

The triad built on the first scale degree of a major or minor key is called Tonic; the triad built on the fifth scale degree of a major or minor key is called its Dominant. They are like the subjects and verbs of music. All music written in the style upon which we are working (common-practice music from the Baroque to the early Nineteenth Century) is given inner life through a tension between Tonic and Dominant.

Once you have a Tonic triad, you can imagine the Dominant as the triad built upon the fifth chord member of that triad. Tonic chords are stable; pieces begin and end with them (with some spectacular exceptions in the Nineteenth Century as tonality disintegrates); dominant chords are inherently dissonant. Dominant chords want to resolve, as the arrows below show. Note that the leading tone of the key is always the third chord member of the (major) Dominant. The leading tone always resolves up to tonic in its own voice (with one very special exception below).

Remember: Consonance means that an interval or chord is stable; within a particular style it is happy to be just what it is, where it is, and when it is. Dissonance means that an interval or chord is unstable; within a particular style it needs to MOVE. Consonance and Dissonance have nothing to do with whether an interval or chord sounds "good" or "bad." It is simply (or not so simply) a matter of culturally-inscribed norms of stability and motion within a certain context.

E major: I V I I V⁶ I I V⁴ I⁶