



The Dominant Seventh Chord

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The Moment of Definition

Jean-Philippe Rameau, in his *Traité de l'harmonie* of 1722, claimed that the triad and the 7th-chord are the main building blocks of the tonal system. The lowest three notes of the 7th-chord simply form a major triad, but another note is added, creating a dissonance.¹ Specifically, the extra note is at the interval of a seventh from the lowest note, hence the name of the chord. Rameau, a little confusingly, called this chord the *dominant-tonique*, which is to imply that it was a dominant chord that had to be followed by the tonic chord, whereas an ordinary dominant triad left several options. Today, we simply call it the “dominant seventh”. But it is the “tonic” chord that stands at the top of the hierarchy of chords in any key, so why use the name “dominant” for a chord of lesser importance? As it happens, the term comes from the liturgical practice of singing longer biblical texts in a plain manner, as opposed to the more elaborate chant melodies. Most of the words were sung on a single note, which was usually the fifth note of the scale, and so this note was dominant in the sung passage, and took on that name, as a description. Centuries later, when the term “dominant” was applied to a chord, it was not because that chord was heard more often than the others, but because it was built on the fifth note of the scale.

In Rameau’s presentation, the chord on note 5 of the scale is given the dissonance of a 7th, and to resolve the tension of this dissonance, the chord built on note 1 follows. In post-Rameau terminology, the first of these chords is the dominant 7th, and the next chord is the “tonic”. The bass, which is the lowest voice, leaps from note 5 to note 1. The voice that is given the 7th of the dominant chord, moves down one note in the scale (this is called “resolving” the dissonance). The voice that has the 3rd of the dominant chord moves up a step. For a complex mixture of acoustic, physiological and cultural reasons, this succession of chords seems to us to have an inevitability, as if the voices are drawn from the dominant by the gravitational pull of the tonic. Musicians speak not just of successions of chords but of “progressions”, since each chord carries implications for the next chord in a chain that arrives, in the end, at a dominant chord followed by tonic chord. This dominant-tonic ending is known as a “cadence”, from the Latin verb for “falling” – again, notice the suggestion of gravity in operation (it is the primary and essential cadence, but there are other varieties, as we shall see in the next lecture).

When Rameau wrote his treatise at the beginning of the 1720s, he was working as a church organist, but the publication of the treatise brought him international fame. It was not until a decade later that he began to win fame as a composer, when he turned his hand to opera. The treatise won him both support and opposition – CPE Bach, for example, was still arguing against it half a century later. His theorising took root in the 19th century, and today’s musicians are strongly influenced by Rameau, even if they have never heard of his treatise.

¹ Consonances are formed by two notes that seem to blend together well. A dissonance is the opposite: a combination of notes that do not blend.

Origins

When did the dominant 7th first appear? The question does not have a straightforward answer. If we are not interested in context, and simply want to know when such a collection of notes first appeared, then the answer would be the mid-1400s. But the term “dominant 7th” *does* imply a context: at the very least, we need to look for it in music where the chordal approach makes some sense, which, as we saw in the last lecture, would mean that our search should only begin in the years around 1600 – any earlier, and our supposed dominant 7th chord will just be a momentary fortuitous confluence of simultaneous melodies in a piece of contrapuntal writing.

Around 1600, we do indeed find some examples, and the first composer usually cited is Claudio Monteverdi, who uses dominant 7ths in, for example, his madrigal *Cruda amarilli*. He introduces the dissonant note, the 7th, freely: one of the voices jumps to that note, demonstrating that the composer is no longer following the rules of counterpoint (the rules for combining melodies), but treats the sonority as a chord in its own right. Monteverdi was already an experienced master of standard counterpoint, and introduces several innovations all at once in this collection of pieces, his Fifth Book of madrigals, so we are not dealing here with a slip of the pen, or the blunder of an incompetent. We know that several of these madrigals had been written in the 1590s and circulated in hand-written copies, because they were cited in those years by Artusi, an opponent of Monteverdi’s innovations. Monteverdi defended himself and published the madrigals, including all the offending passages, in 1605. In spite of the controversy, and Monteverdi’s confidence in his innovations, we do not suddenly find a rash of true dominant 7ths in the following years. Several decades pass before we find that the chord is established in normal practice.

