
Introducing, Returning To, and Playing Up the Leading Tone

John Check

One of the pedagogical strengths of macro analysis is the way it captures the “driving force... [of] harmonic progression”¹ through the use of symbols. Accordingly, for students to succeed in macro analysis, they must learn to use these symbols accurately and in a way that makes good interpretative sense. Even though the symbols signify *harmonic* progressions, students can begin using them surprisingly early in their study of theory—even in an introductory class in the rudiments or fundamentals of music. The sooner they begin using them, the greater the fluency they stand to acquire. A case in point is the dotted slur and the motion—that between the leading tone and the tonic—it symbolizes.

Before proceeding, we should consider an important question: Why should teachers wish to introduce a symbol that represents *harmonic* motion before students understand what harmony entails? Is it a sound pedagogical strategy to introduce such a symbol before students know what a triad or a seventh chord is, what qualities each can be, how these chords are related to each other, or how some of them tend to move one way but not another? Yes it is, and for this reason. Triads rooted on different scale degrees can be thought of as elaborations of those scale degrees or as emanations from them. For harmonic motion to be understandable, students must have a sure grasp of scale degrees. To teachers this is obvious, but not to students at the beginning of their study of music theory. Thus, it is worth emphasizing that they will *depend* on what they already know about scale degrees once they begin studying harmony. Stated another way, students must know their scale degrees thoroughly to understand Roman numerals. In being introduced to triads and harmonic progression, students are returning to something familiar: scale degrees.

With respect to the leading tone, they will learn early in their study of Roman numerals that the triad rooted on the leading tone tends to resolve to the tonic triad. This tendency is so important, so fundamental, that we symbolize it using a dotted slur.² Whenever we see a leading-

1. Bruce Benward and Marilyn Saker, *Music in Theory and Practice*, 7th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2003), vol. 2, 327.

2. See Benward and Saker, p. 75.

tone triad, we should expect to find a succeeding tonic triad, whether in root position or first inversion.

Students can begin this search as soon as they are introduced to the major scale. Having laid out the differences in a previous class meeting between half steps and whole steps, I write the pattern of steps in the scale at the chalkboard. Next, I mention that the tones of the major scale can be given numbers, adding that the caret sign is shorthand for scale degree. Later in the lesson, I introduce the names of the scale degrees themselves.

Now comes the matter of drawing attention to the leading tone, making it more noticeable, and, as it were, “playing it up.” At the piano, I play a major scale beginning on scale degree 1 and ending, lingeringly, on scale degree 7. “Now why,” I ask, “should this seventh scale degree be called the leading tone?” When students reply that it *leads* to tonic, I join the two tones by means of a dotted slur at the chalkboard, perhaps while asking them to sing the note of resolution.

The trick when it comes to playing up this connection, is to be casual about writing the dotted slur. I wouldn’t call attention to it or even explain what it means. I would only be sure to use it, early and often, so that the point is clear. Students absorb what a teacher does, particularly when the teacher is one they like or admire. They are wonderful imitators. If they understand what a leading tone is and how it resolves, they will probably begin adding the dotted slurs on their own.

At this point I should back up a bit and mention the way I introduce whole steps and half steps, a necessary precursor to the topic of the major scale. Students usually grasp that the half step is the smallest conventional interval in Western music and that there are of course two half steps in a whole step. I draw this distinction: the one between chromatic half steps and diatonic half steps—between, that is, half steps that are written with the same letter name and those that are written with different letter names.³ I immediately give them this mnemonic: diatonic half steps are written with different letters—“d,” diatonic; “d,” different: the two words begin with the same letter. The leading tone, I then say, will always—*always*—be one diatonic half step lower than the tonic.⁴

3. William Duckworth—*A Creative Approach to Music Fundamentals*, 9th ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson Schirmer, 2007)—and Ralph Turek—*Theory for Today’s Musician* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2007)—are two writers of textbooks who observe this distinction.

4. The distinction between diatonic and chromatic half steps is crucial to the way I introduce a comparably more advanced topic, augmented sixth chords. Standard augmented sixth chords have three things in common: 1) their bass is a diatonic half step above the dominant—this is so in both major and minor keys; there is no need to mention that the chord is built upon scale degree 6 in the natural or harmonic form of the minor or on the lowered sixth scale degree of the major scale; 2) one of the other notes is a diatonic half step below the dominant; and 3) one of the other voices is tonic. If students grasp what a diatonic half step is, and if they have mastered their scale degrees, then learning augmented sixth chords should be easily accomplished.

Introducing, Returning To, and Playing Up the Leading Tone • 15

After I introduce half steps and whole steps, I distribute a handout, a portion of which is included in Example 1, which shows the opening of the Chaconne from Bach's second Violin Partita.

