The beginning of Haydn’s Oxford Symphony: a two players game.

In 1788−89 Franz Joseph Haydn (1732−1809) composed the three symphonies nos. 90, 91 and 92 for the Parisian musical society Concert de la Loge Olympique. Symphony 92 was played and conducted by Haydn in July 1791 at the conferring of Haydns Honorary Doctorate of Music by Oxford University.

"A more wonderful composition never was heard", wrote the Morning Chronicle. "The applause given to Haydn, who conducted this admirable effort of his genius, was enthusiastic; but the merit of the work, in the opinion of all musicians present, exceeded all praise."

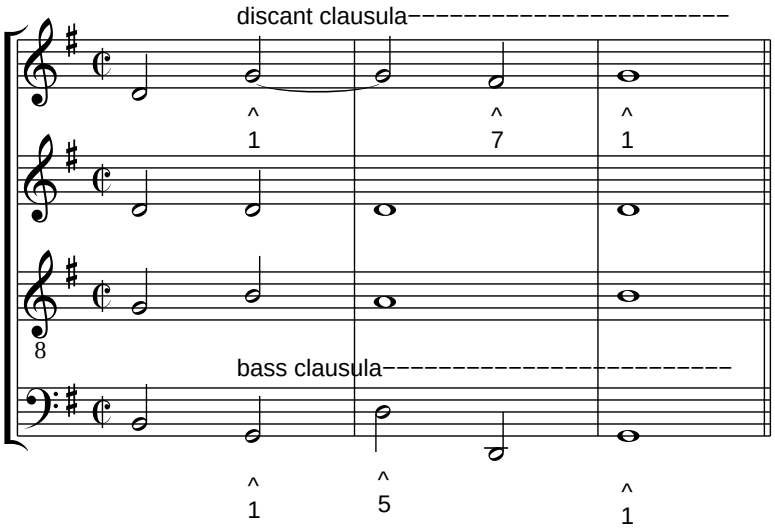
This so called ’Oxford’ symphony represents indeed the culmination of Haydn’s symphonic skills. It is one of an entirely different order, both intellectually and from the point of view of technique and composition. The first movement is especially significant: the first 82 bars (’exposition’ in the 19th century concept ’sonataform’) is an excellent illustration of a −what I always call− ’economic way of composing’. I will try to show this in the following.

1. The players of the game.

A cadence (Latin cadentia, "a falling") is a melodic−harmonic formula that concludes a phrase, section, or piece of music. Cadences give phrases a distinctive ending that can, for example, indicate to the listener whether the piece is to be continued or concluded. An analogy may be made with punctuation, with some weaker cadences acting as commas that indicate a pause or momentary rest, while a stronger cadence acts as a period that signals the end of the phrase. A cadence is labeled more or less "weak" or "strong" depending on the sense of finality it creates.

Parts of a cadence are more or less definite melodic formulas, also called clausulae (from latin clausula), consisting of three tones, of which the first tone is variable. A well−known example is the ’discant clausula’ as a succession of first tone−leading tone−first tone (1−7−1; in G major: G−F sharp−G) and the ’bass clausula’ with the last two tones as a falling fifth: fifth tone−first tone (5−1; in G major: G−C). The cadence in G major of figure 1 is within modal−tonal music the normal form of a cadence, with the discant clausula in the highest voice and the bass clausula in the lowest voice. It can be labeled as the ’strongest’ cadence, acting as a period.