Fast-forward a century, and we find a fully mature tonal system in the works of Arcangelo Corelli, for example in the violin sonatas published as his op. 5 in 1700. In the score, we find numerals below the notes of the bass-line, and these provide the keyboard accompanist with information on the chords that should be built on the bass notes. The numbers appear in various combinations, but the dominant 7th is frequently among them. The performance of a bass-line and fleshed-out chords on the keyboard is known as a “*basso continuo*”, and the notation of a bass-line with numbers is called a “figured bass”. The practice was a great boost to the conceptualisation of music in chordal terms, and led to the establishment of various standard progressions, since each progression will have the same bass-line and numbers, regardless of the key and regardless of the rhythms used. The figured bass actually appeared at the outset of the 1600s in music by Monteverdi and his similarly innovative contemporaries such as Caccini. But the notation of the figured bass was more rigid at the start of the century, specifying exactly the notes the keyboardist should play, whereas the practice in its mature form, dating roughly from 1650 to 1800, gave identical numbers for each chord type, and left it to the keyboardist how the notes would be distributed. If we have a dominant 7th, for example, built on the bass note G, the keyboardist will add the notes B, D and F. But will the notes appear in exactly that ascending order, or can the keyboardist use a different permutation? The answer is that keyboardists were free, in principle, to arrange the notes as B, D, F or D, F, B, or F, B, D as they wished. The choice was affected by the position of the notes for the previous chord, since each new chord should be formed as close as possible to the position of the previous chord on the keyboard.

But although there was a logical chain that partly determined the arrangement of the notes, this would vary according to the position on the keyboard of the first chord in each phrase, which was indeed chosen freely by the keyboardist. Various decorations and figures could be added by expert keyboardists, who could go beyond a straightforward realisation of the figured bass. All considered, there was considerable scope for improvisation on the part of the keyboardist. The keyboard instrument was either the harpsichord or the organ, which may seem strange, since the two instruments behave very differently: the organist can sustain notes of any length, whereas the harpsichordist’s notes die away quickly. To a large extent, this was unimportant, since the succession of chords was usually rapid; where the chords changed more slowly, the harpsichordist had the option of playing back through the chosen notes several times, or could simply rely on the listeners to keep the sonority of the chord in mind once it had died away. For our purposes, the most important aspect of mature figured-bass writing is that the various chord progressions could now be recognised in the abstract, independent of key or rhythm, and, indeed, independent of the harpsichordist’s flourishes.

The alternation of dominant-tonic *triads* became a pattern at an earlier stage than the full establishment of the dominant 7th: there are many such alternations in different keys in Lully’s *Te Deum* of 1677, but most of the dominant chords are triads rather than 7th-chords. The dominant 7th grew in popularity gradually, through the generations of Corelli, Bach and Haydn, until by the time of Beethoven it had become the default

expression of the dominant chord – now the use of the plain dominant triad required a special justification.

Corelli's name is only vaguely known to concertgoers today, and many will not have heard any of his music, but for the generation of Bach, Handel and Vivaldi, he was by far the most influential composer of instrumental music, and his pieces remained the gold standard for several decades. He was widely admired. For example, in 1708 Francesco Gasparini described Corelli's art in these terms:

This practice, followed by the better modern composers, is found particularly in the extremely delightful *Sinfonie* of Arcangelo Corelli, supreme virtuoso of the violin, true Orpheus of our time, who moves and shifts his basses with so much artfulness, care, and grace, using these ties and dissonances, so well controlled and resolved, and so well interwoven with a variety of themes, that one may well say he has rediscovered the perfection of ravishing harmony.

An interesting later assessment of Corelli comes from Charles Burney's *General History of Music* (1776):

...scarce a contemporary musical writer, historian, or poet, neglected to celebrate his genius and talents; and his productions have contributed longer to charm the lovers of Music by the mere powers of the bow, without the assistance of the human voice, than those of any composer that has yet existed.

