progressed, Gustav Mahler, a composer known for pushing the boundaries of tonality, embraced the augmented sixth chord in his compositions. Mahler's use of this harmonic device can be heard in his symphonies, where he skillfully combined traditional tonal language with innovative harmonic ideas.

In his Symphony No. 1, Mahler employs the augmented sixth chord to great effect. In the third movement, titled "Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppend" (Solemn and measured, without dragging), the augmented sixth chord is used in a daring harmonic progression, adding a layer of tension and unease to the music.

The evolution of the augmented sixth chord from Monteverdi to Mahler showcases the remarkable adaptability of musical techniques over time. What began as an experimental device in the hands of composers like Monteverdi has flourished and transformed into a powerful tool used by Mahler to push the boundaries of tonality and express complex emotions. As composers continue to innovate, it is exciting to ponder what further evolutions may lie ahead for this captivating harmonic device.



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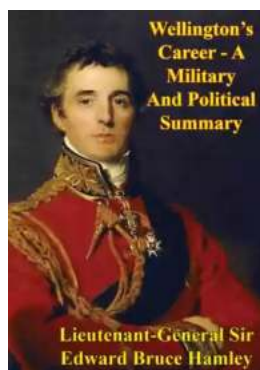
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For centuries, the augmented sixth sonority has fascinated composers and intrigued music analysts. Here, Dr Mark Ellis presents a series of musical examples illustrating the 'evolution' of the augmented sixth and the changing contexts in which it can be found. Surprisingly, the sonority emerged from one of the last remnants of modal counterpoint to survive into the tonal era: the Phrygian Cadence. In the Baroque period, the 'terrible dissonance' was nearly always associated with negative textual imagery. Charpentier described the augmented sixth as 'poignantly expressive'. J. S. Bach considered an occurrence of the chord in one of his forebear's motets 'remarkably bold'. During Bach's composing

lifetime, the augmented sixth evolved from a relatively rare chromaticism to an almost commonplace element within the tonal spectrum; the chord reflects particular chronological and stylistic strata in his music. Theorists began cautiously to accept the chord, but its inversional possibilities proved particularly contentious, as commentaries by writers as diverse as Muffat, Marpurg and Rousseau reveal. During the eighteenth century, the augmented sixth became increasingly significant in instrumental repertoires - it was perhaps Vivaldi who first liberated the chord from its negative textual associations. By the later eighteenth century, the chord began to function almost as a 'signpost' to indicate important structural boundaries within sonata form. The chord did not, however, entirely lose its darker undertone: it signifies, for example, the theme of revenge in Mozart's Don Giovanni. Romantic composers uncovered far-reaching tonal ambiguities inherent in the augmented sixth. Chopin's Nocturnes often seem beguilingly simple, but the surface tranquillity masks the composer's strikingly original harmonic experiments. Wagner's much-analyzed 'Tristan Chord' resolves (according to some theorists) on an augmented sixth. In Tristan und Isolde, the chord's mercurial



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