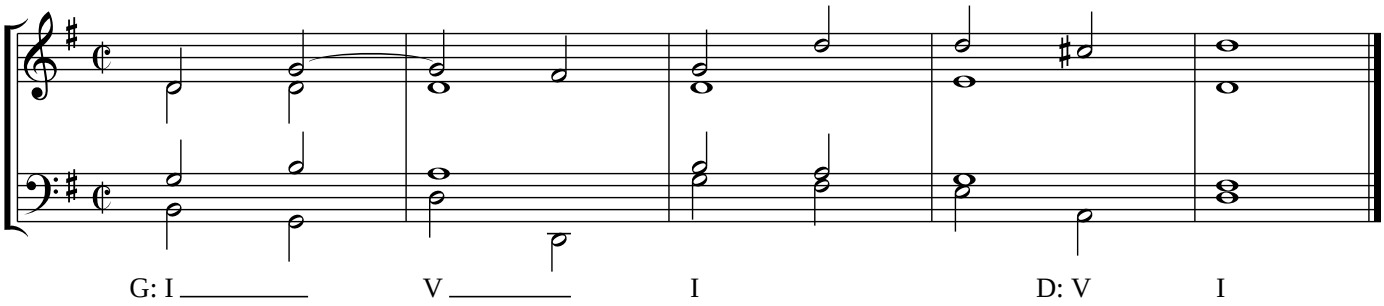
Figure 1: the normal and strongest cadence



Note that from a melodic point of view the leading tone F sharp has a strong drive to the first tone G (or − in other words− the first tone G is defined by the leading tone F sharp). Note also that in this case the leading tone is part of the dominant (V) and that the first tone is part of the tonic (I).

The drive of the leading tone is so strong that you can easily modulate from G major to D major by introducing the leading tone C sharp of D major as Figure 2 shows.

Figure 2: modulation from G major to D major



Note that the drive to D major completely disappears when c'' sharp in the highest voice of bar 4 is replaced by c'' natural.

These key defining qualities are the main features of the players of the game:

− player 1: the first tone G (as part of I) and the leading tone F sharp (as part of V), defending field G major

− player 2: the first tone D (as part of I) and the leading tone C sharp (as part of V), defending field D major.

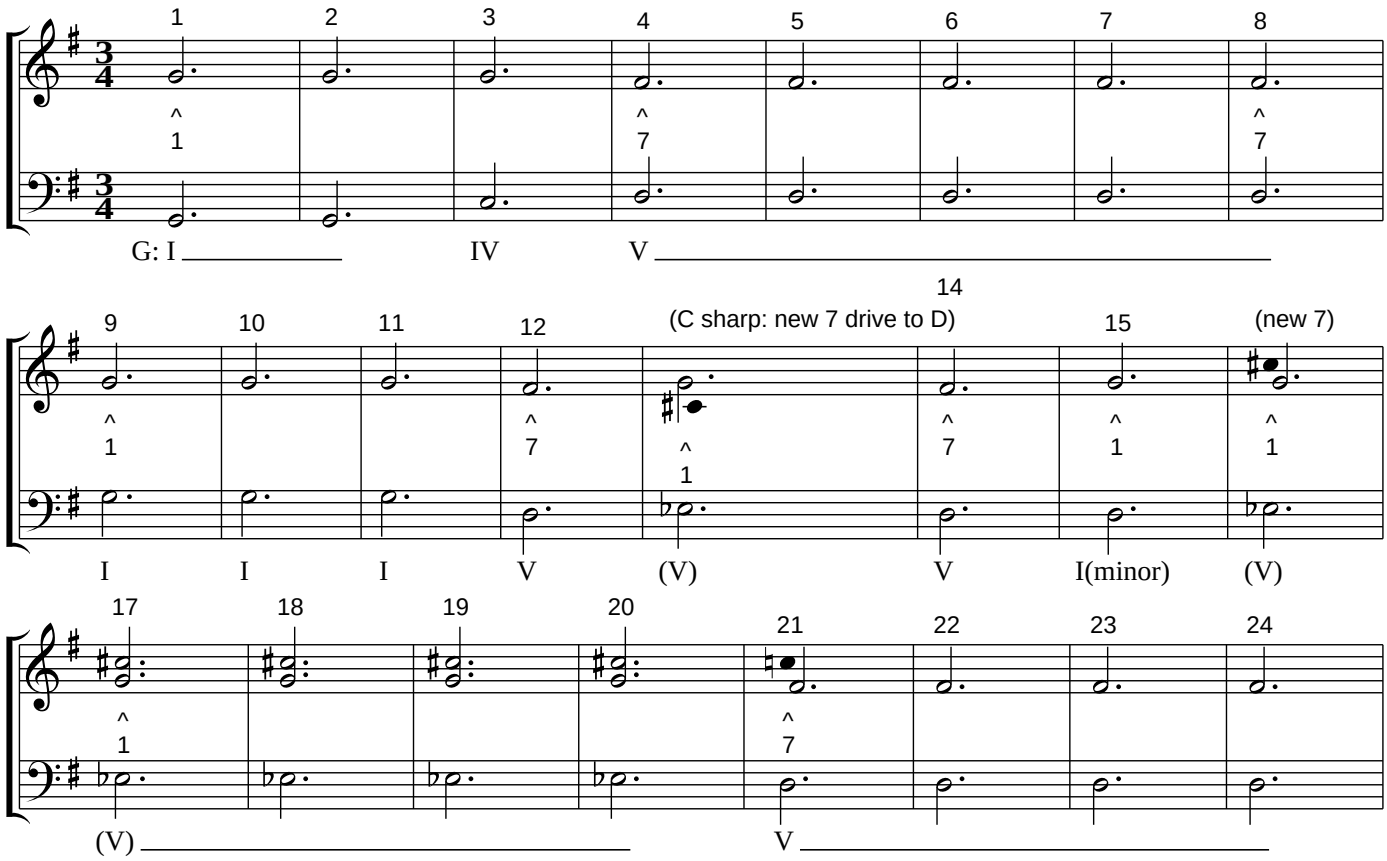
The game can start: player 1 against player 2 or G major against D major or tonic key against dominant key.