1 2 3 4 5 6

6 7 8 9 10 11 12

11 13 14 15 16

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24

21 25 26 27 28 29

26 30 31 32 33 34

31 35 36 37 38 39 40

35 41 42 43

Example 1. J. S. Bach, Chaconne, mm. 1–37, from Partita No. 2, BWV 1004.

I play a recording for the students and then point out the circled and numbered notes. I explain that these pairs of notes are either whole steps or half steps, except for a few that are neither. Then I will ask them to identify what they see. If they point to a half step, I ask them to specify which kind it is, chromatic or diatonic. The pairs of notes in the example are formed between a given note and the note that immediately follows it. Nevertheless, there is no reason not to include pairs of notes that are separated by a number of intervening notes. After all, when analyzing music, we are under no obligation to consider just the relationship between consecutive notes; rather, we look for the connection between notes across time; in other words, we begin to consider the larger-scale voice leading. This is an important point, and it can be made early on, however indirectly.

In addition to using this handout when introducing half steps and whole steps, I can return to it a few class periods later once students have been taught about scale degrees. I instruct my students to find all the leading tones; then I ask them to specify whether each is followed by tonic, adding that, if so, I would like them to show the connection by means of a dotted slur. (Students may need to be reminded that they are to use the dotted slur only when showing the motion of a leading tone to a tonic; some of them may be tempted to use a dotted slur between all diatonic half steps.) What if the leading tone *isn't* followed by a tonic, for example in m. 18, circle 19? In that case, I might ask that students use a modified symbol—perhaps a partial dotted slur ending in a question mark. (One of Heinrich Schenker's favorite analytical symbols was the exclamation mark; the question mark, it would appear, is no less useful.) The point of all of this is to make students aware of leading tones and to make them sensitive to how they typically resolve.

What, then, to make of a leading tone that doesn't resolve to tonic? What is taking place? At circle 19, the C-sharp falls to C-natural. We have a descending chromatic tetrachord that begins in m. 17 on the D5 in the alto voice of a compound melody. The alto voice wends its way to A4 in m. 20. The motion is repeated in mm. 21–24. We might then hear the A fall to G at the end of m. 24, and the G—as the seventh of a V⁷ chord—resolve downward by step to F4 on the downbeat of m. 25. But what should we tell our beginning students? I might return to what they have been told about the leading tone's standard resolution to tonic, this time stressing the word "standard." I might also remind them of the many other times in this example where that resolution in fact appeared. In the interest of affording them more practice, I might ask them to show me.

So, no, I wouldn't necessarily mention the descending tetrachord—nor the compound melody—or, if I did, I would do so only to pique their curiosity, to impart to them some feel for the complexity of music and the richness of its theory. All the same, I might very well point out the

descending line in mm. 17–20. I might then play these measures at the piano and ask students what they observe. One of the best responses is that the music seems to be falling; it has a downward trend, a mournful quality. I might then ask where something similar occurs, a place where the music has this falling tendency. One such place is mm. 33–36. Here, by the way, compound melody is especially prominent. Accordingly, I might ask the students whether they notice anything special about the structure of the music. Typically, they point to the stratified construction of the melody. They also notice that the shape of the melody is preserved. They observe, in other words, that underlying the music in these measures is model-sequence behavior.

Returning to the handout, a student looking for leading tones and their standard resolutions may well point to m. 24 (circle 28) as an instance of a leading tone that is not followed by its tonic: the first C-sharp in m. 24 is followed by a B, not a D. He or she may not realize that the B is just a decorative note, a complete lower neighbor tone. So, I might simply say that the C-sharp is the main note and instruct him or her to place a bracket over its two appearances. Where, I could ask, does this leading tone—this prolonged leading tone, (although I don't call it that)—resolve? Its delayed resolution to D5, symbolized in Example 2 by a dotted slur, follows midway through m. 25.



Example 2. Resolution of prolonged leading tone. J. S. Bach, Chaconne, mm. 24–25, from Partita No. 2, BWV 1004.

I might very well use this handout yet again, but this time to keep track of subtonics. Unlike leading tones, subtonics have a countervailing tendency to descend. Now I ask my students to circle any subtonics and instruct them to draw a descending arrow to their resolutions. And why not? Macro analysis, which is intended to be flexible, allows one “to tailor the analysis to the specific needs of the student and/or to the instructor’s own requirements...”⁵ The descending arrow may not be the most useful of symbols when it comes to harmonic analysis, but it comes in handy early on when introducing the opposing melodic tendencies of the two seventh scale degrees—the leading tone and the subtonic.

Introducing, returning to, and playing up: when introducing students to the leading tone, we lead them to the knowledge of what it does, how it behaves, what, in short, it is. If they grasp all this, then they should have little trouble making the connection between the leading tone itself and the triad that issues from it. They return to something familiar as part of learning something new. What we can do to help them is to emphasize or “play up” the importance of the leading tone; this we can do not only in words but, as we have seen, in the symbols of macro analysis.