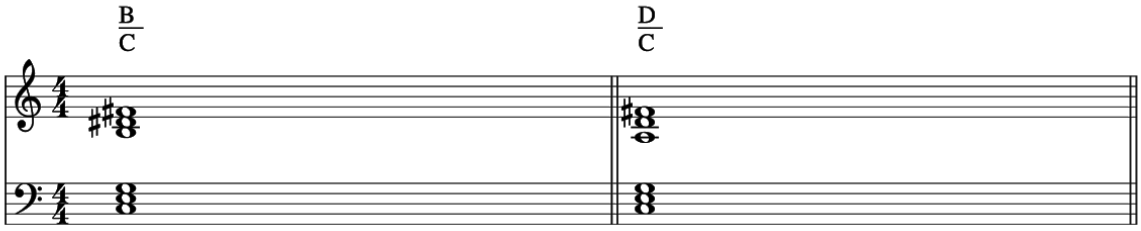
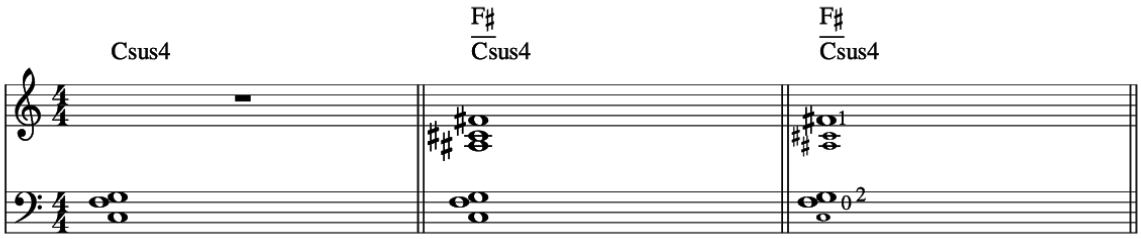
Chromatic Polychords

Chords are formed by stacking intervals. Polychords are formed by stacking chords. Here are two examples of polychords made of Major triads.



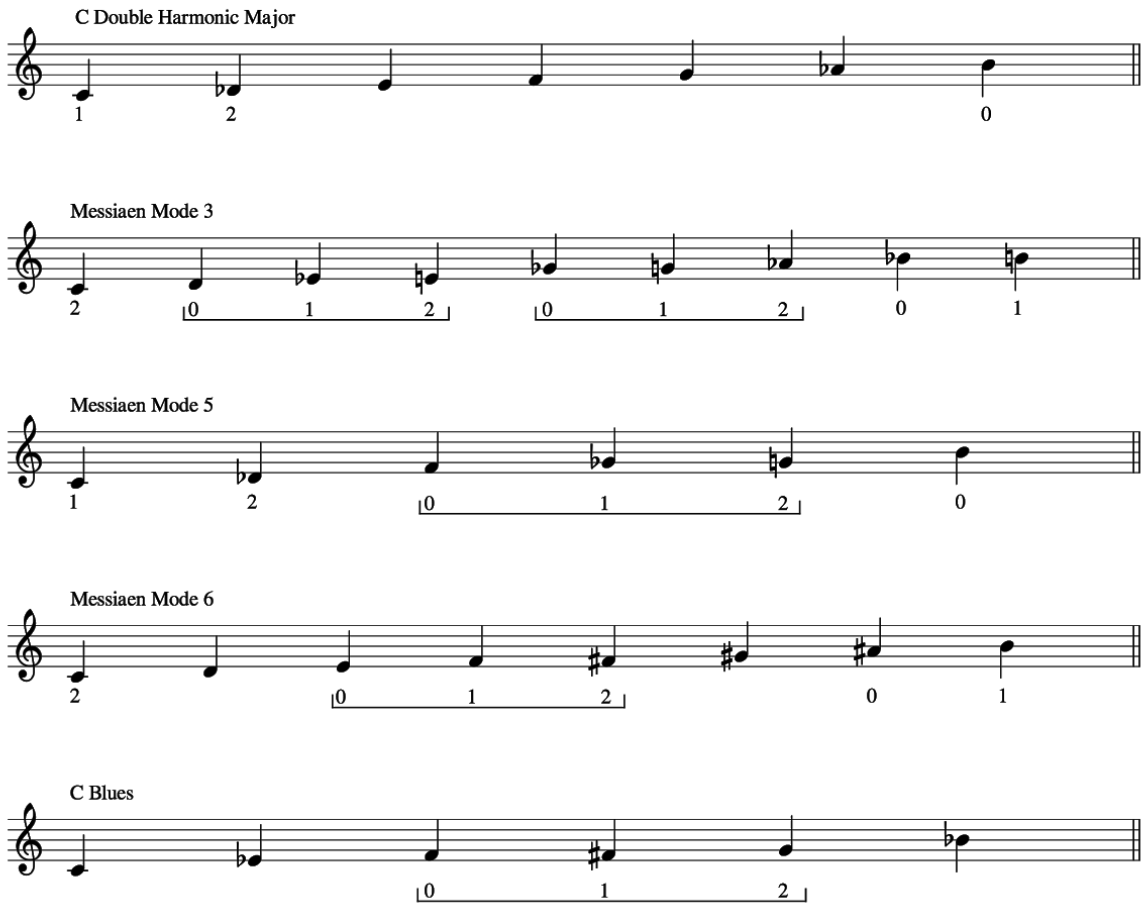
In each of these examples, the polychord consists of two triads that come from the same scale. $\frac{B}{C}$ is derived from C Lydian #9, and $\frac{D}{C}$ is derived from C Lydian. In both cases, six of the seven notes of the mode are present in the polychord. These polychords are a great example of how composers create complex sonorities by combining basic sounds.

