Improvisation in the French Style

Typical Harmonic Progressions, the *Offertoire*, and the Toccata

Rochester AGO Winter Skills Workshop
February 6, 2016
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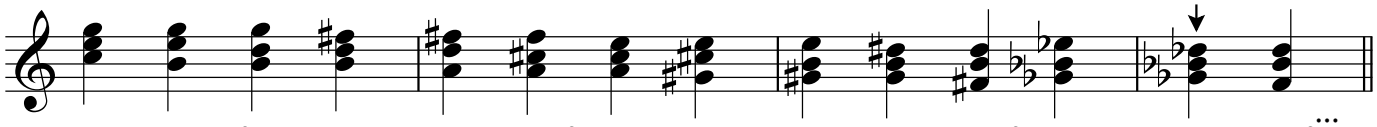
Warmups: Triads

Examples should be practiced with "locked hands": doubled down an octave in the left hand

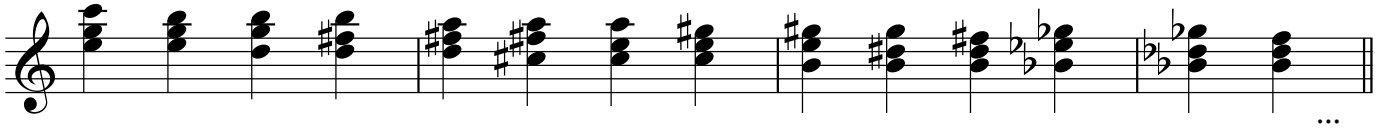
Sequence 1: root motion up by thirds, alternating major and minor triads;
goes through all 24 major and minor keys

halfway there!

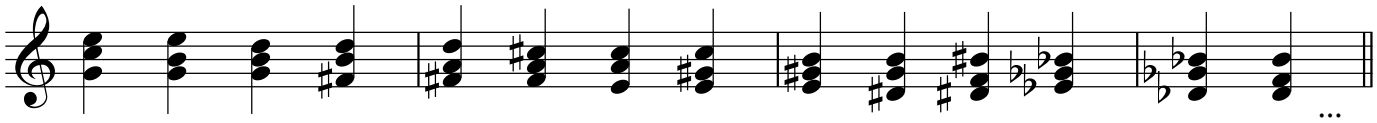


another way of thinking about it: the third of the chord you're on becomes the root of the next one; or, the root falls

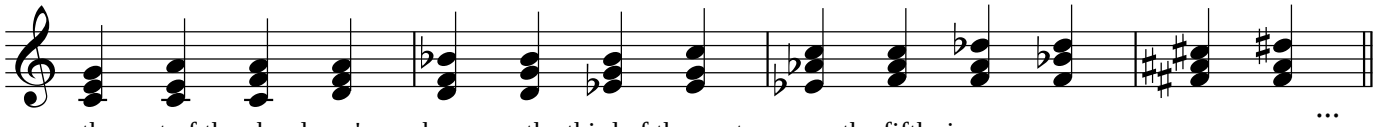
starting on first inversion



starting on second inversion

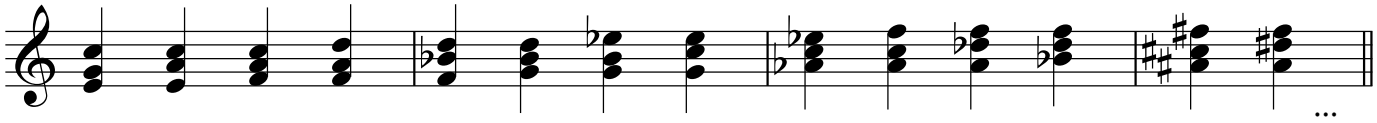


Sequence 2: root motion down by thirds, alternating major and minor triads

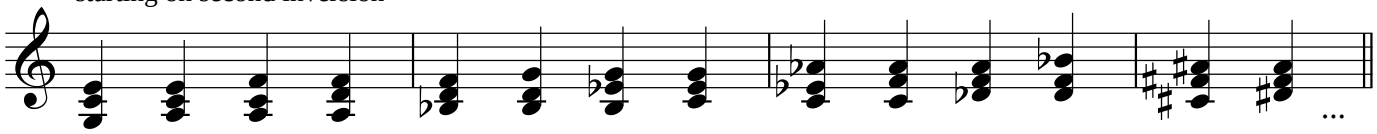


the root of the chord you're on becomes the third of the next one; or, the fifth rises

starting on first inversion

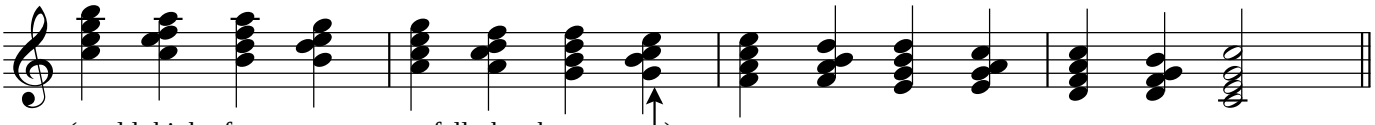


starting on second inversion



Warmups: Seventh Chords

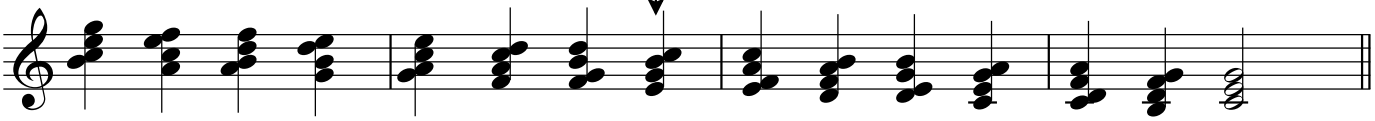
Diatonic "circle of sevenths" (seventh chords the roots of which form a circle of fifths), alternating root and second inversion



(could think of as: top two notes fall, then bottom two)

from here, pattern repeats first 7 chords with positions reversed, so all are played twice

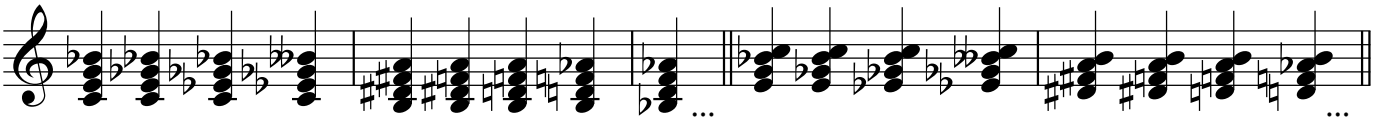
same, alternating first and third inversion



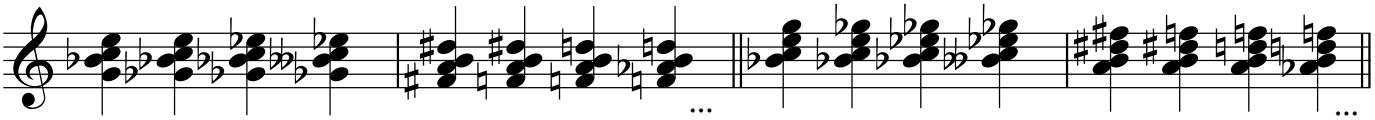
(could think of as: outside notes fall, then inside ones)

The four most common chords in this style:

C^7 $C^{7\flat5}$ $C^{\varnothing}$ $C\text{dim}^7$ B^7 $B^{7\flat5}$ $B^{\varnothing}$ $B\text{dim}^7$ $B\flat^7$ the same pattern in first inversion



in second inversion in third inversion

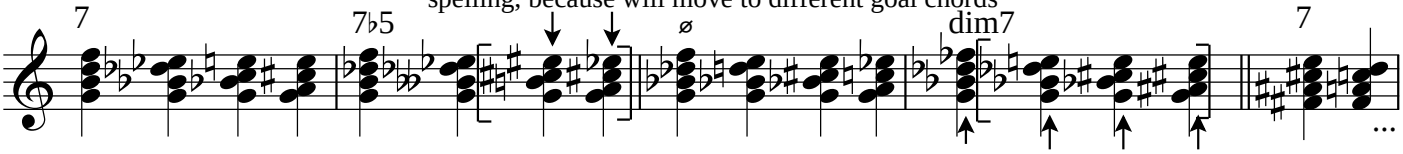


An alternative way of practicing the chords: eleven different chords can be built on one bass note:

sound the same as root and 1st inversion, but it's helpful to think of as having different spelling, because will move to different goal chords

all four dim7 chords sound the same, but whichever note is thought of as the root will become a leading tone

