Basic harmonic sequences

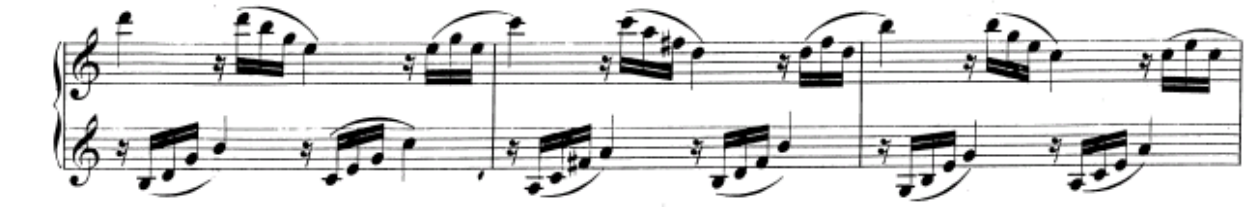
Descending sequence of falling fifths (circle of fifths)

The most common harmonic sequence is the circle of fifths, in which each chord is a fifth below (or fourth above) the previous one. A complete circle of fifths, such as in the example below, starts at **I** and then goes all the way round in fifths until it arrives back at **I** again.

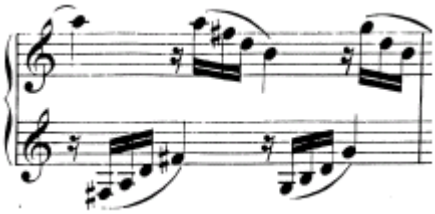
A circle of fifths is usually associated with a sequence as it consists of the first two chords (a falling fifth) repeated down a step each time, as shown by the brackets. This means that once you have written the melody and texture for the first two chords (in this case a bar), you can simply repeat it down a step until you arrive back at **I**.

Circles of fifths are useful because they give the impression of movement without actually going anywhere, reinforcing the key and creating a satisfying varied repetition.

Mozart, Piano Sonata in C major, K545, first movement.



