

## **DOMINANT SEVENTHS**

**There are various sevenths in music. Major sevenths used to be the aristocrats, minor sevenths the lower class, and dominant sevenths the bosses. But this is no longer the case. Read on.**

## THE DOMINANT SEVENTH

The dominant seventh is a very important chord. Its name is derived from the name of the note in the major scale. Each note has a name and a number, usually written in Latin script. The dominant is the fifth note (Vth) as can be seen from the diagram below.

Remember that you construct chords by taking a note from the scale, skipping one and adding the next, and so on. If you add another note to the triad on the dominant (G major in this case) you will end up with what is called a dominant seventh.

To put it in another way which will give you any dominant seventh, you construct it by taking a **major triad** and adding the note a **minor 7th from the root-note**. *This note is a tone less than an octave.*

**dominant 7th**  
 G major triad + the minor 7th | interval of a minor 7th  
 (1 tone less than an octave)  
 = G7

You can see that the note you add to the chord is a perfect 4th away from the starting note of the scale/ the tonic.

Like triads, the chord has a number of inversions. Apart from the root position, there are 3 inversions. These are shown below for a C7th chord (which occurs naturally in the key of F).

**root position   1st inversion   2nd inversion   3rd inversion**

To work out the inversions you can think of the first 2 inversions as a triad, work out which note is the 7th and add it to the triad. The 3rd inversion can be quickly found by adding the 7th a tone below the triad.

You may also like to remember it by observing where the major second interval occurs. In the 1st inversion it is at the top, in the 2nd inversion it is in the middle and in the 3rd inversion it is at the bottom.

In the past the dominant seventh was used to add a little bit of tension to the music. It has a very strong tendency to resolve to the tonic chord. Therefore it served to reinforce the key of the piece. The progression (for any key) is this: V7 to I. The seventh note also has a strong desire to resolve on to the 3rd of the tonic chord (falling down a semitone). Note how the Bb (the seventh in the C7th chord resolves on to the A (the third of the F major chord).

**root position** **1st inversion**

**2nd inversion** **3rd inversion**

This tendency was written down as one of a set of rules which governed classical music for a long time. Today you don't have to stick to these rules but there are occasions when it just sounds right to do so.

Since the dominant seventh has a very strong desire to be followed by the tonic chord, it serves another useful purpose - that of modulation or changing key. To modulate smoothly into another key, we simply have to insert the dominant seventh chord of the new key into the progression and follow it by the tonic chord of the new key. As we have seen, the dominant seventh in the key of C is G7. Any other dominant seventh will take us into another key, major or minor. So work out which key you want to go to and then work out the fifth note of that key/scale and play a dominant seventh on that note.

Eg. Say we are in the key of C and we wish to go to the key of Ab. The Vth note in the key of Ab is Eb. So we play an Eb7th chord followed by an Ab major chord. The whole progression could look like this with each chord lasting 4 beats:

C Em F Eb7 Ab

This will lead into a change of key of some length. But you may only want a temporary modulation. This can be achieved by making the new tonic chord (Ab here) into another dominant seventh.

C Em F Eb7 Ab7 (Db7 Gb7th B7th E7th A7th D7th G7th) C

You can stop anywhere along the line and go into a new key, eg. B7 into E.

Today the term *dominant seventh* is used to spell out a type of chord with the intervals shown above and any note in a sequence can be turned into one without necessarily changing key.

It is useful to know that any chord in a progression can be followed by any chord of the same type. Therefore any dominant 7th can be followed by any other dominant 7th. You must use your ears to 'see' if it sounds right.

A dominant 7th is very often altered - its fifth and ninth can be flattened or sharpened - for details about this, see the section on altered chords.