

Chapter Eleven

Non-Chord Tones 1

Introduction

Many of the examples in the preceding chapters contain notes that do not belong to the chord as analyzed. In many of those examples these notes have been put in parentheses to emphasize the embellishing quality of such non-chord tones, as opposed to chord tones, which are structurally more important. However, to understand tonal music we have to understand non-chord tones because most passages of tonal music contain at least a few of them.

A **non-chord tone** (abbreviated NCT) is a tone, either diatonic or chromatic, that is not a member of the chord. The tone might be an NCT throughout its duration, or, if the harmony changes before the tone does, the tone might be an NCT for only a portion of its duration.

Obviously, you have to analyze the chords before you can begin labeling NCTs, but the process is nearly simultaneous. In multipart music, recognizing the chords and the NCTs is often quite simple, as in Example 11-1.



Example 11-1 Schubert, "Frühlingstraum," Op. 89, No. 11

The musical score consists of two staves. The top staff is the vocal line in treble clef, with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a common time signature. It begins with a measure number '5'. The lyrics are: "Ich träum - te von bun - ten Blu - men, so wie sie wohl bli - hen im Mai,". Several notes in the vocal line are highlighted with grey boxes, indicating non-chord tones. The bottom staff is the piano accompaniment, split into two parts: the right hand in treble clef and the left hand in bass clef. The piano part starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic marking. Below the piano part, a series of chord symbols are provided: A: I, vi, ii⁶, V⁷, I.

Other textures and compositional techniques may make the separation of chords from NCTs more problematic. This will be discussed in greater detail at the conclusion of Chapter 12.

Classification of Non-Chord Tones

One way of classifying NCTs is according to the ways in which they are approached and left.* The table below presents the basic definitions of the various types along with abbreviations. Those in the top half of the table will be discussed in detail in this chapter. The others are discussed in Chapter 12.

NCT name (and abbreviation)	Approached by	Left by
Passing tone (p)	Step	Step in same direction
Neighboring tone (n)	Step	Step in opposite direction
Suspension (s)	Same tone	Step down
Retardation (r)	Same tone	Step up
Appoggiatura (app)	Leap	Step
Escape tone (e)	Step	Leap in opposite direction
Neighbor group (n.gr)	(see p. 185)	
Anticipation (ant)	Step or leap	Same tone (or leap)
Pedal point (ped)	(see pp. 188–189)	

Example 11-2 provides illustrations of each of the NCT types in a three-part texture.

Example 11-2

Example 11-2 illustrates various non-chord tones (NCTs) in a three-part texture. The notation shows the NCT type above the note and the corresponding chord below the staff.

Chords shown: I, 6, I⁶, 3, I⁶, vii[°]6, vii[°]6, I, I, V, I, V, I⁶, vii[°]6, I, I, vii[°], I.

* NCT terminology is not standardized, and your instructor may prefer that you use different labels and definitions. However, the definitions given here are widely used.

In addition to the basic definitions given above, NCTs can be further classified as to their **duration** and relative degree of **accent**.

1. *Submetrical*: less than a beat in duration and occurring on either *accented* or *unaccented portions* of the beat (Ex. 11-3a).
2. *Metrical*: one beat in duration and occurring on either *accented* or *unaccented beats* (Ex. 11-3b).
3. *Supermetrical*: more than one beat in duration (Ex. 11-3c).

Example 11-3

Admittedly, this terminology is cumbersome, but such considerations have much to do with the style and general effect of a passage. Remember that the beat in the definitions above is not always indicated by the bottom number of the meter signature.

Other terms used in the description of NCTs include **diatonic**, **chromatic**, **ascending**, **descending**, **upper**, and **lower**. These terms will be brought up in connection with the appropriate NCTs. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a more detailed discussion of the NCT types that involve only stepwise motion: passing tones, neighboring tones, suspensions, and retardations.