From this, we can fairly conclude that Corelli initiated a new stage in the development of purely instrumental music – music without voice and therefore without text. Now in any kind of music that is not organised and driven by a text, there must be another dynamic force that makes us sit on the edge of our seats and ask: "what's next?"

The Questioning Chord

Once the dominant 7th was firmly established, composers (and improvisers) could use it in different ways to play with their listeners' expectations. Since the dominant seventh was designed to resolve immediately to the tonic and normally does so, the listener will be surprised if that resolution does not actually take place. Composers can create a diversion immediately after the dominant 7th, and then work back around to the same chord a second time to resolve it. The listener is kept in suspense until the final resolution takes place. If you pause on a dominant chord, a kind of questioning phrase results, and balance is only restored if a phrase ending on the tonic triad follows. This is what happens several times in Chopin's otherwise simple Prelude in A major. The music comes to a halt repeatedly on a dominant 7th, and order is restored each time with a phrase ending on the tonic triad, until just before the end, when Chopin replaces the expected tonic with a dominant 7th that belongs to a different key, creating not only suspense, but momentary puzzlement (although some expert first-time listeners may fill in Chopin's route back to the tonic in their imagination before the continuation is played). Here, we are catching a glimpse of further levels of complexity that we will not explore yet in this lecture.

In the finale of Haydn's Quartet op. 9 no.5, the suspense created by a dominant 7th moves up to the level of large-scale form in a movement nearly ten times longer than the Chopin Prelude. Here the substantial opening section breaks off on a dominant 7th. The suspense is relieved in two ways: the first time, we return to hear the opening section repeated; the second time, we shoot off on a journey through several different keys. A similar trick occurs later, but this time, the dominant 7th is in the "wrong" key. The first time, we return to the wandering music that answered the earlier dominant 7th; the second time, we move on to a relatively brief and stabilising section that rounds off the movement.

After the dominant 7th acquired dramatic possibilities within the sphere of instrumental music, it could be exploited to subtle effect in music with a text. Schumann, in his song cycle *Dichterliebe* (Poet's Love), ends his first song on a dominant seventh – this is a deliberate contravention of musical grammar, which requires resolution to the tonic chord before a piece can be regarded as complete. Schumann, of course, had his reasons: the poetic text does not literally ask a question at the end, but the attentive listener catches the uncertainty of the protagonist: "Will she return my love?", and Schumann's dominant 7th ending draws this out eloquently.

In using the unresolved dominant 7th as an expression of unquenchable longing, Schumann might well have been influenced by the description of this chord in a short story by one of his favourite writers, E.T.A. Hoffmann:

It was in the depths of autumn... and in the calm of the night, wafted in by a light breeze, I could

clearly perceive long sustained notes, sometimes like a muffled organ pipe, at other times like the tolling of a distant bell. I could often distinguish clearly between a low [root] F and the fifth, C; sometimes an E flat was added a third above, the notes producing a piercing seventh chord whose aura of deep lament suffused my soul with melancholy, and even horror. [from the story "Die Automate"]

Imagine the difference if Hoffmann's character had heard a major triad in the wind – he would have been delighted. But the chord he hears has a dissonance, and because it is produced by nature rather than a human mind, it will never resolve, creating a disharmony in the natural world, which is exactly Hoffmann's purpose in this tale of the preternatural.

Chopin, in another of his preludes, this time in the key of F major, apparently does the same thing as Schumann, but the resemblance is only superficial. Obviously enough, there is no poetic text in the Chopin, but there is a much more interesting difference. He could easily have ended this already fascinating piece on a tonic triad, and so it seems he does, until at the last moment, he adds a 7th to his tonic chord, turning it into something that would usually serve as a dominant 7th in another key, after which the piece would continue (as in the Haydn Quartet we looked at). Chopin's 7th is placed high on the keyboard, which greatly weakens the effect of the dissonance, and the composer must have been inspired by the harmonic series of acoustics: the seventh frequency of the series, present in most musical sounds, is close to the 7th in Chopin's piano chord, although the 7th of the harmonic series is a little flatter. We don't normally notice the individual harmonics consciously, and instead, they contribute to the timbre of a note, allowing us to detect whether a note has been produced by a piano, a violin, a flute, a clarinet etc. Chopin is effectively bringing the harmonic series to our consciousness, laying it bare on the piano. Because of the various compromises enshrined in piano tuning, Chopin's 7th cannot blend in with the rest of the chord so thoroughly as its counterpart in the harmonic series, but the high position gives it the assistance that it needs, and the effect of the final chord is stable enough to leave the listener content that no resolution is required. On first listening, the novelty of the effect is most striking, but once we are familiar with the piece, the final sonority takes on the stability that Chopin intended – quite the opposite of the effect of the dominant 7ths we looked at previously.

