

Non-Chord Tones

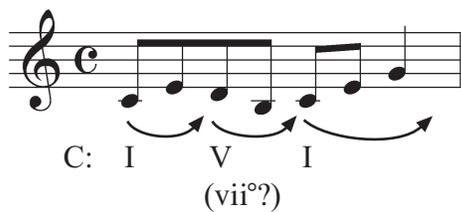
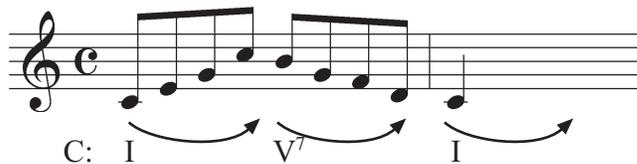
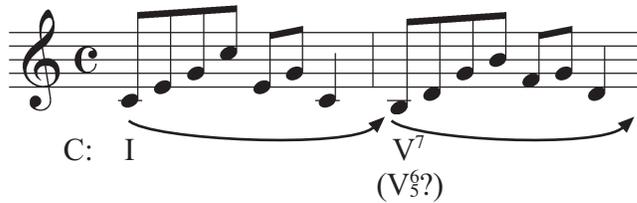
Non-chord tones are notes that don't seem to fit into the harmony that is sounding. They often breathe life into the melody by creating motion or adding some interesting tension.

What is a harmony?

When multiple notes seem to combine into a single event, we are perceiving a harmony. There are two basic ways to present a harmony - either all at once with a simultaneous chord, or spread out in an arpeggiation.



Either way, we perceive some underlying event that subsumes all of the notes on the surface. This event is actually intensely rhythmic - we expect harmonies to start on relatively strong beats. (The examples below show harmonies that begin on a downbeat, on 1 and 3, or on the first three beats of a 4/4 measure.)



If a chord appears between beats there is often a sense that it is “early” or “late,” a rhythmic elaboration of some more basic underlying structure.

This rhythmic notion of harmony may help you analyze particularly complicated passages and untangle the chord-tones from the non-chord tones. The basic idea is to look for harmonies that start on the beat and proceed at a fairly regular pace.

Steps can create non-chord tones

The chords you’ve been taught thus far are all built out of thirds. This is due to a basic perceptual principle, that notes a third or more apart tend to peacefully co-exist. (This is why melodic “leaps” tend to create a sense of arpeggiation.) Melodic steps (intervals of a whole tone or half tone) tend to create a sense of movement, however - the first note seems to “move up” or down to the next one.

When we perceive movement, we tend to ask “is this motion *towards* something or *away from* something?” In the case of melodic notes, the motion will tend to be towards or away from harmonic tones, creating the sense that one of the notes is a subservient “non-chord tone.”

motion into chord tone motion away from chord tone no motion - must be part of the chord!

C: I⁹

In order to illustrate the various kinds of NCTs I'm going to use a few graphic symbols:

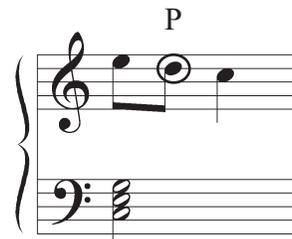
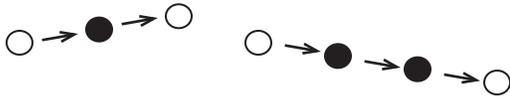
○ = chord tone (consonant, stable)

● = non-chord tone (dissonant, subservient to more stable note)

→ = stepwise connection

Passing Tone

A passing tone comes from a note and continues on to a different note.



C: I

Neighbor Tone

A neighbor tone goes back to the same note it came from.



C: I

Appoggiatura [from the Italian word "to lean"]

Also known as an "incomplete neighbor." Resolves to a chord tone, but it is approached by leap or just out of the blue.



C: I

Different Kinds of P, N, and app.