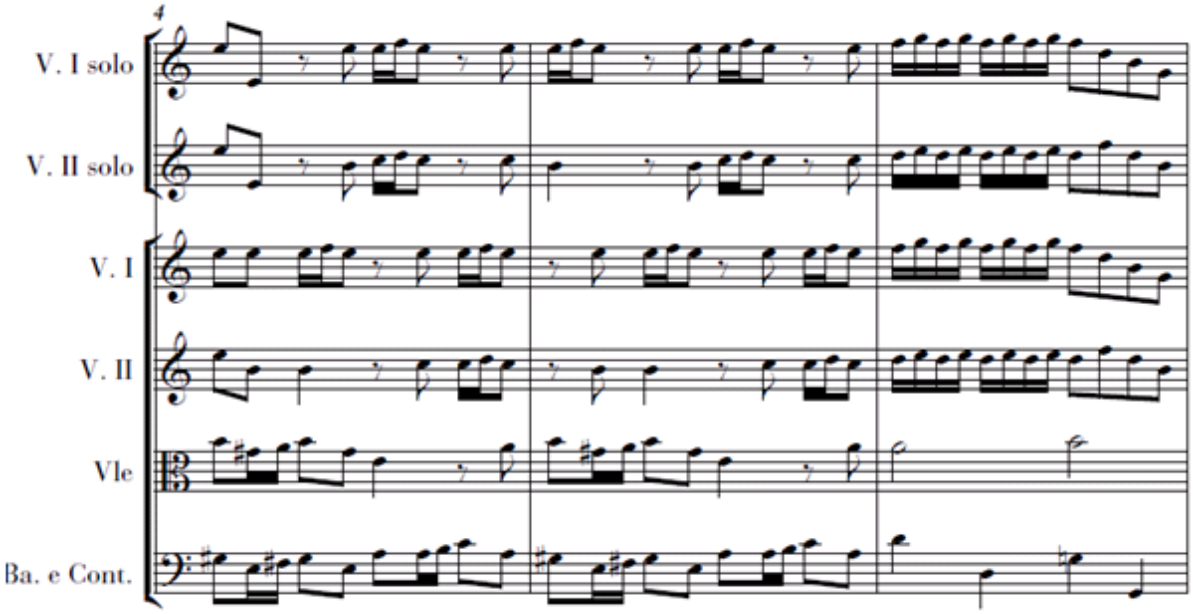
G major: Ib IV viib iii vib ii



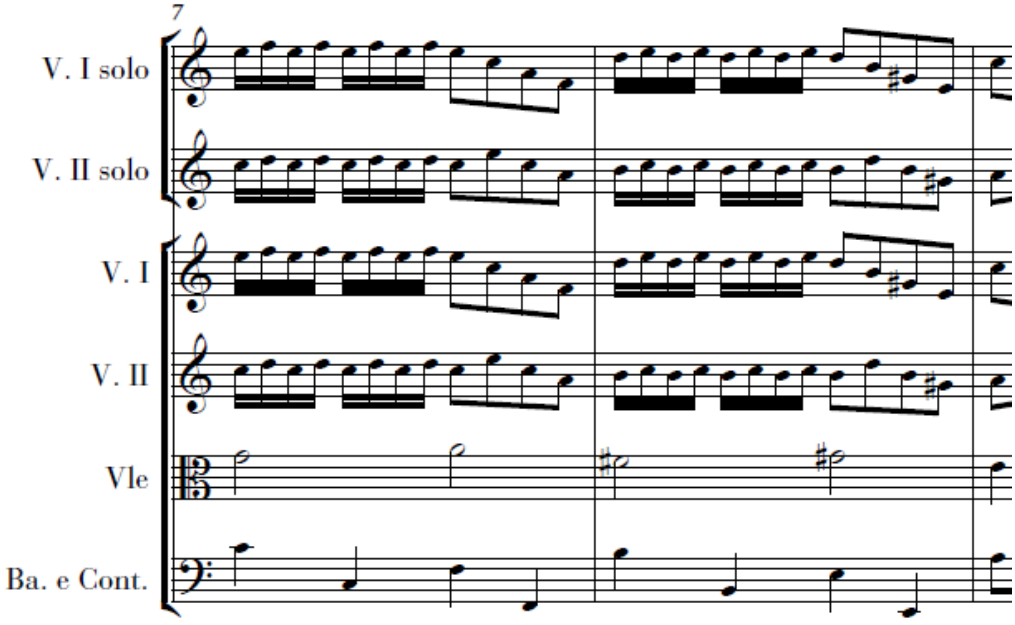
Vb I

In this second example, this time in the key of A minor, you will notice that Vivaldi does not sharpen the seventh on **VII** and **III**. This avoids **VII** being diminished (so we get a G major chord instead of a G# diminished) and **III** being augmented (so we get C major instead). It is quite common to miss out the sharpened seventh in minor keys to avoid awkward chords in this way.

Vivaldi Concerto Op. 3 No. 8, first movement



A minor: i IV VII

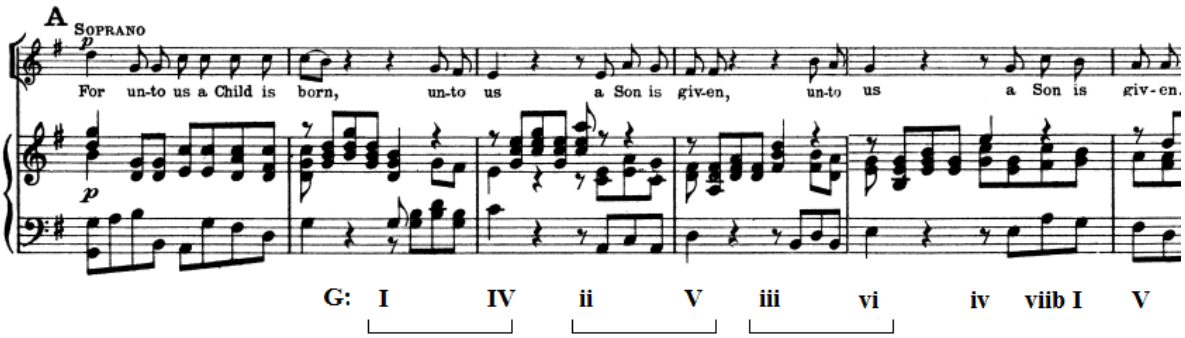


III VI ii V i

Ascending sequence of falling fifths (or descending fourths)

This uses the same basic progression as a circle of fifths, but instead of making a continuous chain, you take your initial chord sequence of **I** – **IV** and then sequence it **up** rather than down a step each time. As with a circle of fifths, it is usual for the melodic material to be sequenced in the same way. This type of sequence does not usually take us back to our starting point.