Changing Direction

Imagine that we are visiting a spacious apartment with a dozen connecting rooms, perhaps the former residence of a famous composer. By analogy with the large-scale harmony of a piece of music, let us consider the drawing room to be our home key. We start our tour from the drawing room and we will return there at the end. In the other rooms, we sometimes linger, sometimes simply pass through, and sometimes even hover in the doorway but decide to go elsewhere. On returning to the drawing room, we will probably not simply retrace our steps, but take in a different series of rooms. In music, moving to the other rooms is a modulation. A piece that remains in its home key throughout is generally very brief or very rudimentary. Modulations provide us with a welcome variety of other keys. The most efficient way to clinch a modulation is to play the dominant 7th chord that belongs to the new key, since, as we have seen, the dominant 7th has clear implications (for any listener with even a little experience). For example, in the opening theme of Haydn's first movement, in the same Quartet op. 9 no. 5, there is just such a dominant 7th, and we find ourselves in a new key by the end of the phrase.

An interesting anecdote from eighty years ago illustrates the force of the dominant 7th's implications. In 1941, two years after his emigration to the US, Stravinsky created several arrangements of The Star-Spangled Banner, and in 1944, he conducted one of these arrangements with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, bringing the unwelcome attention of the Massachusetts state police upon himself. It is hard to listen to this arrangement without a strong suspicion that Stravinsky was having fun, either at the expense of the National Anthem itself, or more subtly, at the expense of some previous arrangers of the Anthem whose pomposity outstripped their competence. Perhaps most of the humour escaped the audience (including the police), but one feature stood out as unacceptable, which was a particular dominant 7th chord at the end of the penultimate phrase. The offence lay in the fact that Stravinsky had chosen a dominant 7th that implied a move towards another key at the very moment when the harmony should have been focused on the main key, to bring the piece to a firm conclusion. The effect is like a train about to draw into the station, only to be rerouted onto a different line by a mistaken changing of the points. Perhaps Stravinsky thought the quirkiness of his arrangement would pass unnoticed, or that his prestige as a composer would give him sufficient leeway, but it is unlikely that he meant to cause outrage, not least because his citizenship application was pending. In the end, the police dropped the matter, having misinterpreted the law, and Stravinsky became a

US citizen the following year – the rogue dominant 7th was not held against him.

Such moves from room to room via a dominant 7th are a normal part of music in the 18th and 19th centuries, so common that many a listener will not notice them (although their absence would be noticed as a blandness in the music, or a lack of dramatic interest). But there is a startling trick that can be played with the dominant 7th. Those who know the Robert Heinlein story “And He Built a Crooked House” will remember the four-dimensional building whose doorways can lead unpredictably to rooms that should have been distant in the three-dimensional world. Similarly, the dominant 7th can sometimes lead to a distant key that we could not have predicted. In a later lecture, we will see that the notes of such dominant 7ths are reinterpreted, and the chord is renamed an augmented 6th – the change is not in the sound of the chord itself, but in the new implications it acquires, although the listener only knows about this in retrospect, after the surprising key emerges. There are plenty of opportunities here for composerly wit in creating false expectations, and the result has its own distinctive charm. In the first movement of Haydn’s Symphony. No. 55 there is a moment of suspense when a dominant 7th is repeated quietly (which might arouse our suspicions), and then leads to a distant minor key. A couple of minutes later, the process is reversed, and the same kind of trickery takes us back to the main key.

