

COMMON-TONE DIMINISHED SEVENTH CHORDS

The common-tone diminished seventh chord is a chromatic non-functional chord that serves to expand another chord. Because it generally appears as a collection of neighbor tones, the common-tone diminished seventh is often described as a “neighbor chord.” The outer voices are especially likely to move by step or common tone; leaps (if necessary) are usually relegated to an inner voice.

As its name suggests, the common-tone diminished seventh chord has a fully diminished quality and shares one note with the chord it prolongs. This common tone is the root of the prolonged chord. Since the common-tone diminished seventh chord has no function of its own, it is not given its own Roman numeral but instead is simply abbreviated CT^{°7}.

a. preferred b. acceptable c. poor soprano d. poor spelling

B \flat : I CT^{°7} I I CT^{°7} I I CT^{°7} I I CT^{°7} I

Notice that the smoothest voice-leading will result in a doubled fifth (*a*); this is generally considered preferable to leaping, although minimal leaping is acceptable as long as it is hidden in an inner voice (*b*). Leaping in either of the outer voices is undesirable (*c*). The common-tone diminished seventh chord’s spelling should be determined by the voice-leading tendencies of the notes involved: examples *a-c* are spelled appropriately, but *d* is not. Notice that when the expanded chord is in root position, the CT^{°7} will appear to be in $\frac{4}{2}$ position.

e. f. g. h.

D: I⁶ CT^{°7} I⁶ V CT^{°7} V V⁷ CT^{°7} V⁷ V⁶ CT^{°7} V⁶₅

Although common-tone diminished sevenths are frequently used to expand root-position chords, they also expand inverted chords quite effectively (*e* and *h*). Notice that the common tone is far less conspicuous in these cases, often relegated to an inner voice (*h*). The common-tone diminished seventh chord almost invariably expands a major chord, most likely the tonic (*a-e*) or the dominant (*f-h*). The expanded dominant may be either a triad (*f*) or a seventh chord (*g*), and sometimes the seventh is added after the CT^{°7} (*h*).

i. passing chord (non-functional) j. secondary chord k. secondary chord

$E\flat$: I CT $^{\circ 7}$ V^4_3 CT $^{\circ 7}$ I 6 I vii $^{\circ 7}/ii$ ii vii $^{\circ 7}/V$ $V^6_4 = \frac{5}{3}$ I

The common-tone diminished seventh chord generally appears between two identical (or nearly identical) chords, in which case chromatic neighboring motion will be evident. However, it is also possible for this chord to pass between functional chords (*i*). For inexperienced music analysts, passing CT $^{\circ 7}$ chords are much more difficult to detect because they look very similar to secondary leading-tone chords. Notice several important differences between the first three chords of *i* and *j*:

- Although the diminished seventh chords are enharmonically equivalent, they are spelled differently.
- The spelling of the CT $^{\circ 7}$ might lead us to expect a D triad next, but this chord never appears. The spelling of the secondary chord leads us to expect an F triad, and it does indeed resolve to an F-minor chord.
- The root of the secondary chord resolves to the root of the next chord, as expected. The apparent root of the CT $^{\circ 7}$ resolves to the third of the next chord.
- One voice in the CT $^{\circ 7}$ retains a common tone, whereas all voices in the secondary chord resolve by step.

Be aware that when vii $^{\circ 7}/V$ resolves to V via a cadential $\frac{6}{4}$, there will be a common tone (two common tones in minor keys), as shown in example *k*. However, this is not an instance of a common-tone diminished seventh chord. We must keep in mind that the progression is functional. The common tones result from the suspensions that delay the arrival of $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{2}$ in the upper voices once the bass moves, which is quite different from the previous examples.

Other common-tone chords are possible, but they are relatively unusual. The one you are most likely to encounter is the common-tone augmented-sixth chord (CT $^{+6}$), which expands the tonic. Once again, the common tone is the root of the prolonged chord.

l. m. n. o.

F : I CT $^{+6}$ I I CT $^{+6}$ I I CT $^{+6}$ I I CT $^{+6}$ I

The bass may maintain the common tone (*l* and *m*), or it may leap a third to $b\hat{6}$ (*n* and *o*). While the CT $^{+6}$ chord may be spelled like a functional German chord (as in examples *l* and *o*), it is often spelled with $\sharp\hat{2}$ rather than $b\hat{3}$ (as in examples *m* and *n*) because this better reflects the voice leading of the chord's resolution. Even when it looks exactly like a functional Ger $^{+6}$ chord, the CT $^{+6}$ is easily distinguishable because it returns to the tonic rather than progressing to the dominant.