Passing Tones

The **passing tone** is used to fill in the space between two other tones. The two other tones may belong either to the same or to different chords, or they might be NCTs themselves. Usually the space between them is a 3rd, either up or down, and the passing tone is given whatever scale degree lies in between. In Example 11-1 the B4 in m. 6 is used to fill in the space between C#5 and A4. The B4, then, is a passing tone or, more specifically, an **accented**, **submetrical**, **diatonic**, **descending passing tone**. You might think that this terminology is too detailed to be really useful, and you would be right. Most of the time we would refer to the B4 in Example 11-1 simply as a passing tone and let it go at that. However, a good musician, although perhaps not consciously using all the modifiers employed above, will still be aware of the possibilities and their influence on the musical effect.

Occasionally a passing tone fills the space between two notes that are only a M2 apart. Look at Example 11-4, from the *Jupiter* Symphony. The G#5 in m. 56 is a passing tone, but the two tones that it connects, G5 and A5, are only a M2 apart. The G#5, then, is a **chromatic passing tone**, as is the A#3 in the bass line in m. 58.

Still referring to Example 11-4, look at the first violin part in m. 59. The tones G5 and D5, which are a P4 apart, are connected by two passing tones, F#5 and E5. In m. 61 several

passing tones appear in the first violin part. Technically, the A4, the D5, and the F#5 are chord tones, and the others are passing tones. In a functional sense, however, *all* the tones after the A4 serve as passing tones filling in the m7 between A4 and G5, connecting the half cadence in m. 61 to the beginning of the next phrase. (See the textural reduction that follows the example.)

Finally, notice that the A#3 in the second violin part in m. 58 is a passing tone, as analyzed. Two lines are being played simultaneously by the second violins.


Example 11-4
Mozart, Symphony No. 41 (Jupiter), K. 551, I

56

Bsn.

Vn. *p*

Vla. *p*

Vc. D.B. *p*

G: I⁶ V₂⁴ *p*
4
3

60

tr

p

[*p*]

[*p*]

I⁶ V₅⁶ I V HC I

Textural reduction

Neighboring Tones

The **neighboring tone** is used to embellish a single tone. It may appear above the main tone (upper neighbor) or below it (lower neighbor), and it may be diatonic or chromatic. Example 11-1 contains neighboring tones in the voice line; all of them are **unaccented, upper neighboring tones**. The neighbors in Example 11-5 are all **accented** because they fall on stronger metrical positions than the notes they resolve to. The upper neighbors (the A's and the D) are **diatonic**, whereas the **lower neighbors** (the F#'s and the B) are **chromatic**. (The $\text{vii}^{\circ 4}_3$ in Example 11-5 is a fully diminished seventh chord instead of half-diminished because it is a "borrowed" chord, to be discussed more fully in Chapter 21.)



Example 11-5 Schumann, *Scherzo Op. 32*

We can only guess about Schumann's reason for using the chromatic form of the lower neighboring tone here because diatonic neighbors would have been possible. A chromatic neighbor lends more tonal color to a passage, and it tends to draw more attention to the pitch that it is embellishing. A chromatic lower neighbor, like those above, acts as a leading tone to the tone it ornaments. As an experiment, try playing Example 11-5 four ways: (1) all diatonic neighbors, (2) chromatic upper neighbors, (3) chromatic lower neighbors, and (4) all chromatic neighbors. Compare the results.

Suspensions and Retardations

The **suspension** holds on to, or suspends a chord tone after the other parts have moved on to the next chord. Although the suspension may not seem more important than any other type of NCT, considerably more study has been devoted to it. Part of the reason for this is that the suspension is the primary source of dissonance on the *accented* beat in much tonal and pretonal music. Suspensions may be submetrical, metrical, or supermetrical, but in any case they almost always fall on accented beats or accented portions of beats.