Tchaikovsky, writing almost a century later, was very familiar with such tricks, but for dramatic reasons, he handled one of this trick dominant 7ths in an effortful way during his *Romeo & Juliet* Overture. The music freezes on the dominant seventh chord, and we expect it to resolve in the normal way to introduce a lyrical theme. But the dominant 7th is reinterpreted to take us to a distant key for the love theme, which is now all the more magical for its appearance in this unexpected key (D-flat major instead of D major). Once the love theme is underway, it glides through an enfilade of different rooms without stopping in any of them.

Losing Direction

We have seen dominant 7ths used deceptively, as the point of departure for a diversion that eventually leads back to the same dominant 7th and closure on the tonic. What, though, if the dominant 7th leads to an apparent diversion that does not, in fact, come around to the tonic in the end? There are cases, for example, where one dominant 7th is followed by a dominant 7th from different key, but instead of stepping out on a circuitous route to the tonic, we find that the two dominant 7ths merely alternate indefinitely. In such an oscillation, we can no longer form a sense of any key, and once we realise that we are going nowhere, harmonically speaking, these dominant 7ths no longer carry any implications for us. It is notable that the early cases of dominant-7th oscillation appear in operatic contexts, where the events on stage can supply a justification for the loss of tonality. In Glinka’s *Ruslan and Lyudmila* (1842), such an oscillation appears when an evil magician kidnaps the bride in the midst of her wedding feast; the astonished guests are frozen to the spot, prevented by sorcery from doing anything to stop the abduction. The effect was a startling novelty in the 1840s, so contemporary audiences would have been as spellbound as the wedding guests. The spell is eventually broken, but by then, the unfortunate bride is far away.

There had been Russian opera composers before Glinka, but their music was generally Italian in style, whether the libretto was in Italian or Russian. Glinka was the first to create a new style, as rich as it was innovative. His well-earned prestige in Russia, together with the fact that he drew to some extent on Russia’s own musical traditions, led him to be regarded as “the father of Russian music”. His two Russian operas were a treasure trove for the following generation of Russian composers. One of his successors, Musorgsky, decided to make use of a dominant 7th oscillation in his opera *Boris Godunov*. Because Glinka’s magical scene was so well known, however, Musorgsky had to use the device to a very different effect if he was not to sound derivative. He succeeded admirably, using each of his two dominant 7th to represent an enormous bell, clanging inharmoniously in alternation. This was, in a way, quite realistic, since the largest Russian church bells produce a complex spectrum of frequencies, whereas their Western counterparts produce a much clearer pitch. Boris is a usurper, and his reign is ill-fated (as Russian audiences know from their history), and Musorgsky’s representation of the bells sounds grim and foreboding – even frightening. For the duration of this long passage, there is no key, and we listen to Boris’s premonitions of disaster against this disturbing orchestral backdrop.

Other Family Members

At this point, I will need to introduce you to the concept of “inverting” chords. We know that the dominant 7th

consists of four notes, and in all the examples so far, the note in the bass is the “root” of the chord, which is the note from which the chord takes its name. So, if our dominant 7th is called G7. The default is to put the root in the bass, and this is accordingly called the “root position” of the chord, which is what we have heard so far in the discussion. In our example of G7, the notes are built up from the root thus: G, B, D, F. What if the root appears higher in the chord, and one of the other three notes is in the bass? If B is the bass note, then we say the chord is in “first inversion”; if D is in the bass, it is now in “second inversion”, and finally, if F is in the bass, it is in “third inversion”. Each of these inversions has a character of its own, distinct from the root position. Charles Burney, an 18th century writer famed for an account of his musical travels in Europe, was enthusiastic about these different forms of the chord; whoever first used the inversions of the dominant 7th, he says:

conferred as refreshing a benefit on the craving lovers of music as Moses on the thirsty Israelites in producing water with his wand from the rock on Mount Horeb.