2. The game.

The figures 3−7 show the stages of the game of the first 82 bars of the first movement of Haydn's Oxford Symphony. It is presented as an annotated two part reduction with harmonic information (Roman numerals below the lowest stave) and melodic information about the first tone and leading tone of G major and D major (1 and 7 with caret, between the staves).

Note that the first tone and leading tone can be 'hidden', i.e. they can be transferred to inner voices or they can be implied (which is of course always a matter of interpretation...).

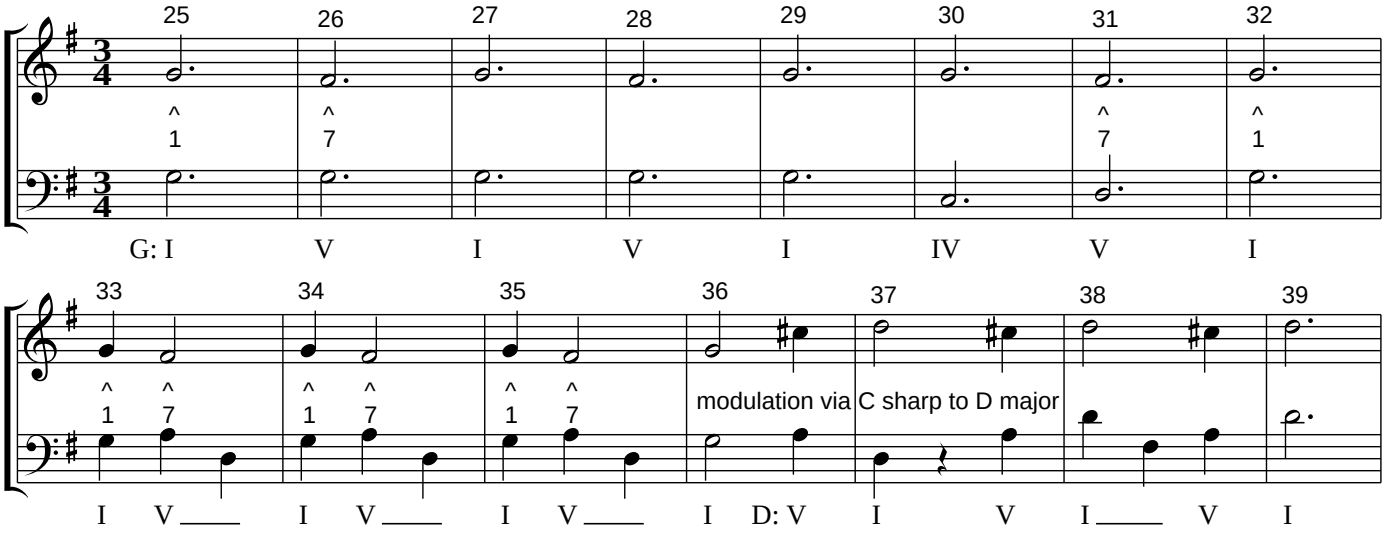
Figure 3: the game



The first 8 bars define G major clearly with a sort of oscillating first tone G (I) and leading tone F sharp (V). The first tone G becomes part of a Italian sixth (bar 13 and 16), which acts as a secondary or applied dominant (V) to V in G major.