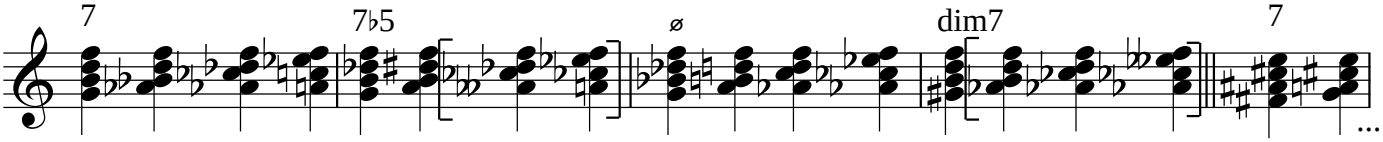
7 7♭5 ø dim7 7



will go to A♭ to F to D to B

Another alternative for practicing: eleven different chords can be built under one top note:

7 7♭5 ø dim7 7



Prolongation ("treading water")

keeping root, moving third and fifth
(can be chromatically altered)

based on Dubois, *Fiat Lux*

keeping fifth, moving root and third
(usually not altered)

"pinkie pedal"

sixths around inside pedal point (based on Dubois, *Fiat Lux*)

...

neighboring
dim7

neighboring
Ger7 (common in style)

neighboring
Fr7

"Scalar prolongation": alternating I and V7 with
stepwise contrary motion (idiomatic; see Grison, *Toccata*)

Similar wedge idea,
but chromatic,
based on Widor

The Widor idea extended:

G7 E7 C♯7 B♭7 back to G7

the tonic and seventh
trade places chromatically,
forming a minor triad in the middle