Mendelssohn’s *Song without Words* op. 62 no.1 is unusual for its opening chord, which is a 1st-inversion dominant 7th. The choice of chord gives us the impression that we have walked in on a piece that is already *in medias res*. Mendelssohn’s first-inversion chord sounds in urgent need of resolution, just like the normal dominant 7ths we have already heard, but the effect is different: instead of the conclusive jump in the bass from the dominant to the tonic, there is just a step (upwards) in the bass. This, however, is exactly what Mendelssohn needs, since he doesn’t want his phrase to conclude on the second chord of the piece.

The Third Inversion: A Turning Point

I would like to devote a whole section of this talk to the third inversion of the dominant 7th, which has a very strong and memorable character of its own. In the early 18th century, it was commonly used, and young musicians were taught it as a standard move in “the rule of the octave”, which was an exercise in adding chords to each note of a slow-moving scale in the bass. If we return to our example of the G7, the dissonant note is F, and it is this note that appears in the bass when the G7 is placed in the third inversion. The bass, with its dissonant note, can only resolve by moving a step downwards. If the composer doesn’t resolve this chord immediately, the result is a heightening of suspense greater than in any of the other forms of the dominant 7th, precisely because the dissonant note is now in the all-important bass position. Saint-Saëns begins his *First Piano Concerto* with a chord that should be very familiar to you from the first lecture – a major triad. It is given to the horns, as if calling to each other from different parts of the forest in a royal hunt. But when the strings enter, another note is added in the bass, turning the chord into a dominant 7th in the third inversion. The effect is subtle, and Saint-Saëns takes care to reinforce it when the piano enters a few seconds later. The confidence of the opening horn calls dissipates in unease and expectation, all because of this dissonant note in the bass, and we sense that a long story is about to unfold.

Beethoven used the third inversion to great effect, not least because he was always ready to use a sound that was in itself ugly if it was warranted by the musical drama. In the first lecture, we have already seen that we have difficulty distinguishing notes that are close together when they are played in a low register. This is exactly the problem that occurs when the dissonant note is placed immediately below the root in a third-inversion chord, although what we normally call a “problem” is often an effect that Beethoven is happy to exploit.

In the first movement of his *Symphony No. 7*, we encounter a passage with exactly this kind of low-register dissonance. The chord resolves for an instant, then goes back a step, resolves, goes back a step and so on, many times, like the needle jumping on a record. It is one of those moments where Beethoven can write music that is both disturbing and witty. When finally the grimly obsessive repetition comes to an end, we are genuinely relieved, not for a character in some imaginary drama, but relieved for our own sake.

The third-inversion chord was also a prominent feature in recitatives, a feature of operas back to their beginning in the 1590s, when pioneering composers tried to give a musical rendering of speech in what they supposed was a recreation of Ancient Greek drama. Recitative makes constant use of questioning and answering chords. Specifically, the third-inversion chord is a kind of musical “but” or “however”. In Bach’s *Matthew Passion*, for example, in one of Jesus’s recitatives we have the following text: “I have sat teaching day after day in the courts of the Temple, and yet you did not arrest me. But this has taken place so that the Scriptures may be fulfilled.” Before we even hear the word “but”, we hear its musical counterpart, the third-inversion chord, and already know that the speaker, Jesus, is not actually puzzled, but is about to offer an explanation.

Tchaikovsky, in his operas, often uses the third-inversion just before some important turn in the drama, or when a new character is about to appear on stage. In *Eugene Onegin*, we watch a love duet between Olga and Lensky, but we hear the third-inversion, and just afterward, the Mother and Nanny appear on stage. The chord also fulfils the same purpose as a noise, like a snapping twig, signalling to the lovers that they are about to be interrupted. Tchaikovsky's later opera, *The Queen of Spades*, contains another example, again interrupting a duet between two lovers. The troubled couple, Hermann and Lisa, are seemingly reconciled, but then we hear the third-inversion chord. This time, it is not another character who interrupts the lovers, but Hermann himself. Just after the chord, his psychosis suddenly takes hold of him, and he raves about the luck he will have in his next bout of gambling, no longer caring about the unfortunate Lisa. Admittedly, this third-inversion chord changes its meaning in retrospect, with a resolution in a different key, but at the moment when we hear it, it is still the familiar third inversion. In both these examples, the music is fleshed out, with full orchestration and musical details, but there is still a clear lineage that can be traced back to the much sparser recitative passages of old.