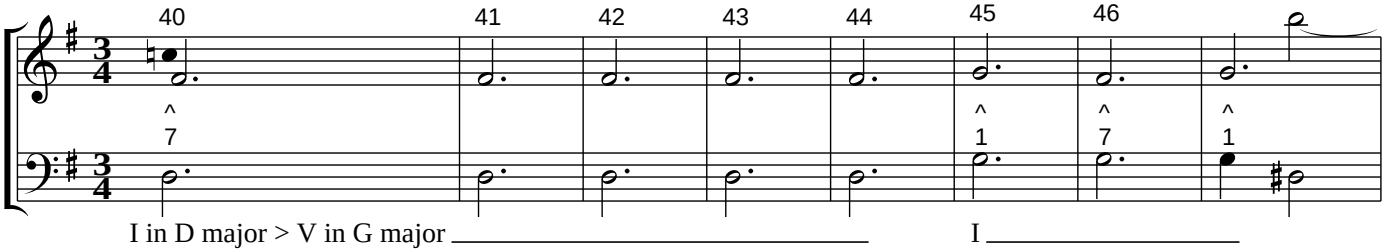
Note that the C sharp has a strong drive to tone D (i.e. D major), which could be expected in bar 21. However, bar 21 introduces completely unexpected the minor seventh, C natural, as part of V in G major (such irregular progression is called an 'ellipsis').

Figure 4: the game (continued)



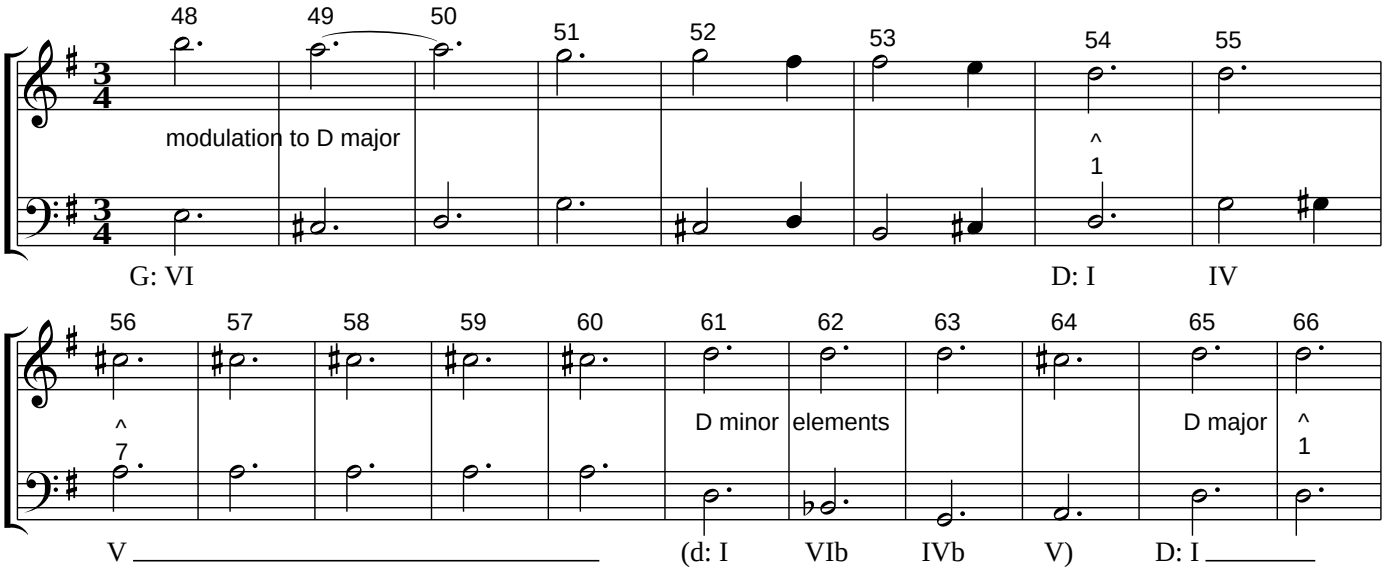
Again, G major is clearly defined, in the same way. However, bar 37 shows what was missing in bar 21: a cadence in D major, repeated three times. C sharp is now part of the dominant seventh of D major and functions as a new leading tone, defining the first tone D.