Idiomatic Chord Progressions as Sequences

<u>Down a second</u>

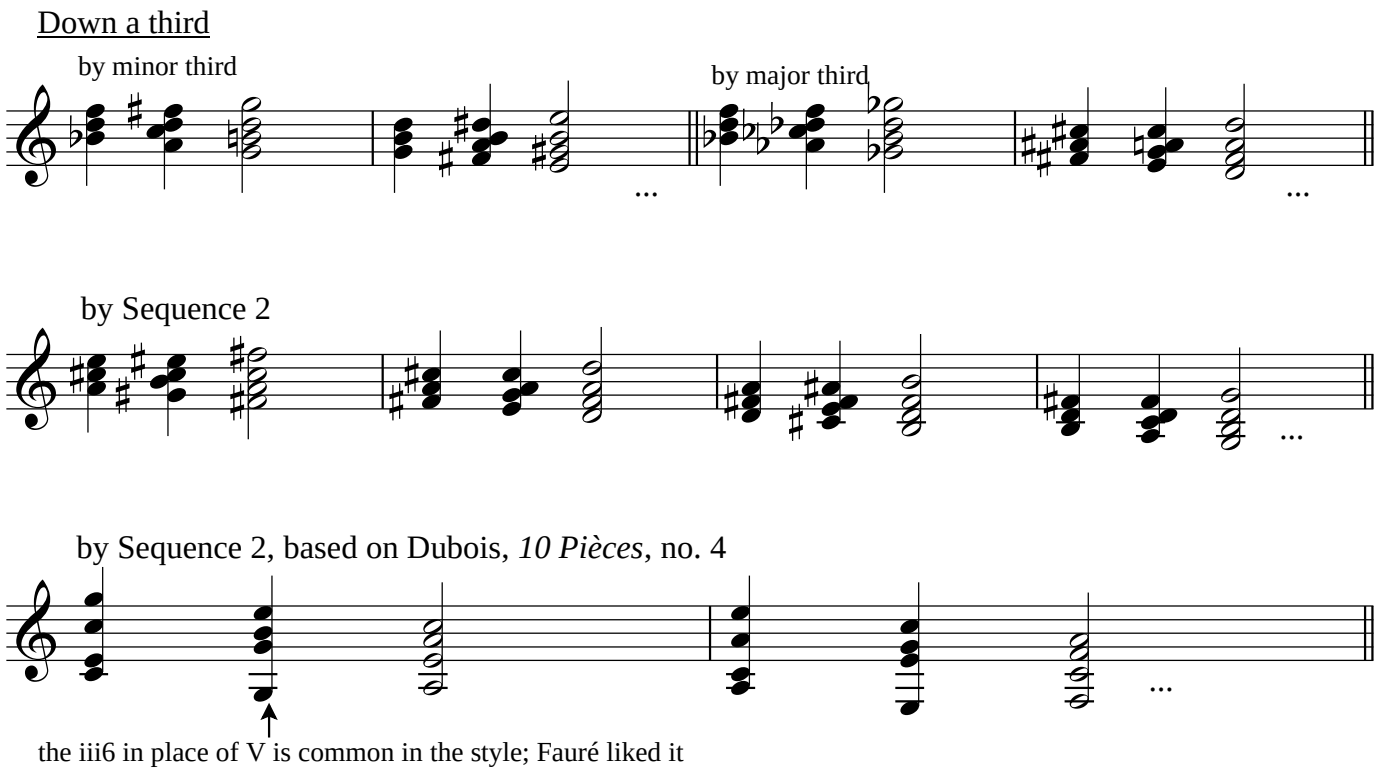
by major second

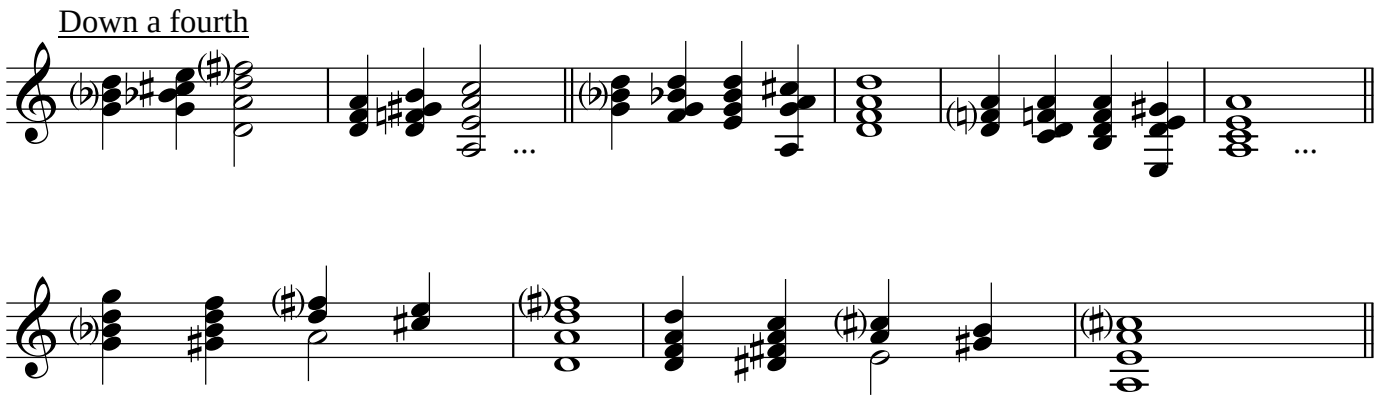
the "Allegretto" sequence

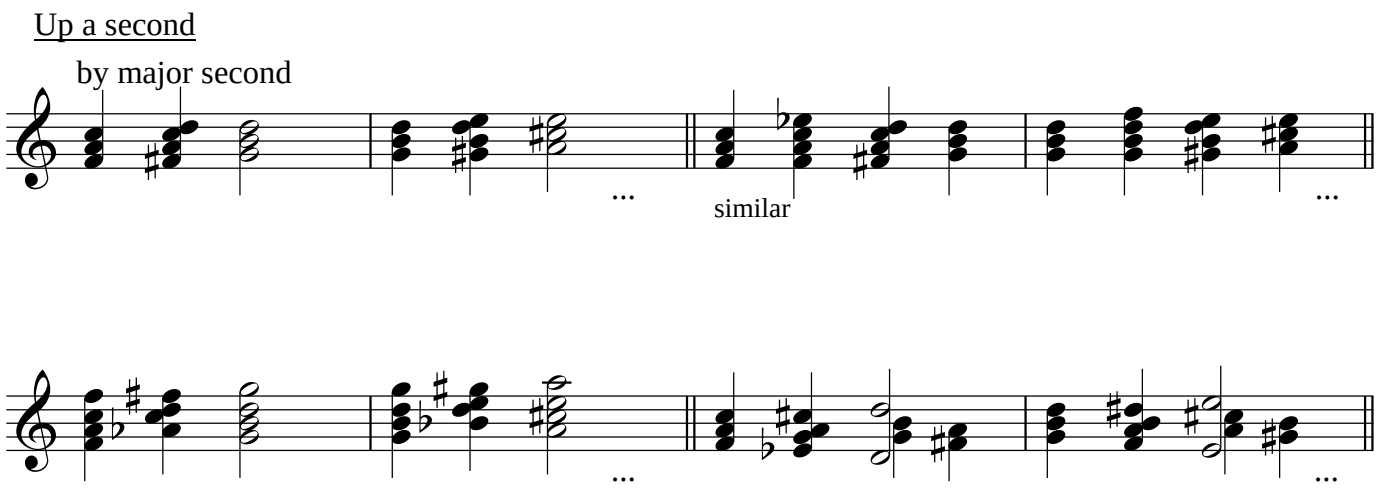
...

by minor second

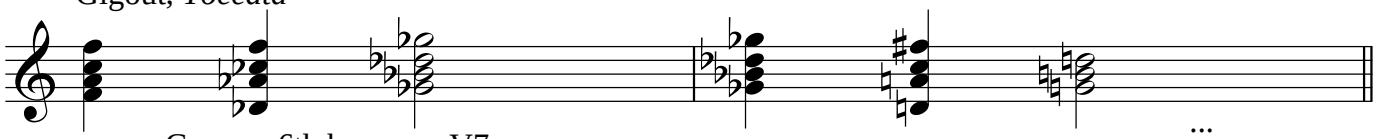
...


Down a third
by minor third
by major third
by Sequence 2
by Sequence 2, based on Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 4
the iii6 in place of V is common in the style; Fauré liked it


Down a fourth


Up a second
by major second
similar

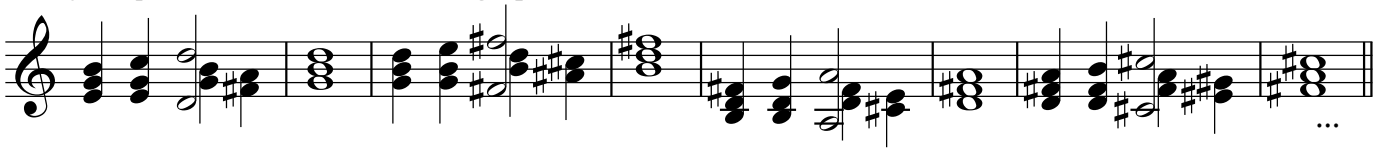
Gigout, *Toccata*



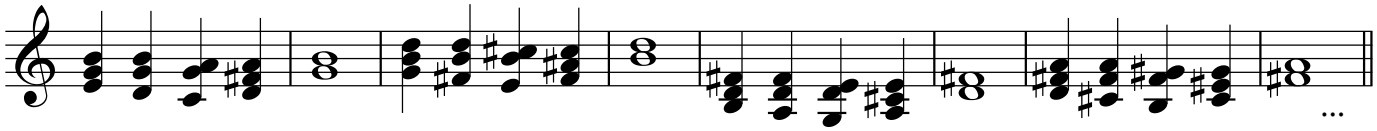
Ger aug 6th becomes V7

<u>Up a third</u>

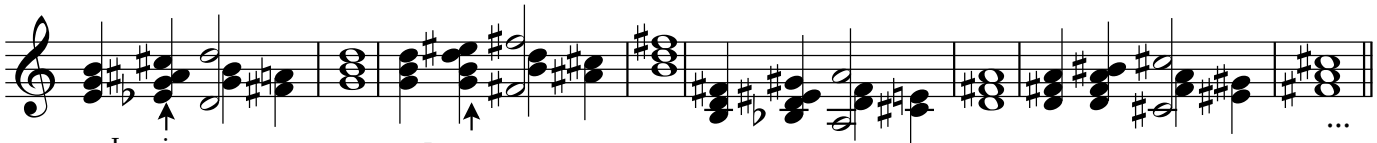
by Sequence 1, dominant moving up



by Sequence 1, tonic moving down



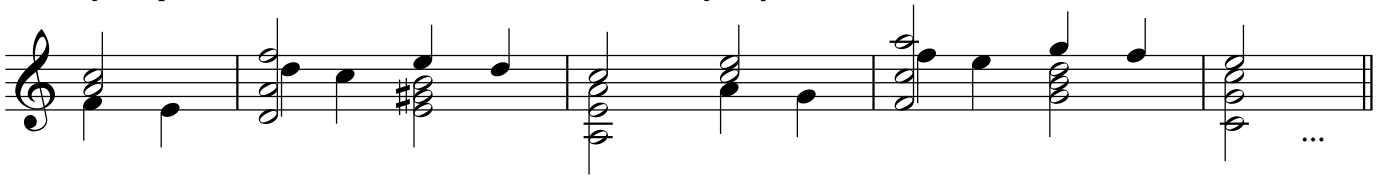
by Sequence 1, dominant and tonic moving chromatically to make German augmented sixths



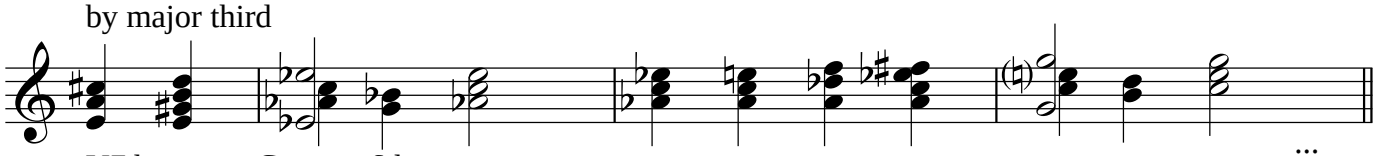
In minor,
Ger aug 6th built on ♭1

In major,
Ger aug 6th built on 1

by Sequence 1, based on Boëllmann, *L'Heure Mystique*, vol. 1, Offertoire 3

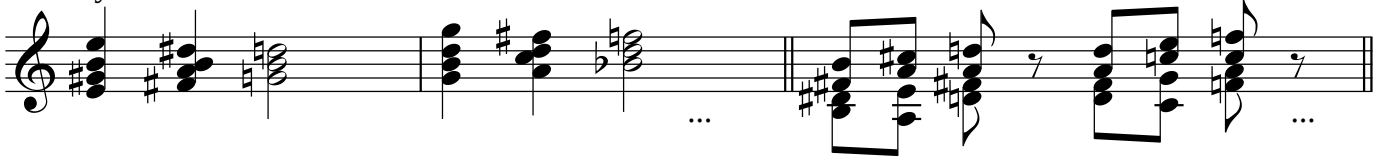


by major third



V7 becomes Ger aug 6th

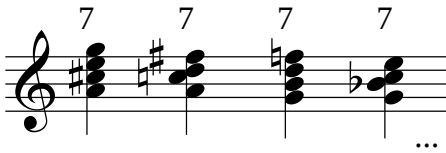
by minor third



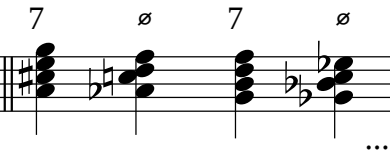
Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 3

