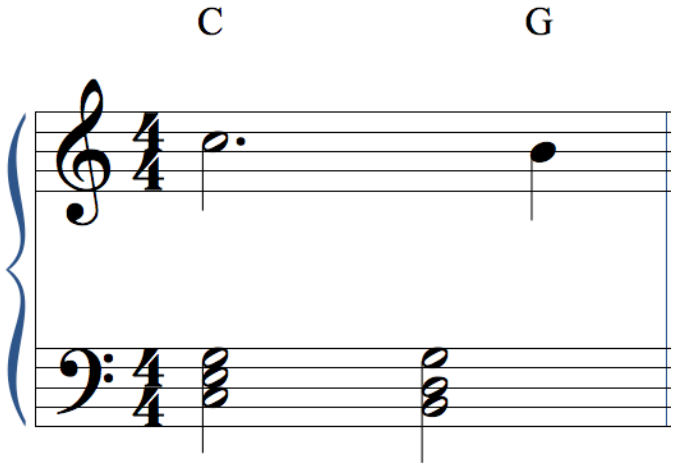
Suspensions

A suspension is a type of non-harmonic tone in which a note starts out as a harmonic tone, is held across a chord change, then resolved after the chord has changed. What causes this tone to be non-harmonic is not the note or the melody itself, but the context which changes around it. Here is an example:



The C note in the melody starts out as a harmonic tone. However, when the harmony changes to a G major chord, the C is no longer part of the chord. After one beat, the C note then drops to a B causing it to resolve.

This tension and resolution is critical to the emotional impact of a suspension. The effect of the dissonance is almost unnoticeable at first because the melody does not move. It is felt rather than heard. However, there is a moment of relief when the note resolves to a nearby chord tone. The great classical composers used this technique to great effect. It allowed them not only to create emotional tension, but to introduce radically dissonant note combinations without taxing the listener's ear.

In the Renaissance, the rules governing the usage of suspensions were very strict. Suspensions could only resolve *downward*, never up. Also, only certain interval combinations were permitted. In more modern times, any harmonic tone that holds over a chord change, becomes dissonant, then resolves by step qualifies as a suspension.

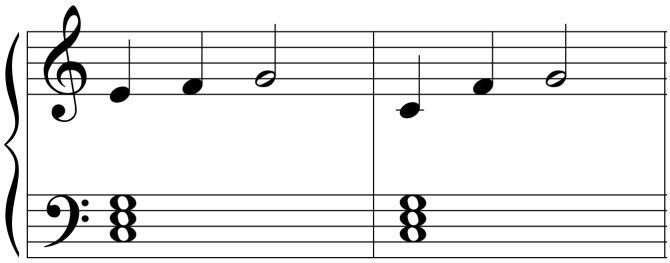
Non-Harmonic Tones in Depth

Most music text books will site approximately eight different types of non-harmonic tones, each with a few variations. In reality, if we look at every variation in terms of

direction, contour, and rhythmic emphasis, there are at over *forty* unique types. What are the important characteristics of a non-harmonic tone? What factors give each type of non-harmonic tone its unique sound and character? Fortunately, while there are many types of non-harmonic tones, there are only a few attributes one needs to grasp to understand the quality of each.

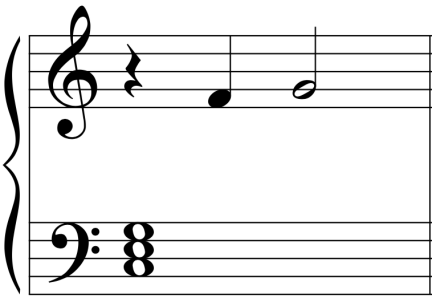
Whether it is approached by skip, step, or rest, or unison
Whether it is left by skip step, or rest, or unison
Whether the direction of approach is the same as the direction of departure
Whether it occurs on a strong or weak beat
Whether it is over a chord change or not

First we will consider whether the note was approached or left by step or skip. Here are two examples where a non-harmonic tone F is approached by step, and another where it is approached by skip:



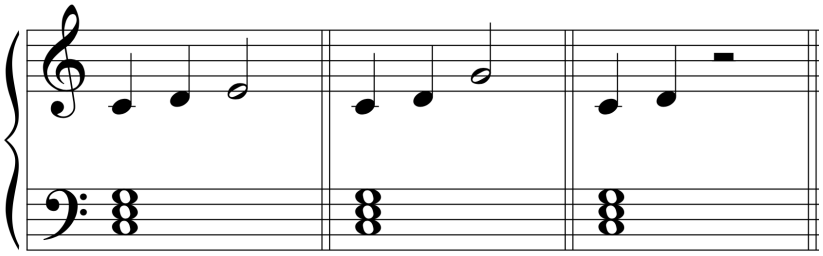
Whether a note is approached by step or skip is very important because when a note is approached by skip, the sound of the note is much more exposed and the dissonance is much more audible. This can be acceptable, but only if you desired a more intense sound. The second example, where the note is approached by skip and left by rest is called an *appiogiatura.*

Sometimes a note is not approached by step or skip, but by a *rest.* That is, the non-harmonic tone is preceded by silence. Approaching by rest has the same effect as approaching by skip – the sound of the note is more exposed. The sound of the F will be quite noticeable here.