Figure 5: the game (continued)



After the three cadences in D major, the vital tone C sharp is modified to C natural; result: back to G major with tone F sharp as a leading tone.

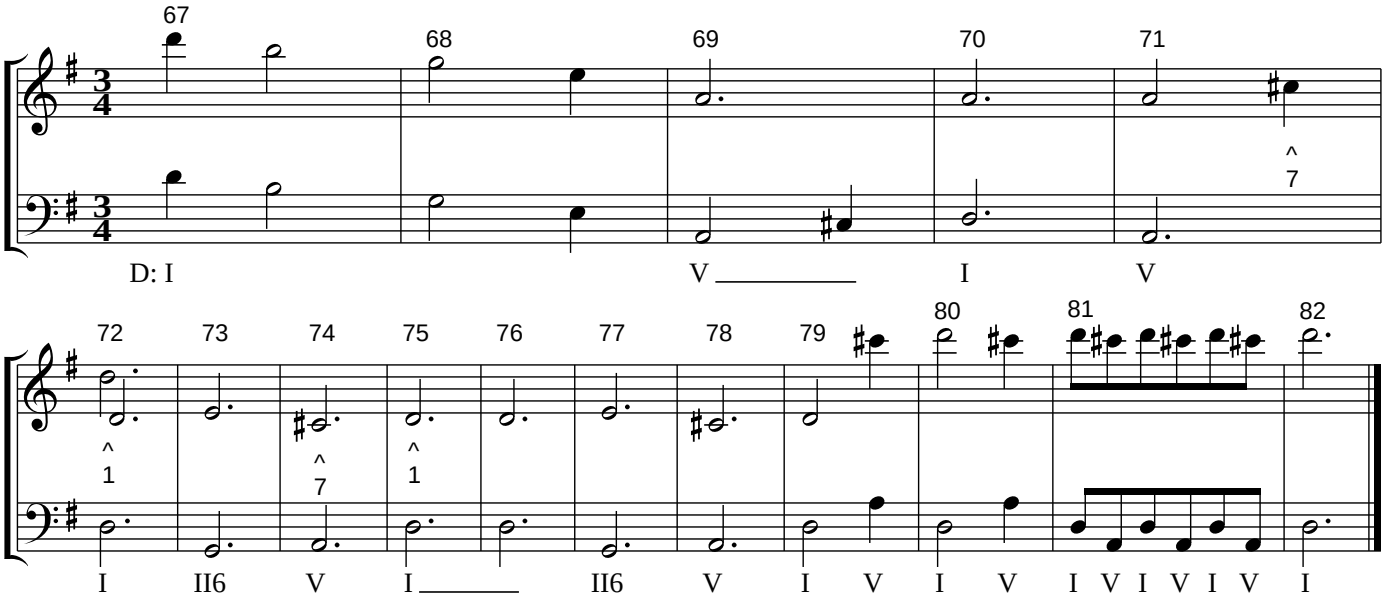
Figure 6: the game (continued)



From bar 48 a stepwise, descending line reaches its goal in bar 54: D major (note the stressing function of the dominant chords: A major and the A dominant seventh). Then, five bars with dominant function in D major (bar 56 − 60) result in a short, however surprising D minor section (bar 61 − 63), that ends in D major.

Figure 7 shows − after a descending unison passage (bar 66 − 69) which can interpreted as a horizontalized seventh chord of II − the concluding and clear definition of D major with a dominant role for the leading tone (C sharp) and the first tone (tone D).