Advanced Triad types can also be used to construct polychords. In this example Csus4 is paired with F# Major.



The resulting polychord is noteworthy because it contains a chromatic trichord, three consecutive notes that form a cluster. In this case, the notes F, F#, and G make up the chromatic trichord. In the third measure above, these notes are emphasized and labelled 0, 1, and 2. **Chromatic Polychords** are polychords that contain a chromatic trichord.

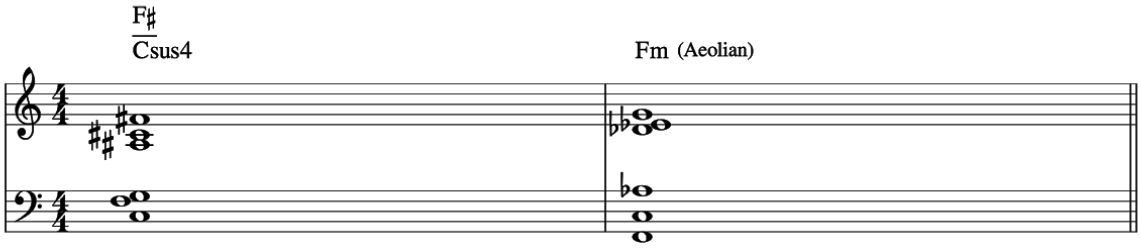
One reason the chromatic trichord is a special sound is that it does not appear in common scales like Major, Melodic Minor, Harmonic Minor, Harmonic Major, or any of their modes. However, it can be found in the Double Harmonic Major scale, various symmetrical scales, and the Blues scale. In fact, $\frac{F\#}{Csus4}$ exists within the C Blues scale with the exception of one note, C#.



Constructing and Resolving Chromatic Polychords

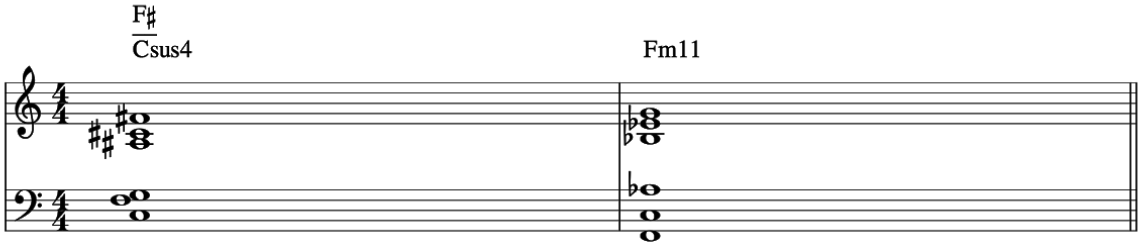
When creating Chromatic Polychords, it is helpful to use at least one Advanced Triad. These include two notes that are a Second apart, which can serve as two of the three notes of the requisite 012 trichord. After selecting an Advanced Triad, identify the missing pitch needed to complete the trichord, and select a triad that contains that pitch to complete the Chromatic Polychord.