A special terminology has developed concerning the suspension. The **preparation** is the tone preceding the suspension, and it is the same pitch as the suspension. The **suspension** itself may or may not be tied to its preparation. The **resolution** is the tone following the suspension and lying a 2nd below it. The preparation and resolution are usually chord tones (Ex. 11-6), although the preparation is sometimes a NCT.

Example 11-6



Suspension terminology also provides a means of categorizing suspensions according to the vertical intervals created by the suspended tone and the resolution. For example, in Example 11-6, the harmonic interval above the bass created by the suspension is a 7th and that created by the resolution is a 6th, so the entire figure is referred to as a 7-6 suspension.

Example 11-7 summarizes the common suspensions. Notice that the second number is larger than the first only in the 2-3 suspension, a type sometimes referred to as a **bass suspension**. In textures involving more than two parts, the vertical intervals are calculated between the **bass** and the suspended part. If the bass itself is suspended, the interval is calculated between the bass and the part with which it is most dissonant (generally a 2nd or 9th above in a 2-3 suspension). With the exception of the 9-8 suspension, the note of resolution should not be present anywhere in the texture when a suspension occurs.

Example 11-7

A musical staff in bass clef showing four measures of music illustrating different suspensions. Above the staff, the intervals are labeled: 7 - 6, 4 - 3, 9 - 8, and 2 - 3. Below the staff, the chords are labeled: I⁶, vii^o6, I⁶, V, V⁶, I, I, V⁶.

The names of most suspensions remain constant, even if compound intervals are involved. For example, even if the 4-3 is actually an 11-10, as in Example 11-7, it is still referred to as a 4-3. The exception to this is the 9-8. It is always called a 9-8 suspension unless it does *not* involve a compound interval, in which case it is labeled a 2-1 suspension. The reason for this inconsistency is that the 2-1 suspension is found much less frequently than the 9-8, so it is appropriate that they have different labels.

When a suspension occurs in one of the upper voices, the bass will sometimes move on to another chord tone at the same time as the suspension resolves. This device is referred to as a **suspension with change of bass**. In such a case a 7-6 suspension, for example, might become a 7-3 suspension because of the movement of the bass. It is also possible to move the upper part of the dissonance as the bass resolves in a 2-3 suspension, creating a 2-6 suspension (Ex. 11-8).

Example 11-8

The musical notation for Example 11-8 is written on a single staff in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It consists of four measures. Above the staff, four suspension figures are labeled: 7-3, 4-6, 9-6, and 2-6. Each label is positioned above a pair of notes that form the suspension. The notes are connected by a horizontal line, and a vertical line indicates the resolution point. The bass line is not explicitly shown but is implied to be moving to a new chord tone as the suspension resolves.

Although most suspensions are dissonant, consonant suspensions do occur. Example 11-9 contains a suspension in the second measure, even though no dissonance is present.

Example 11-9

The musical notation for Example 11-9 is written on a single staff in treble clef. It consists of two measures. The first measure is labeled "C: vii⁶₃" and the second measure is labeled "I". Above the staff, a suspension figure is labeled "6-5". The notes are connected by a horizontal line, and a vertical line indicates the resolution point.

Suspensions are very often embellished. That is, other tones, some of them chord tones and some not, may appear after the suspended tone but before the true resolution. In Example 11-10 there is an embellished 7-6 suspension at the beginning of the second measure. In other words, the G5 is a suspension that resolves to F5, but ornamenting tones are heard before the F5 is reached. A similar figure appears at the beginning of the next measure, but here the 7th is a chord tone, part of the G⁷ chord. In this case, the F5 is a chord tone that is treated as a suspension. Such **suspension figures**, in which the suspension is actually a chord tone, are quite common. Notice also in this example the use of the minor v⁶ as a passing chord between i and iv⁶.


Example 11-10 *Bach, French Suite No. 2, Sarabande*

c: i v⁶ iv⁶ p ii[°]6 v⁷ i

Textural reduction

When the resolution of one suspension serves as the preparation for another, the resulting figure is called a **chain of suspensions**.