Other Stylistic Progressions

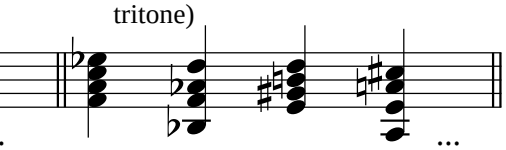
regular circle of
dominant sevenths



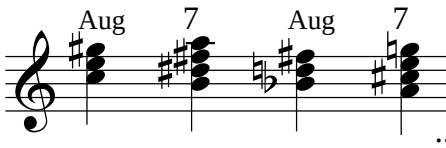
more idiomatic:



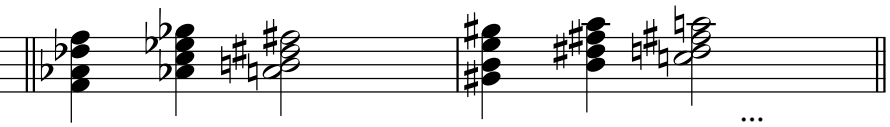
based on Philip, *Toccata*
(break circle with
tritone)



based on Mulet, *Tu es Petra*
(alternating augmented triads
with dominant sevenths)

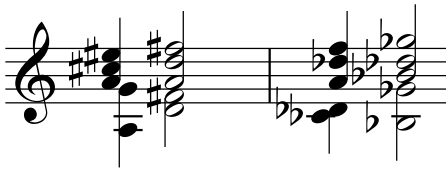


based on Boëllmann, "Toccata" from *Suite Gothique*



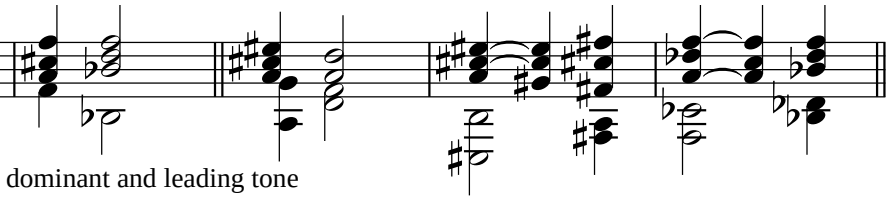
In the style, the four dominant 7ths whose roots outline a dim7 frequently jump directly to each other; all those jumps involve two common tones.
In the example, we jump from A♭ to B, then B to D.

The augmented triad is often part of a V7#5 chord,
with three normal resolutions:

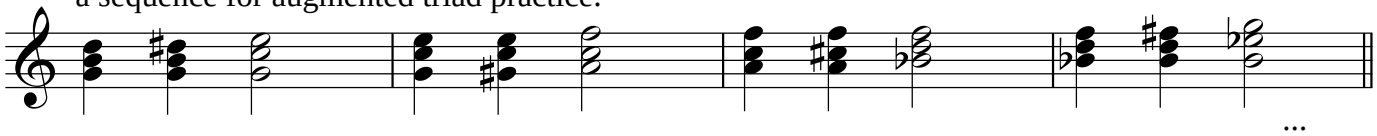


any 2 of the triad's notes can be the dominant and leading tone

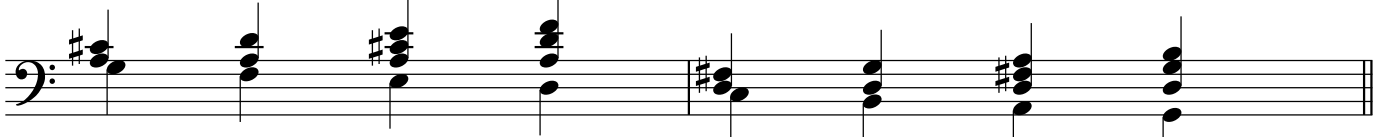
It can also be seen as part of a V13 chord:



a sequence for augmented triad practice:

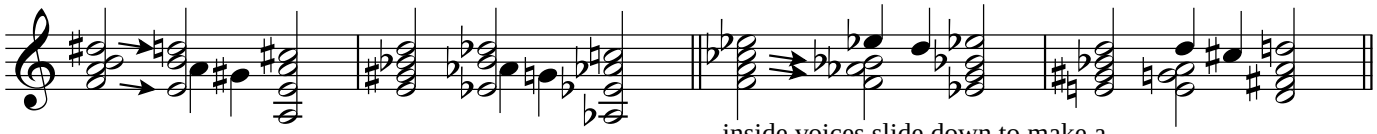


an equivalent to the Baroque "rule of the octave":



just make any 4 descending notes into a 4/2, 6, 6/4, and 5 of a key

Two ways the French 6th can resolve to a V7 with a 4-3 suspension:

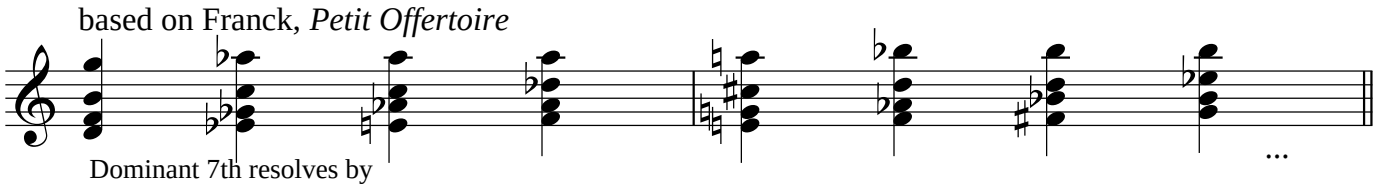


outside voices slide down to make a
dominant 7th with a suspension

inside voices slide down to make a
different dominant 7th with a suspension

Some general guidelines for the style: just think about the chord you're on, not the key you might be in; move thirds and sixths by parallel motion chromatically; when you're on a triad, either move the tonic down or the dominant up to get things moving; avoid minor seconds sounding together.

based on Franck, *Petit Offertoire*



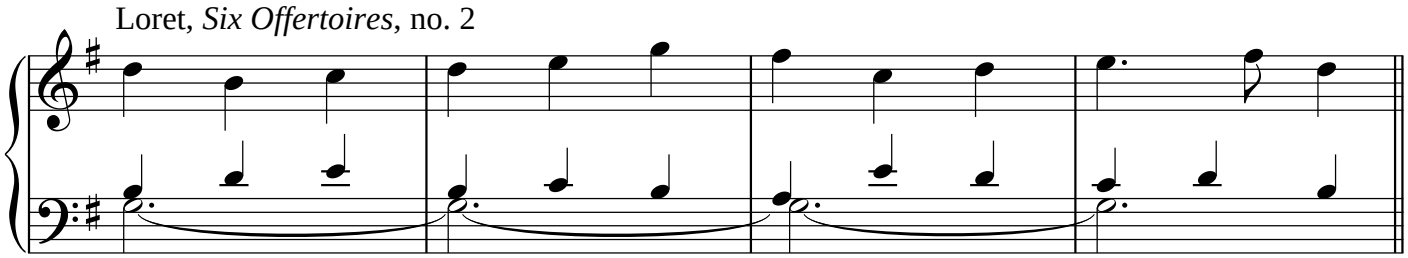
Dominant 7th resolves by
all voices moving up a semitone

The Offertoire

These, part of a standard 5-movement form (Entrée, Offertoire, Elevation, Communion, Sortie) are almost always:
-just on manuals;
-just on 8 foot stops, usually strings, sometimes with an hautbois solo;
-keeping to either 3 or 4 voices consistently;
-with very periodic melodies (regular 4-bar phrases);
-in ternary form (ABA)