The presence of an 012 trichord will generally result in some level of dissonance and tension, so it can be helpful to interpret these polychords as having a dominant function that can be resolved to a tonic. In this first example, the lowest note, C, is interpreted as the root, and the chord is treated as a C7 (V7) chord in the key of F minor. Note that this particular Polychord works especially well in this context due to the inclusion of an A# note, enharmonically the b7 of C.

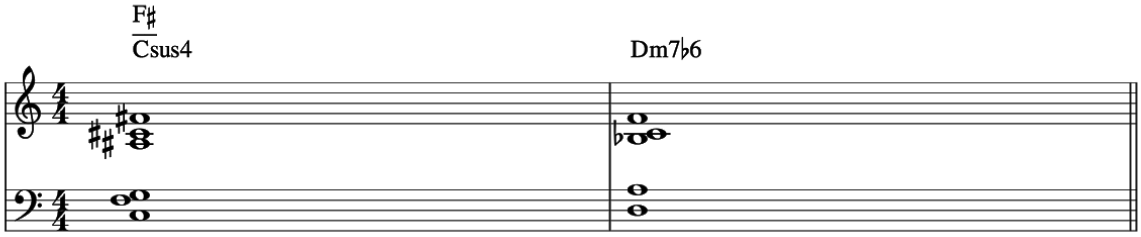


Play through this example repeatedly. Notice how the careful voice-leading helps ensure a convincing cadence. The root, C, resolves down to F, exactly as it would in a traditional C7 to Fm progression. The same can be said of the 5th (G) and b7th (A#/Bb), which both resolve in contrary motion to Ab (the b3 of F minor). The b9 of C7 (C#/Db), remains as a common tone, and is reinterpreted as the b6 of F Aeolian. Finally, the #11 (F#) of C7 resolves up to the 9th (G) of F minor, another typical resolution, applied to this somewhat atypical polychord.

Here is a slightly different resolution that works very similarly.

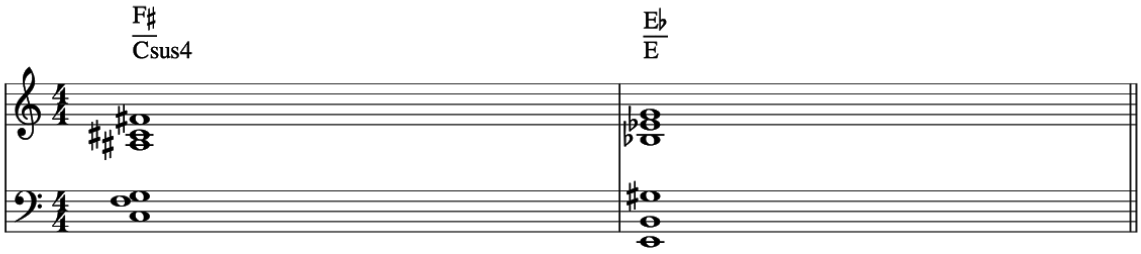


C7 also commonly resolves to Dm in a deceptive cadence.



Once again, the voice-leading sells the resolution. A# is reinterpreted as Bb, while C# and F# each resolve down by half-step.

In this final example, the polychord resolves to a chord whose root is a Third away, behaving much like a chromatic mediant modulation.



The voice-leading here is reminiscent of the previous examples. A# is reinterpreted as Bb, F# moves up a half-step to G, and C# moves up a whole-step to Eb.

Creative Applications

Construct your own Chromatic Polychord by selecting an Advanced Triad and pairing it with a complimentary triad that will complete the 012 Trichord.

Treating the polychord as a dominant, experiment with various cadences and resolutions. Pay attention to the voice-leading. Smooth voice-leading can be used to help make an unusual progression more convincing.

Compose or improvise melodies over your cadence. In addition to creating a hexatonic scale out of the notes of your Chromatic Polychord, try to exploit the relationship between the chord and the Blues scale that shares its 012.