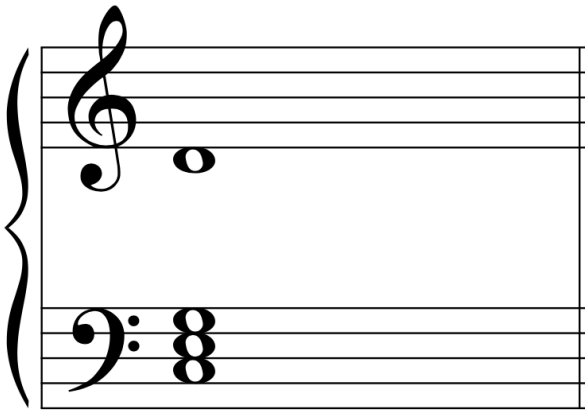


Generally it is always safer to approach by step. That does not mean approaching by skip should be avoided, only that you should be aware of the sound it creates before choosing it.

Similar to the method of approach is the method of departure. Here are three examples, one where a non-harmonic tone is left by step, another where it is left by skip, and a third where it is left by rest:



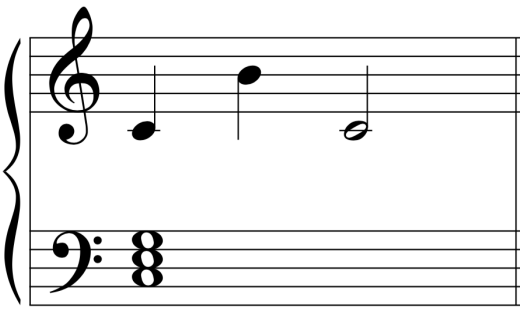
As always, leaving by step is safest. Also, leaving by skip has the same effect of exposing the note and creating a more intense sound. When a note is approached by step and left by skip we call that an *escape tone.* Generally escape tones are very risky. Whereas approaching by skip can sometimes create a sound which enhances the emotion of the piece, escape are much less reliable. The sound of the non-harmonic tone, rather than being a brief moment in time instead lingers in the listeners memory and becomes embedded in the sound of the chord. Only use this if playing the non-harmonic tone against the chord produces an agreeable sound. In the above example, we would want to test playing the D by itself against the C chord like this:



Never use an escape tone if it produces a minor 9th.

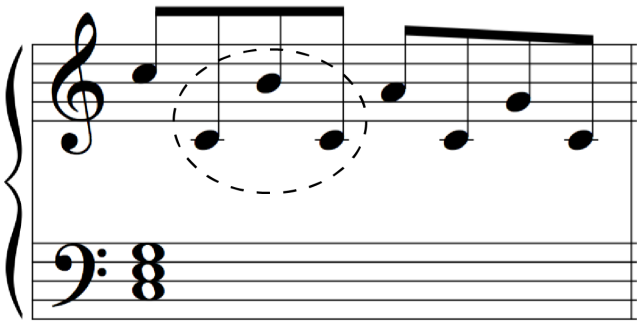
If a note is approached *and* left by skip, it is called a *free tone.* In the example below, B is

a free tone:

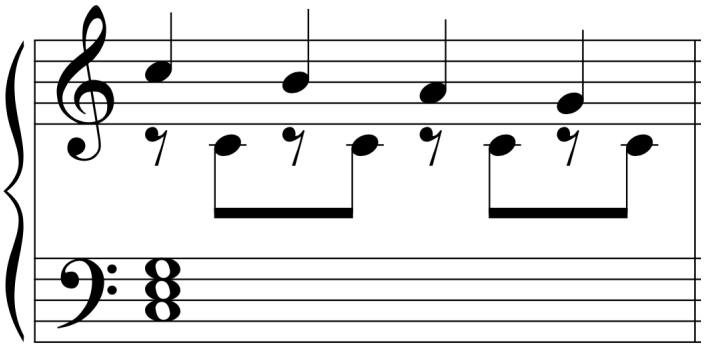


A free tone produces the maximum amount of exposure for the non-harmonic tone. This sound should be universally avoided unless one seeks to create a harsh, dissonant and unpleasant sound.

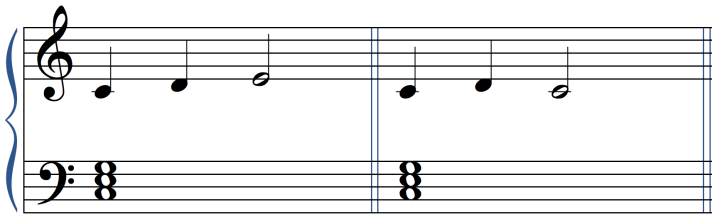
Something which resembles a free tone occurs when we use a pivoting pattern. That is, we can have a non-harmonic tone which appears to be approached and left by skip.