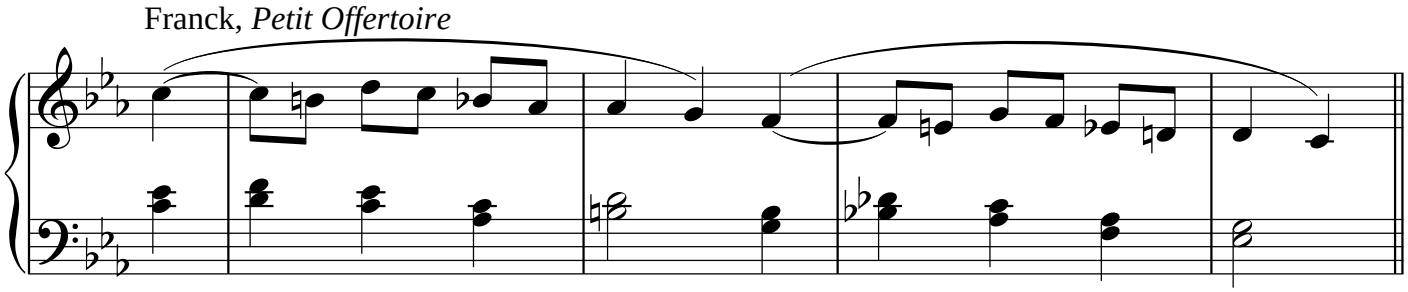
The texture is usually melody and accompaniment, usually just quarters or eighths, and mostly in stepwise motion:

Loret, *Six Offertoires*, no. 2



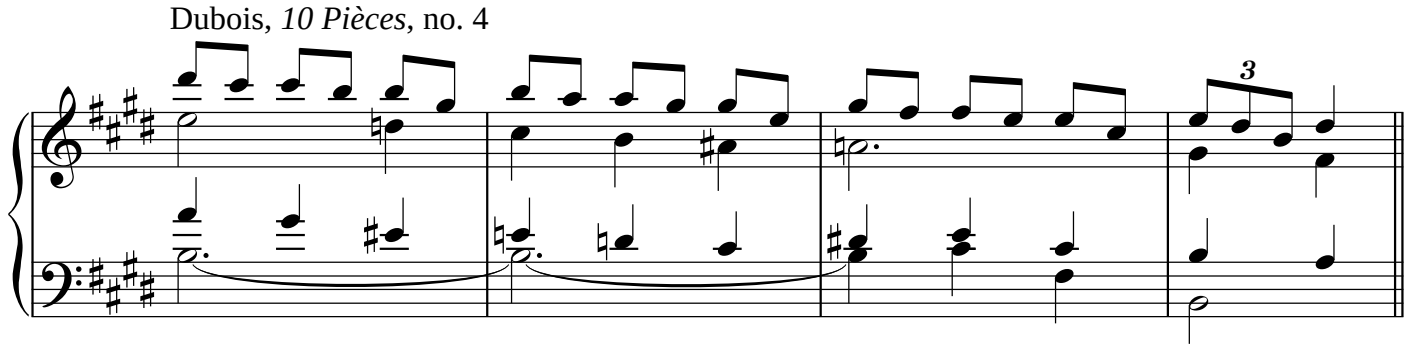
a pedal point at the beginning is fairly common

Franck, *Petit Offertoire*



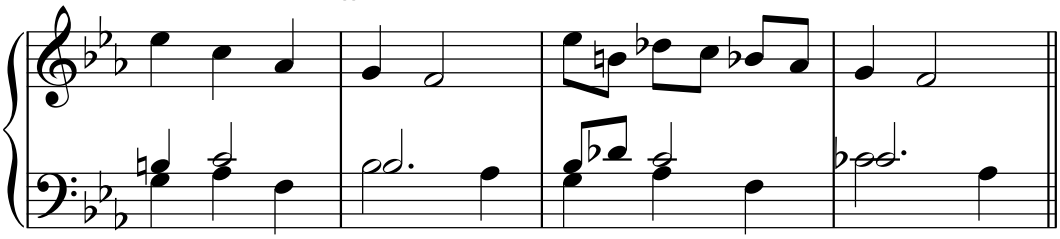
pervasive accented dissonances in the top line are very common (also see Franck above):

Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 4



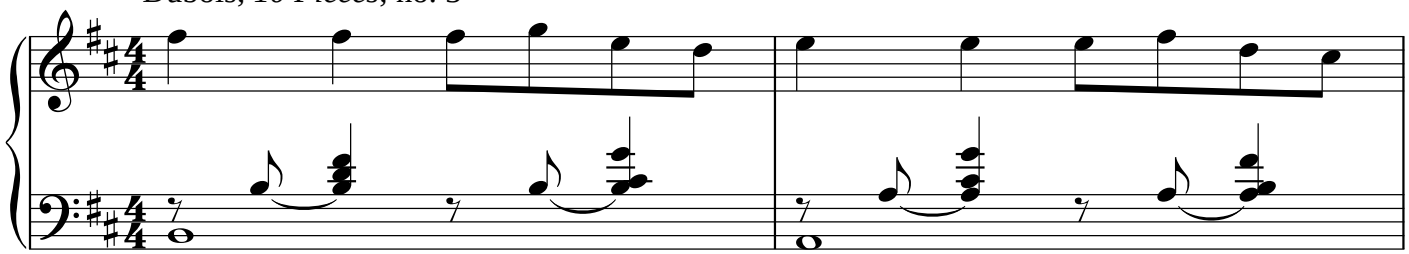
often, a short idea (usually 2 measures) is repeated and varied:

Franck, *Petit Offertoire*



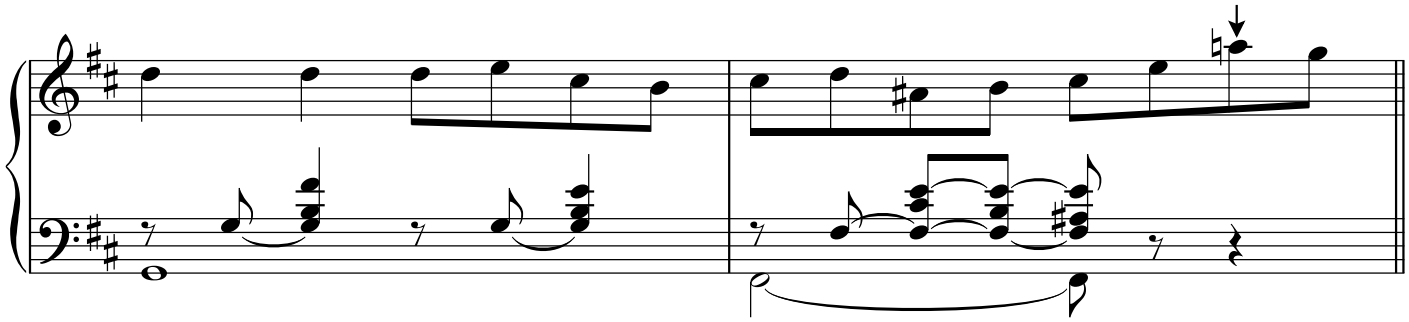
or it can be sequenced (sequences in general are very common in the style):

Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 3



if there is an obbligato pedal (rare), it will be simple

the diminished octave (also used by Franck)

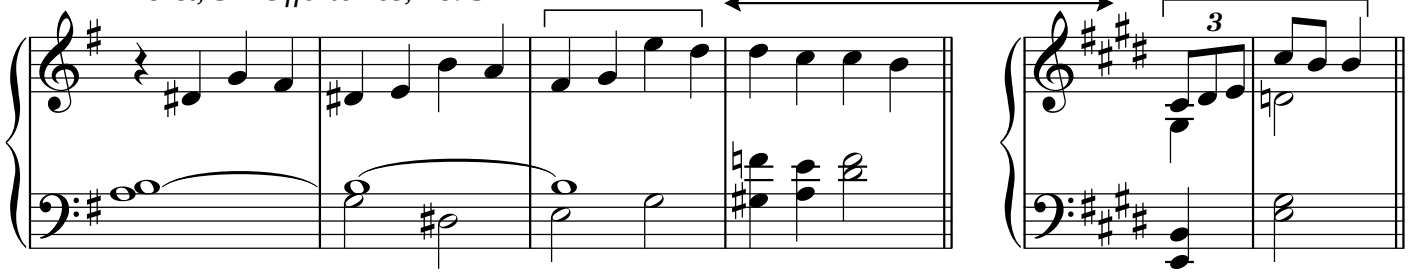


"overshooting" (to an appoggiatura) is common: leap up or down to the note on the other side of the goal note