Let us turn to Shostakovich for our last examples of the third inversion. Shostakovich drew from the current of modernism that was known as neoclassicism, which was not a recreation of earlier music, but an ironic recontextualization of materials from earlier music. The third-inversion chord was perfect as a compact and easily recognisable item from the music of the 18th and 19th centuries. The slow movement of Shostakovich's Second String Quartet is subtitled "Recitative and Romance", leading us to expect a neoclassical reference to some feature of recitatives before long. Sure enough, the opening gesture is precisely a third-inversion, and in the course of the Recitative section, it returns many times, prompting intense monologues from the first violin (in the place of the imagined opera singer). In Shostakovich's Fifth Quartet, the intensely dramatic finale takes us to the third inversion as a fateful climactic chord, played pizzicato but with great force by all four musicians. Three strikes, repeated three times, function as a turning point in the movement, in the gulf between a terrifying and desperate atonal passage on one side, and an ironic waltz tune on the other. The chord loses none of its questioning nature, and given both the immediate musical context, and the larger context of Shostakovich's place and time, we can well imagine the grim dilemma.

Against the Dominant Seventh

Toward the middle of the 19th century, tonality was long established. At the same time, a musical aesthetic of originality was developing among those composers who identified with literary romanticism, so various features that had been considered neutral over the previous century or two were now questioned, avoided or disguised. One of the challenges to standard tonal practice came from the Russian polymath Vladimir Odoevsky, who helped Russian composers to distance themselves from the Western mainstream. To Odoevsky, the dominant seventh was not a progressive force, but a conduit for corruption and degradation:

When Monteverdi, or whoever it was, brought the [dominant] 7th chord into music, it removed the firm foundation from music... The seventh chord put a stop to the ancient modes, or to our own *glasy*, in which, I believe, lies the embryo of music's future development... I wouldn't deny the seventh chord a right to exist, since it is a musical element and a necessary one at that, but in our era it has become too assertive. Because of [the dominant 7th], we have to make do with just two modes, the major and minor. But the time will come, and it is not far off, when [these chords] will outstay their welcome, and musicians will remember that there were other modes.

Odoevsky also proposed that the melodies of Russian folksongs should be taken up by Russian composers. But when such melodies were to be harmonised, he insisted, the dominant 7th should be purged as a foreign and anachronistic element. The vocabulary of folksong harmonisations should be limited, he said, to pure triads:



Odoevsky's proposals were well received by composers who already wanted to develop a musical style that was distinctively Russian. Mikhail Glinka tried to avoid various Western clichés and once, in a conversation with Liszt, he criticized Weber's music for its overuse of the dominant 7th (in root position) – although Liszt disagreed, his own innovations were one of the main sources for Russian composers of the next generation. These later Russian composers remembered Glinka's comment, and in Glinka's overture to his opera *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, they found a musical articulation of his misgivings: instead of the usual tonic-dominant-tonic progression to establish the key, Glinka swaps the dominant for a chord built one step lower. Although it may seem quite trivial to us, in the polemics of the time, it was held up as a banner in the struggle for a more authentically Russian music.

Musorgsky, in his opera *Boris Godunov*, avoided the dominant seventh chord in his Russian scenes, but used it freely in the scenes at the Polish court (since he saw the Poles as Catholic Westerners). In the pilgrims' chorus, Musorgsky uses a melody that might have been a hymn actually sung by pilgrims (the source is unknown), but whether authentic or invented, his harmonisation avoids the dominant seventh, even where there are some obvious opportunities for the chord. The effect is oddly fresh and archaic, which is exactly what Musorgsky wanted. Much of the harmonic experimentation in Russian music of this time was prompted by the desire to avoid the dominant 7th – there were many possible substitutions and alternative strategies. Musorgsky and his Russian colleagues, in turn, influenced Debussy, who took further steps towards the dissolution of tonality. Odoevsky was richly vindicated.

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References and Further Reading

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