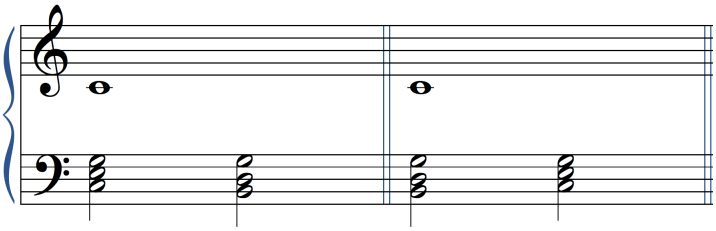
However, it is actually an illusion because the ear parses the line and pivot portions of the pattern separately. The upper notes actually form a descending scale. The B in this case is not an escape tone. Functionally, the above example is perceived by the listener more like this:



The next important factor is whether the direction of arrival and departure are the same. In other words, does it continue the initial line, or is there a change of direction? In the first example, the non harmonic tone is approached and left by the same direction, making it a *passing tone.* If however, it were to leave from the opposite direction, it would be a *neighbor tone.*



There is another situation which occurs frequently but is often overlooked which is when a non-harmonic tone is approached or left by *unison.* You might be wondering how it is possible that a note could be approached by unison. The answer is simple: the note is stationary but the *harmony* around it changes. In the first example the note C starts out as a harmonic tone, but when the harmony changes it suddenly becomes a non-harmonic tone. The C did not change but the context around it did. In the second example, the C starts out as a non-harmonic tone, but the harmony changes and suddenly it becomes a harmonic tone.



Approach	Departure	Direction	Chord	Beat	Common Name
STEP	STEP	SAME	SAME	WEAK	Passing Tone
STEP	STEP	SAME	SAME	STRONG	Passing Tone
STEP	STEP	SAME	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Passing Tone
STEP	STEP	SAME	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Passing Tone
STEP	STEP	OPPOSITE	SAME	WEAK	Neighbor Tone
STEP	STEP	OPPOSITE	SAME	STRONG	Neighbor Tone
STEP	STEP	OPPOSITE	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Neighbor Tone

Approach	Departure	Direction	Chord	Beat	Common Name
STEP	STEP	OPPOSITE	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Neighbor Tone
STEP	SKIP	SAME	SAME	WEAK	Escape Tone
STEP	SKIP	SAME	SAME	STRONG	Escape Tone
STEP	SKIP	SAME	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Escape Tone
STEP	SKIP	SAME	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Escape Tone
STEP	SKIP	OPPOSITE	SAME	WEAK	Escape Tone
STEP	SKIP	OPPOSITE	SAME	STRONG	Escape Tone
STEP	SKIP	OPPOSITE	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Escape Tone
STEP	SKIP	OPPOSITE	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Escape Tone
STEP	UNISON	N/A	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Anticipation
STEP	UNISON	N/A	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Anticipation
SKIP	STEP	SAME	SAME	WEAK	Appiogiatura
SKIP	STEP	SAME	SAME	STRONG	Appiogiatura
SKIP	STEP	SAME	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Appiogiatura
SKIP	STEP	SAME	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Appiogiatura
SKIP	STEP	OPPOSITE	SAME	WEAK	Appiogiatura
SKIP	STEP	OPPOSITE	SAME	STRONG	Appiogiatura
SKIP	STEP	OPPOSITE	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Appiogiatura
SKIP	STEP	OPPOSITE	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Appiogiatura
SKIP	SKIP	SAME	SAME	WEAK	Free Tone
SKIP	SKIP	SAME	SAME	STRONG	Free Tone
SKIP	SKIP	SAME	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Free Tone
SKIP	SKIP	SAME	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Free Tone
SKIP	SKIP	OPPOSITE	SAME	WEAK	Free Tone
SKIP	SKIP	OPPOSITE	SAME	STRONG	Free Tone
SKIP	SKIP	OPPOSITE	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Free Tone
SKIP	SKIP	OPPOSITE	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Free Tone
SKIP	UNISON	N/A	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Anticipation
SKIP	UNISON	N/A	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Anticipation

Approach	Departure	Direction	Chord	Beat	Common Name
UNISON	STEP	N/A	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Suspension
UNISON	STEP	N/A	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Suspension
UNISON	SKIP	N/A	DIFFERENT	WEAK	?
UNISON	SKIP	N/A	DIFFERENT	STRONG	?
UNISON	UNISON	N/A	DIFFERENT	WEAK	Pedal Tone
UNISON	UNISON	N/A	DIFFERENT	STRONG	Pedal Tone