Loret, *Six Offertoires*, no. 3

this contour is very stylistic

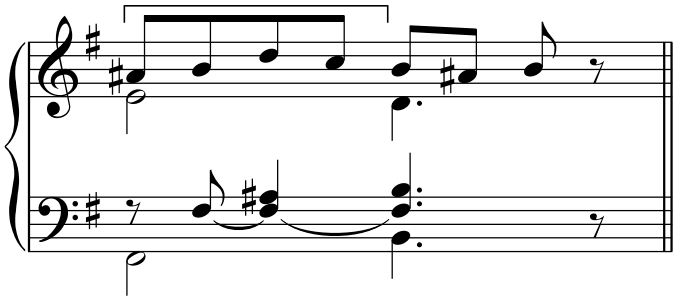
Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 4



many 13th (and 9th) chords

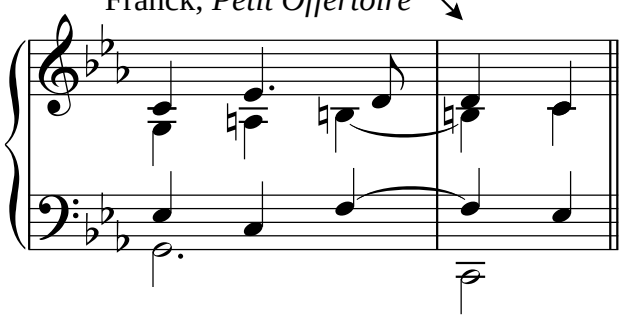
The dominant 13th is common at cadences
(the first example also has the appoggiatura contour from before):

Dubois, *10 Pièces*, no. 3



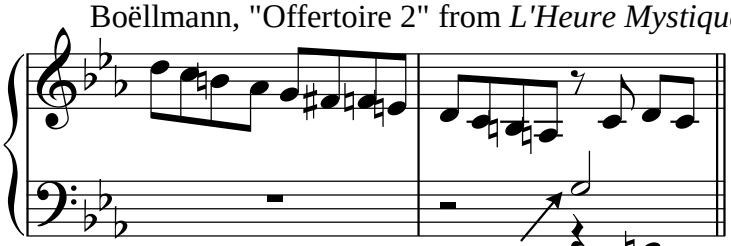
this Mozartean suspended
cadence is common in the style

Franck, *Petit Offertoire*



At the end of the B section, there's often a little cadenza
to come back to the reprise note:

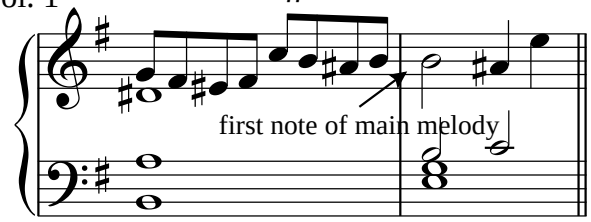
Boëllmann, "Offertoire 2" from *L'Heure Mystique*, vol. 1



first note of main melody

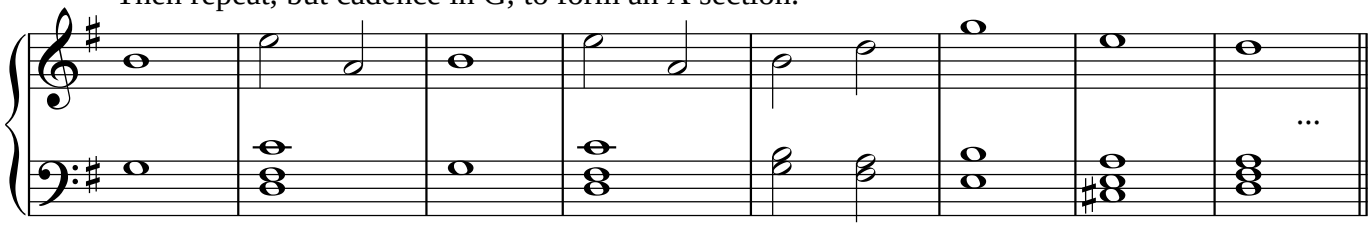
this idea buys time for the improviser to remember
the key of the piece, and how the first tune begins

Loret, *Six Offertoires*, no. 3

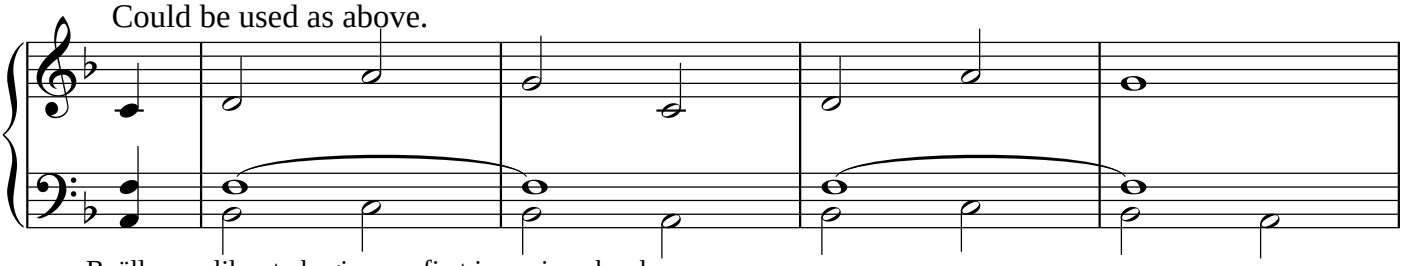


first note of main melody

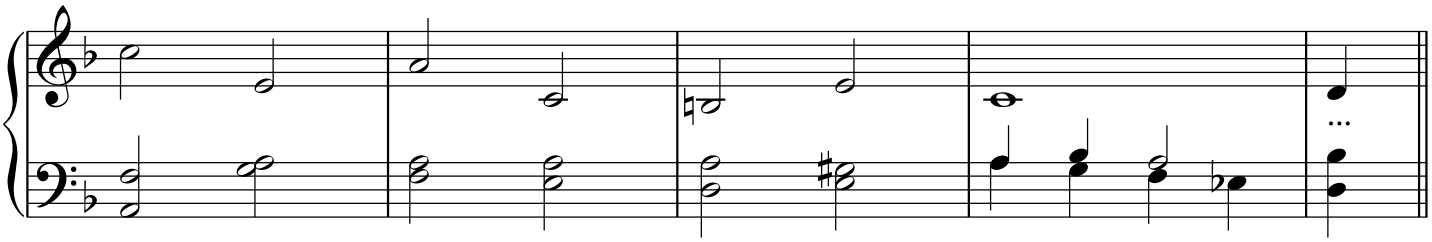
The background from Loret's *Six Offertoires*, no. 5, mm. 1-8.
The right hand line should be decorated with appoggiaturas and chromatic passing notes.
Then repeat, but cadence in G, to form an A section.



The background from Boëllmann's "Offertoire" no. 3, mm. 1-8.
Could be used as above.