Figure 7: the game (continued)

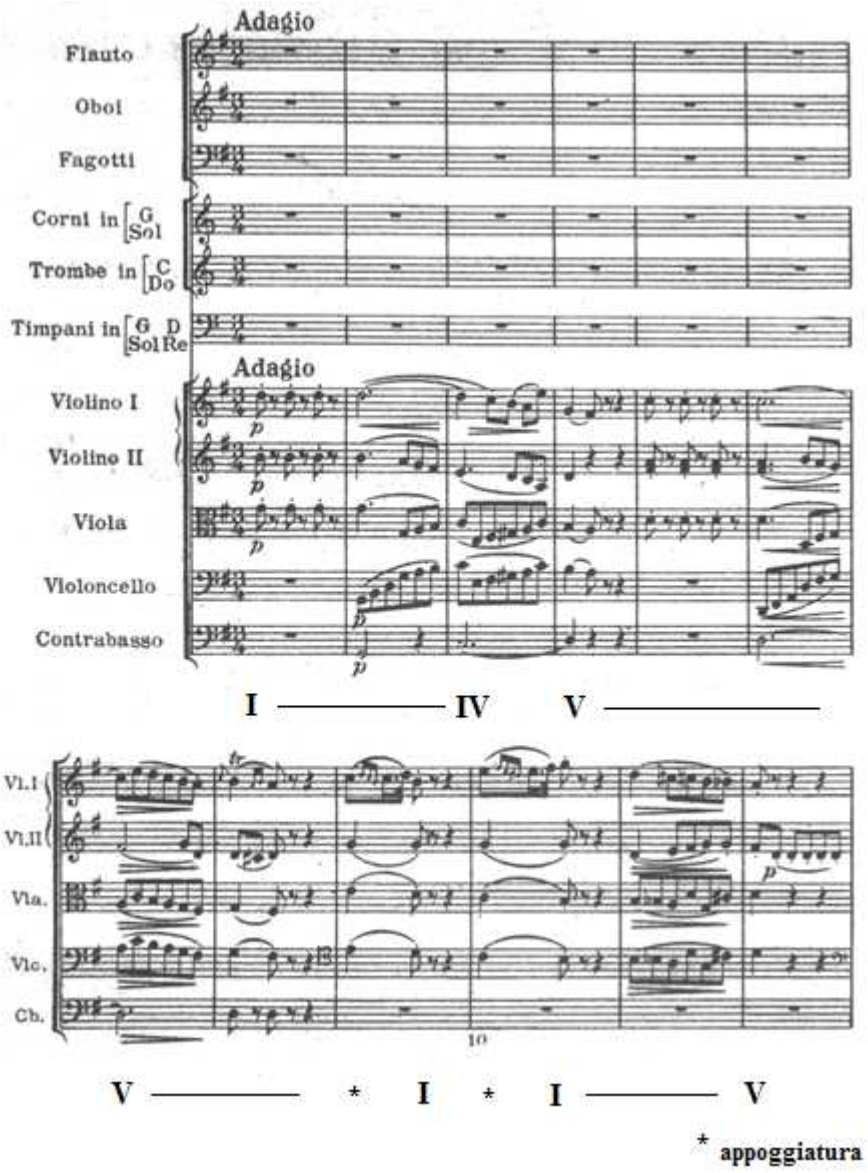


3. Concluding remarks.

The foregoing figures demonstrate the clear construction of the first 82 bars from the first movement of Haydn's Oxford Symphony. The harmonic organization is basic, consisting merely of tonic and dominant chords from G major or D major. The underlying melodic organization is also basic: it can be defined in terms of first tone and leading tone of G major or D major as part of I or V. The 82 bars represent in an easy way a discussion between G major and D major, or as you like, a two players game, each player defending his own tonal region. Winner is the D major player.

The way Haydn elaborate these basic harmonic and melodic structures is really astonishing. Figure 8 shows the first 12 bars of the Oxford Symphony, which is − pars pro toto − an very nice example of Haydn's craftmanship.

Figure 8: the first 12 bars as an example of Haydn's ingenious elaboration techniques.



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