

# Intervals through Key Relationships

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Taken out of context, intervals can seem as if they trick your ear—a minor interval may sound major or vice versa. This can usually be explained by music you have heard previously and absorbed unconsciously, so as an ear training student, it is important to understand the various contexts that each interval can function. While your instincts may often be correct, you will still need to develop a method to double-check your first guess.

While **Seconds** are usually easy to identify when heard alone, they can be confused for one another if heard after an interval that strongly implies a related key. Check your answer by building a scale around the interval. Major seconds will sound like the beginning of a scale (major or minor,) but minor seconds will feel as if they want to resolve. The strongest resolving points are from 'fa' to 'mi' and 'ti' to 'do' in major keys and 'le' to 'sol' in minor keys.

m2      a: sol-le-sol-do      F: sol-la-ti-do      M2      F: do-re-mi-fa-sol  
C: do-re-mi-fa

**Sevenths** only function as part of seventh chords—big surprise, huh? Check your interval by filling in the interval with a major triad off of the lowest note. If the top note sounds like it should resolve downwards by a half-step (making a dominant chord,) you have a minor seventh; if the top note resolves upwards by a half-step (creating a major seven chord,) you have a major seventh.

m7      C: V7      sol-ti-re-fa (mi)      M7      F: IM7      do-mi-sol-ti (do)

**Thirds** are one of the easiest interval classes to confuse. Thirds are the basis for both major and minor triads, so you may hear the top third from the opposite triad. For example, if you think you are hearing a minor 'sound,' it can actually be the top third ('mi' to 'sol') of a major triad. See the examples below, for all the possibilities.

m3      F: mi-sol-do      a: do-me-sol      M3      C: do-mi-sol      F: sol-ti-re  
Bb: ti-re-sol

As **Sixths** are simply inversions of thirds, they can be confused in many of the same ways. But due to the larger space between the two notes, there are even more ways in which you may hear this interval class. Always check your answer by completing the pattern; with sixths, it is possible to resolve the pattern upwards as well as downwards.

m6 C: mi-sol-do a: sol-me-do F: ti-sol-do e: do-le-sol M6 C: sol-mi-do G: do-la-ti-do e: me-sol-do

**Perfect Fourths and Fifths** should sound obviously different from all the other interval classes, but are easily confused with each other. The easiest way to check a perfect fifth is to fill in the interval with a third and create a triad. For perfect fourths, check to see if the two notes sound like ‘sol’ resolving upwards to ‘do’. However, follow ‘do’ with a ‘ti’, and if the ‘ti’ sounds as if it moves the tonality, it is probably ‘fi’. In this case, try your check for a perfect fifth interval.

P4 C: sol - do - ti - do P5 F: do-mi-sol-mi-do F: do-sol-do

**Tri-tones** may end up being the easiest class for you to identify, even if they seem tricky at first. They have the same crunchy dissonance as seconds and sevenths, but they sit squarely between them. Most importantly, they should sound as if they want to resolve. You may hear them as resolving either inward or outward, but the result is the same. However, if you learn the tonal implications of the direction of the resolution (as illustrated below,) you can improve your dominant identifications on harmonic dictation (e.g.  $V^7$  vs.  $vii\ dim$ ).

A4 C:  $V4/2$  -- I6 fa-ti-do-sol-mi-do d5 C:  $vii^\circ$  -- I ti-re-fa-mi-do

#### FURTHER (REQUIRED) PRACTICE:

These methods for checking your intervallic guesses depend on your ability to create tonality. As such, you should practice creating keys from any note on any solfege syllable. Start simply—play or sing a random note and sing a major scale based on that note. Next, pick a different note and make that your new ‘sol’. How will you establish your new note as ‘sol’? Try singing sol-la-ti-do from that note. Maybe that won’t work for you, so try singing downward through sol-fa-mi-re-do or building a downward triad. Now pick a new note, and make it ‘mi’ or ‘me’ or ‘fa’, and eventually, you will be able to establish a key from any solfege syllable. The most important aspect of this process is developing the ability to create a key from nothing; without this skill, no amount of theoretical knowledge will allow you to master interval identification. Because each person has a unique way of hearing music, the only way to discover the methods that work best for you will be to practice and develop your own tonal vocabulary.