Example 11-10 above contains a chain suspension: The G5 is suspended, resolving to F5, which in turn is suspended (although not as an NCT), resolving to Eb5. A chain of 7-6 suspensions can be seen in mm. 5-7 of Example 8-8 (p. 121).

Much of what has been said about the suspension applies also to the **retardation**, which is simply a suspension with an upward resolution. Retardations may occur anywhere in a passage, but they are especially common at cadences in Classical style, where they appear in combination with suspensions. As in Example 11-11, the retardation in this context usually involves $\hat{7}$ resolving up to $\hat{1}$.

Example 11-11

Ab: v⁷ I

Notice in this example that the I chord begins as soon as the tonic note is reached in the bass. It would be incorrect to analyze the first beat of the second measure as a vii° or V⁷ over a pedal point A_b. A pedal point starts out as a chord tone and only later becomes dissonant against the chords above it.

As if to help us summarize the suspension, Bach has provided us with a chorale phrase containing all the common suspensions as well as a less common one. To help you get the most out of Example 11-12, chord roots are provided along with the functional harmonic analysis. This is because the phrase **modulates** (changes key) from a to C and back again, and we have not yet presented the ways in which modulations are analyzed. After you understand the chords, follow each voice part through, looking at the NCTs and following the discussion below the example. Finally, play through Example 11-12 and listen to the effect of the suspensions.



Example 11-12 *Bach, "Danket dem Herren, denn Er ist sehr freundlich"*

roots:	A	A	E	A	G	C	C	G	A	E
a:	i	V ⁶ i		V ⁶	I	6	V ⁽⁷⁾ a: i	vi		V

Soprano
No NCTs

Alto

m. 1 The B₄ is a submetrical 9–8 suspension. Its resolution, A₄, becomes a submetrical 7–6 suspension on the next beat. Therefore, this is a chain of suspensions.

Tenor

m. 2 The D₄ eighth note actually represents a metrical 9–8 suspension. The suspension is ornamented by the two sixteenth notes that follow it, one of them being a chord tone that anticipates the resolution, the other being a lower neighbor. Notice that by the time the “real” resolution arrives (beat 2), the bass has moved to another chord tone, so this is a 9–6 change of bass suspension.

The B₃ on beat 4 is an example of a relatively unusual suspension, the 2–1.
m. 3 The quarter note A₃ represents a half note A₃, which is a supermetrical 4–3 suspension. The suspension is ornamented with an augmentation of the figure used to ornament the suspended D₄ in m. 2.

Bass

- m. 1 The empty parentheses on beat 2 remind us that the A3 is still sounding but is no longer part of the chord. This is an example of a submetrical 2–3 suspension.
- m. 2 The NCTs in this measure are unaccented, submetrical, ascending passing tones.



CHECKPOINT

1. A suspension is an NCT that is approached by _____ and left by _____.
2. A neighboring tone is an NCT that is approached by _____ and left by _____.
3. A retardation is an NCT that is approached by _____ and left by _____.
4. A passing tone is an NCT that is approached by _____ and left by _____.
5. What are some other terms that are sometimes used to describe NCTs? (Review p. 169.)
6. Provide the arabic numerals that are used to label the four common types of suspensions.

Figured Bass and Lead Sheet Symbols

With the exception of suspensions, NCTs are generally not indicated in a figured bass or in lead sheet symbols. Most suspensions in figured basses are shown by the use of symbols identical or similar to the numbers we use to name suspension types. Some of the customary figured bass symbols are given in the table below.

Suspension	Symbols
9–8	9 8
7–6	7 6 or $\frac{7}{6}$
4–3	4 3 or 4 #
2–3	$\frac{5}{2}$ under first bass note, 6 under the next

Change of bass suspensions can be recognized by such combinations as “7 3” or “9 6” appearing over a moving bass.