Diatonic vs. Chromatic

Diatonic NCTs use tones that belong to the scale. Chromatic NCTs use tones that are outside the scale (and require accidentals.)

a passage that includes some chromatic NCTs

A musical score in C major, first position, showing a passage with various non-chord tones. The treble clef staff contains a sequence of notes: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). Above the staff, several notes are circled and labeled: P (Prolonged) above the first C4, P above the first D4, N (Non-chord tone) above the first B4, P above the first A4, and app. (Appoggiatura) above the first G4 and the first F4. The bass clef staff shows a simple accompaniment with a bass drum symbol.

C: I

(In my opinion there is no elegant way to distinguish between diatonic and chromatic NCTs in everyday analysis. Just mark P, N, etc.)

Accented vs. Unaccented

An unaccented non-chord tone will be relatively “weak” and “unimportant” compared to the notes around it. An accented NCT, however, will stick out - it falls on the beat or it is longer than surrounding notes. You can mark accented P’s, N’s, or app’s with a little accent mark.

A musical score in C major, first position, showing accented and unaccented non-chord tones. The treble clef staff contains a sequence of notes: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). Above the staff, the first B4 is circled and labeled with an accented P (P̂), and the first A4 is circled and labeled with an unaccented N (N̄). The bass clef staff shows a simple accompaniment with a bass drum symbol.

C: I

A Few More - ET and Double N

The Escape Tone

The escape tone is the only NCT that doesn’t *resolve to* another chord tone - instead it *comes from* a chord tone. It’s the opposite of an appoggiatura. The most common use of ET’s in classical music is to decorate a scalar ascent or descent, like the example on the right.

A musical score in C major, first position, showing the use of escape tones (ET) in a chord progression. The treble clef staff contains a sequence of notes: C4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C5 (quarter), B4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), G4 (quarter), F4 (quarter), E4 (quarter), D4 (quarter), C4 (quarter). Above the staff, three notes are circled and labeled ET: the first B4, the first A4, and the first G4. The bass clef staff shows a simple accompaniment with a bass drum symbol.

C: I ii⁶ I₄ V I



The Double Neighbor

Instead of going immediately back to the note it came from, a double neighbor figure makes an “above, below, then back” pattern (or the opposite.)



dbl.
N

C: I

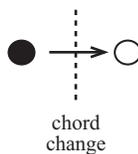
Displacement NCTs - ant., sus., ret., pedal

Finally we get to a few NCTs that involve notes being where they don't belong - they either arrive early or hang on late.

Anticipation

Here a note simply comes in early instead of waiting for the next chord. All of these displacement NCTs can involve either a sustained note (which is held through more than one harmony) or a repeated note.

Anticipations, though, are almost always a repeated note.



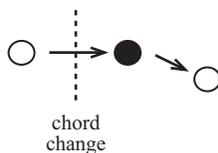
ant.

C: V I

Suspension

Suspensions are perhaps the coolest NCT, but they also involve the most complicated theoretical baggage.

Simply put, a suspension hangs over from the previous harmony and then *resolves down by step* into the new harmony.



For some reason analysts like to classify suspensions according to figured bass numbers. (Remember that figured bass numbers are all about the interval above the bass - when you figure out your suspension labels you don't have to think about what the roman numeral is, or the key - just measure above the actual bass note. Look carefully at these examples and make sure you can see where the numbers come from.)

4-3 sus

C: IV I

7-6 sus

C: V⁶₄ I⁶

Remember that the following suspension is always called “9-8”, not “2-1”

9-8 sus

C: V I

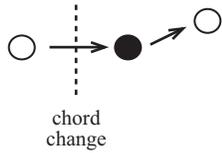
And, finally, a suspension in the bass is always called “2-3.” It refers to the fact that somewhere in the chord is a 2 that the bass is dissonantly rubbing up against - once it resolves it makes a consonant 3.

2-3 sus

C: I V⁶

Retardation

If a held-over note doesn't resolve down, it ain't a suspension. It's a retardation. Retardations are less common than suspensions. They don't need the fancy figured-bass style labels.



C: V I

Pedal Tone

A pedal tone is held across a number of harmonies. It is usually on $\hat{1}$ or $\hat{5}$, and usually in the bass. The harmonies on top usually go away from and then back to consonance with the pedal tone. You can analyze it in two layers, with no inversion symbols on the top layer. (See the example.)

C: pedal V I IV I V⁷ I