Boëllmann likes to begin on a first inversion chord,
with the melody on the dominant

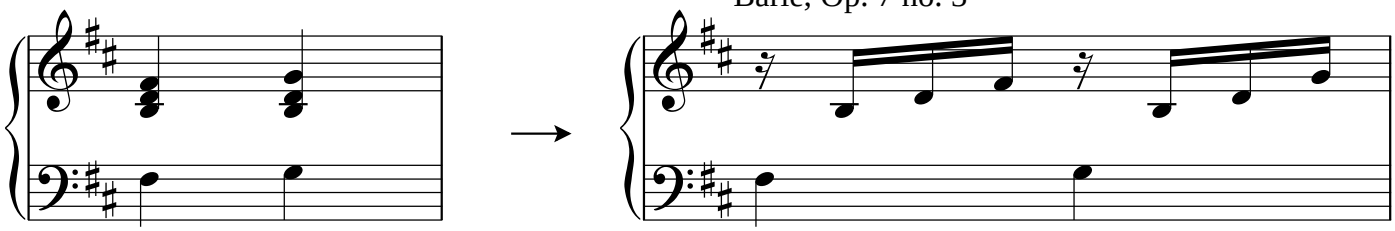


Toccata Figurations

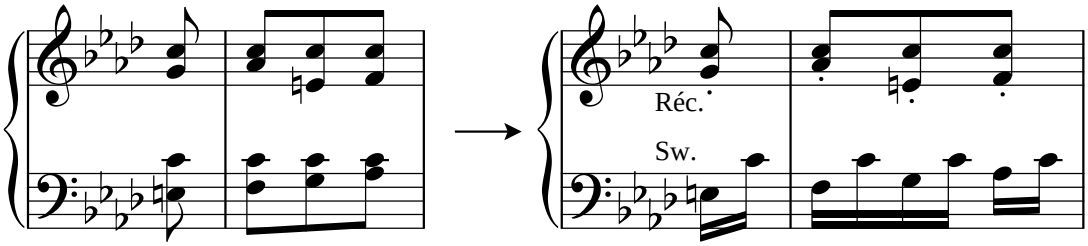
-toccatas are closely related to Baroque figuration preludes, so inspiration can flow both ways
-try playing just solid chords at first, keeping the number of voices consistent
-then just arpeggiate from bottom to top, and vice versa
-find or invent a pattern that feels comfortable, and keep using it
-try keeping to one or two sequential progression types for the whole piece

Four-part chords

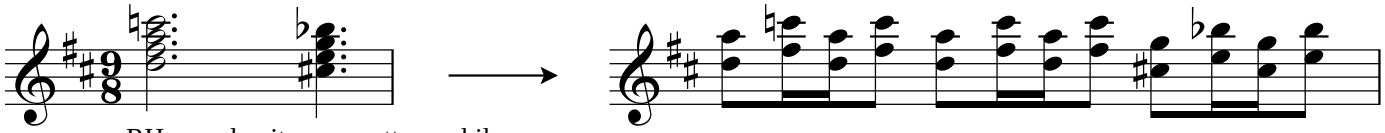
Barié, Op. 7 no. 3



Grison, *Toccata en Fa*



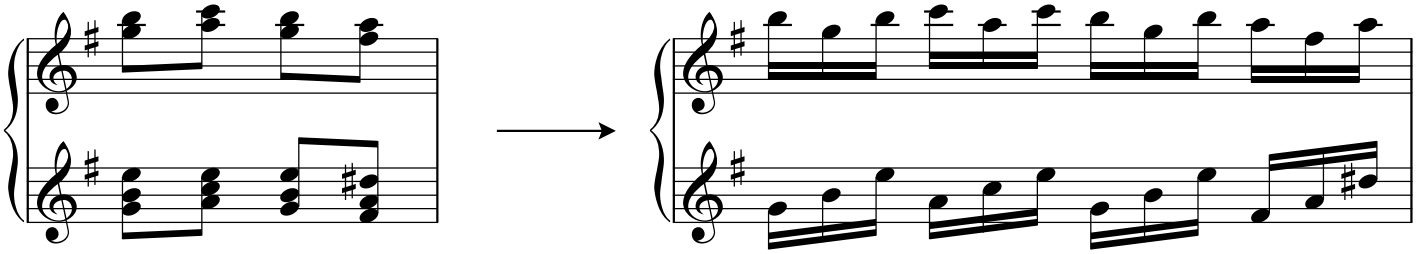
Vierne, *Carillon de Westminster*



RH can play its own pattern while
LH plays melody

Five-part chords

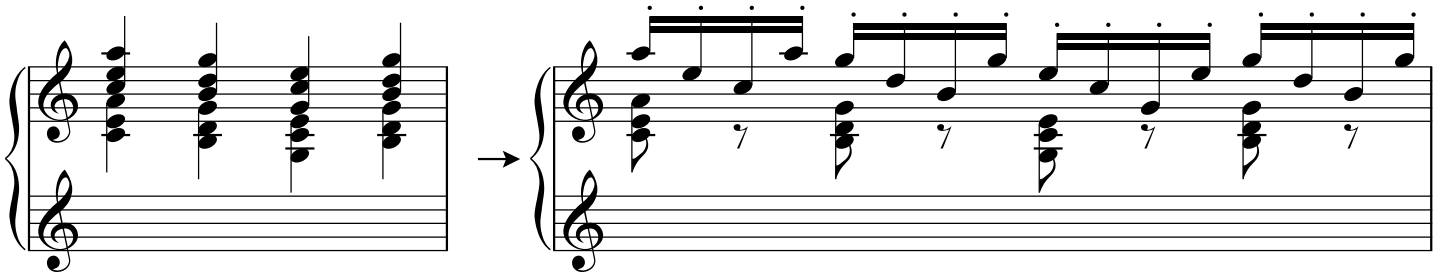
Callaerts, *Toccata in E Minor*



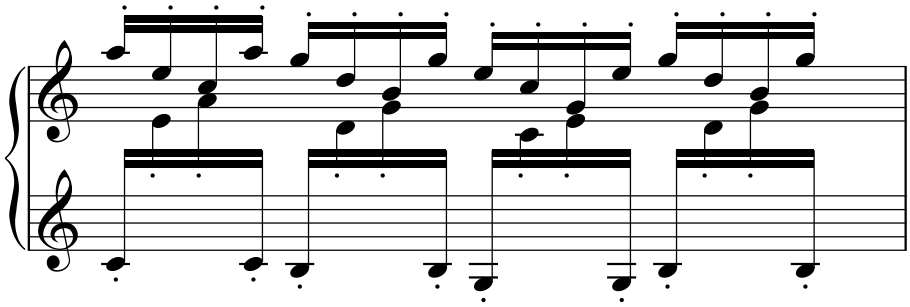
implied parallel octaves,
even in outside voices,
are common in the style

<u>Six-part chords</u> (the most common; often "locked hands")