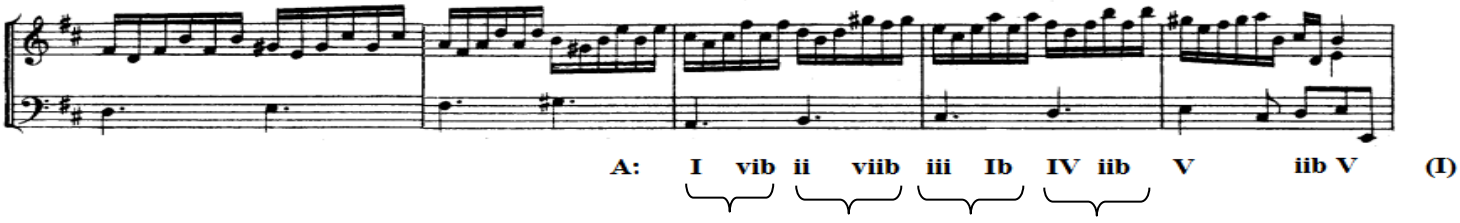
Handel, The Messiah, Part I no. 12 (Chorus): "For unto us a child is born"



Note how in this example Handel repeats the sequence for a fourth time (**iv**-**vii**) but speeds up the harmonic rhythm so that he can finish with a more emphatic imperfect cadence (**I** - **V**)

Ascending sequence of falling thirds

A final sequence that was often used in the Baroque era in particular is the series of falling thirds (another strong harmonic progression). In the example below, as is very common, Corelli puts the second chord in the sequence each time in first inversion so that bass note stays the same as for the previous chord.

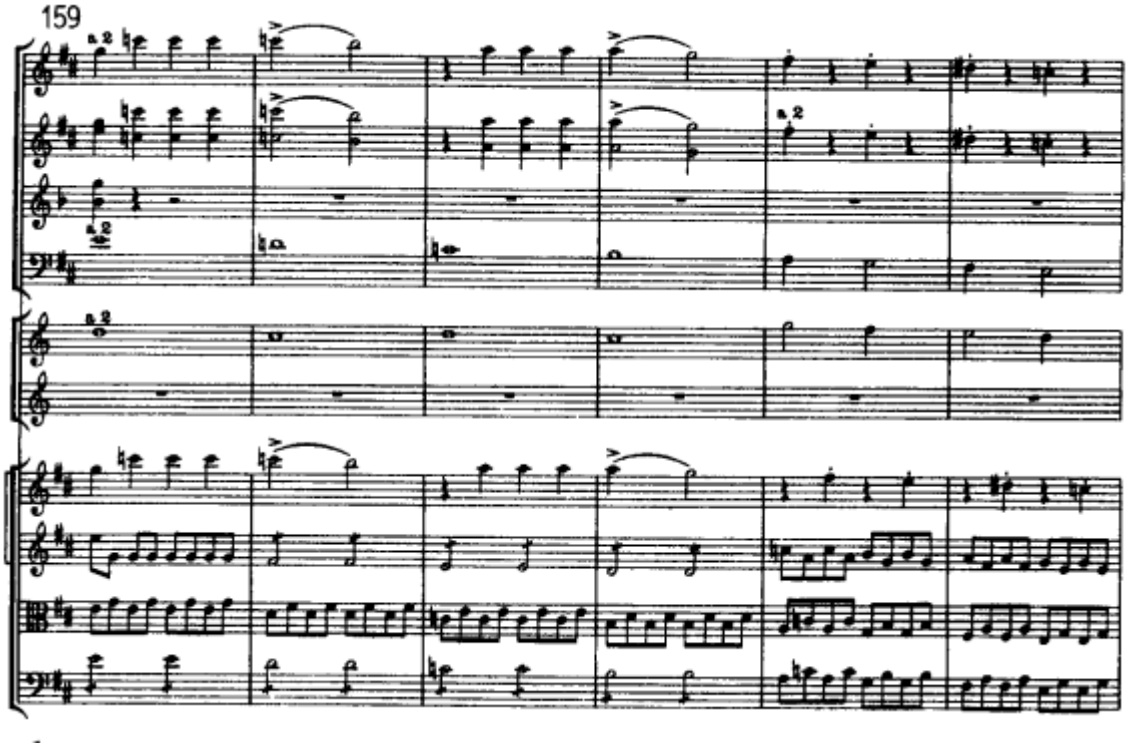


Long sequences driving towards a cadence are a hallmark of Corelli's style and in this example, you might notice that he actually starts this sequence at the beginning of the line on IV, extending the passage to cover a full octave.

Descending first inversion chords

A simpler type of sequence just follows a descending series of first inversion chords as shown below

Haydn Symphony No. 104, first movement



G: IV6 iii6 ii6 I6 e: ii6 i6 vii6 vi6