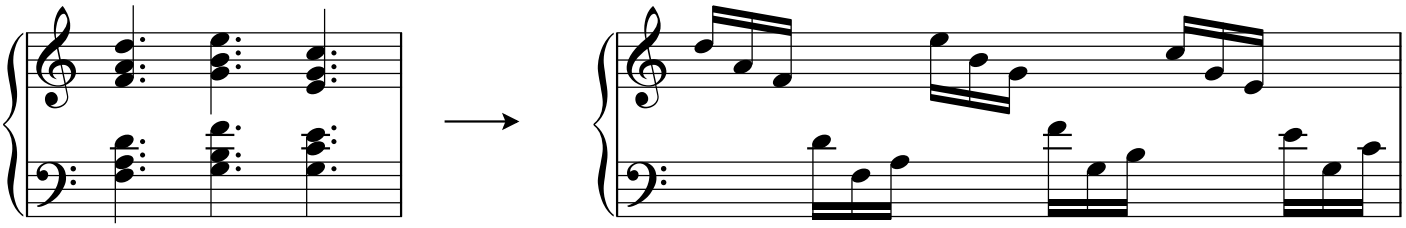
Philip, *Toccata et Fugue en La mineur*



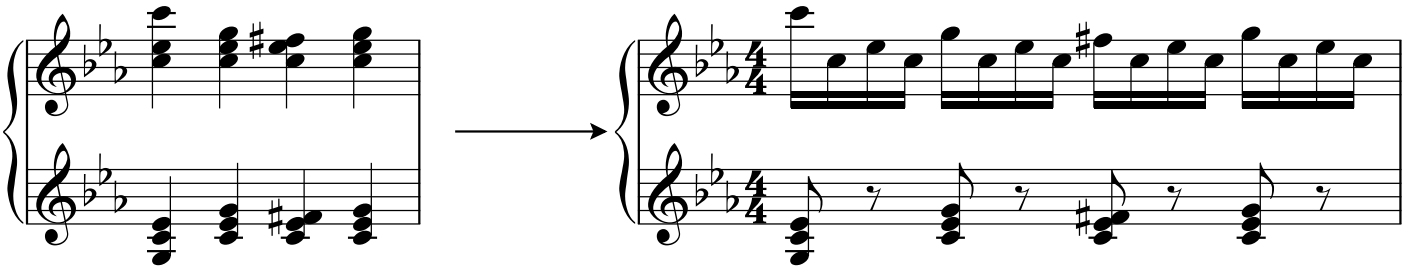
Philip, later



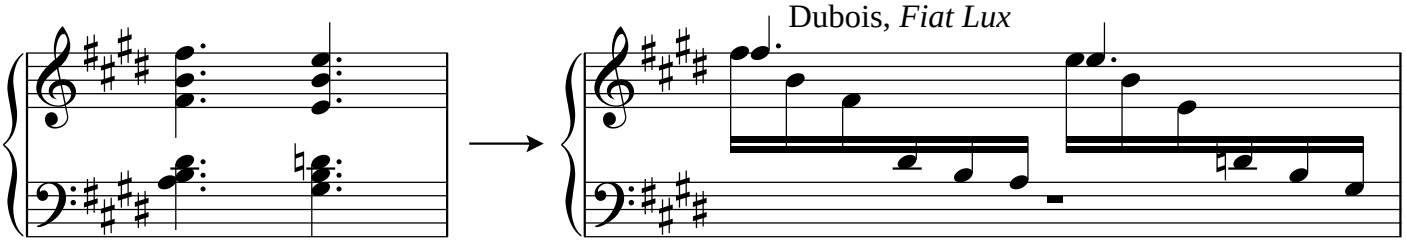
Fleuret, *Toccata*, Op. 10 no. 3



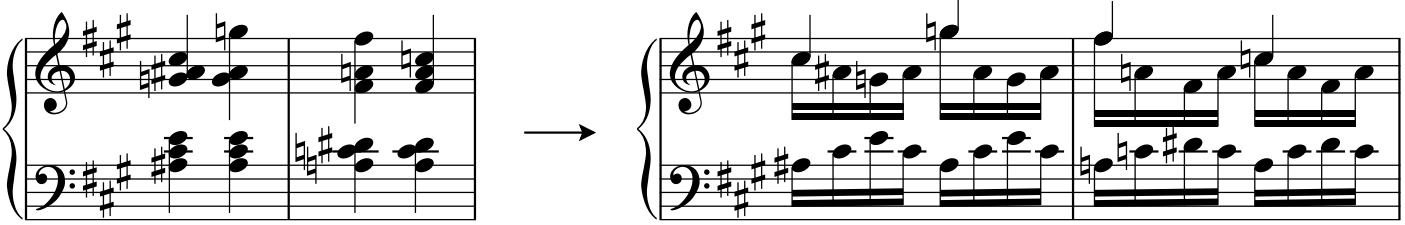
Boëllmann, "Toccata," from *Suite Gothique*



Dubois, *Fiat Lux*



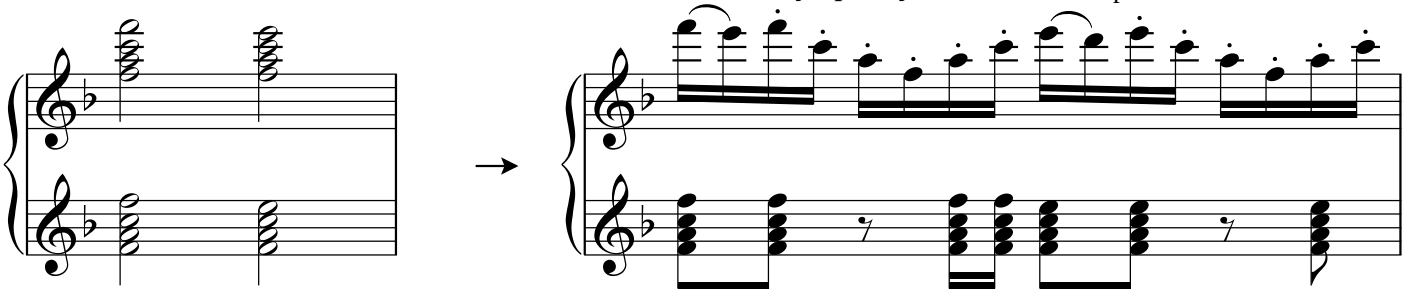
Vierne, Op. 53



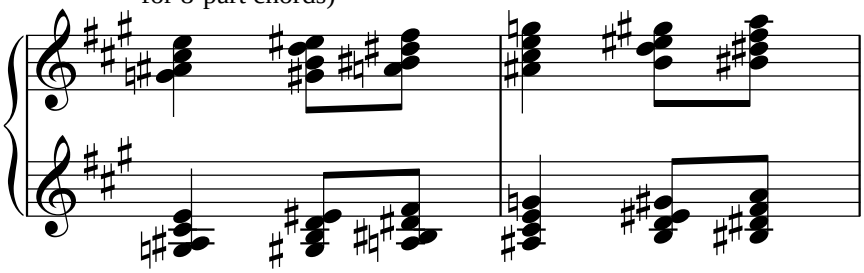
Eight-part chords

Widor, from *Symphony V*

Lower neighbor notes (most often semitones) are common at the tops and bottoms of chords

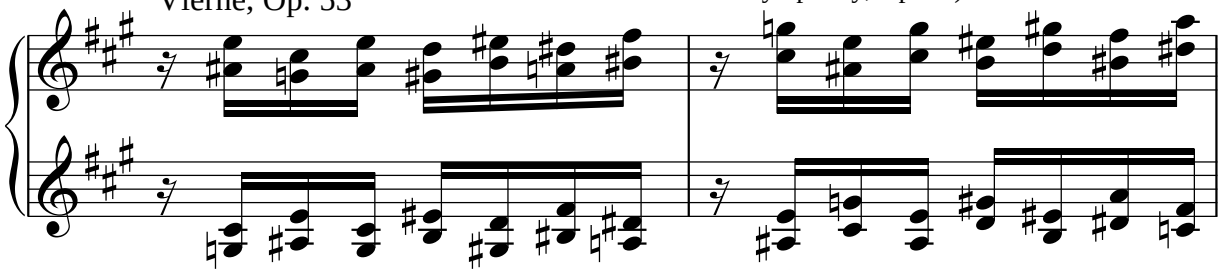


(parallel dim7 chords work well for 8-part chords)



(Vierne likes playing a 7th as two dyads; cf. the *Carillon de Westminster*, or the *Final* from his 5th Symphony, Op. 47)

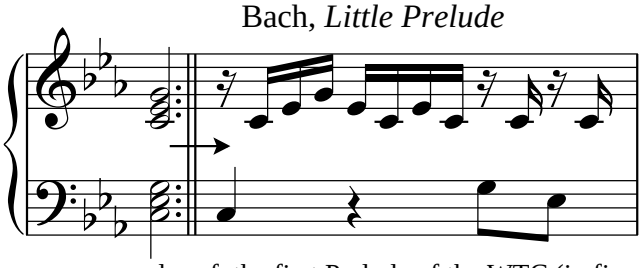
Vierne, Op. 53



(this idea is repeated almost exactly in the *Final* from his Op. 59)

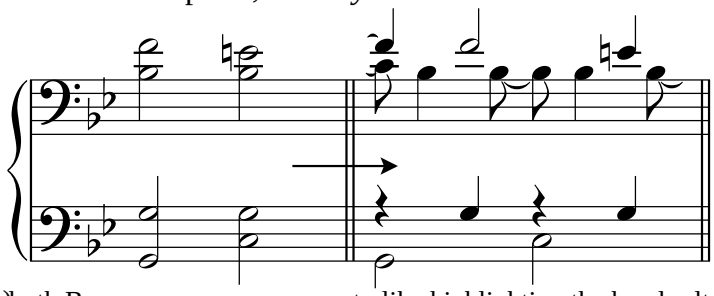
Historical Inspiration

Bach, *Little Prelude*



also cf. the first Prelude of the WTC (in five parts)

Couperin, *The Mysterious Barricades*



both Baroque composers seem to like highlighting the hands alternately