

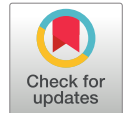
Konservatoryum Conservatorium

Submitted 15.03.2026
Revision Requested 20.05.2026
Last Revision Received 19.06.2026
Accepted 19.06.2026
Published Online 30.06.2026

Research Article

 Open Access

Chordal Incompleteness as an Idiomatic Feature of Voice-Leading in Early Nineteenth-Century Classical Guitar Music



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Abstract

This article examines incomplete chordal structures in the early nineteenth-century classical guitar repertoire as an idiomatic feature of guitar voice-leading rather than as a simple sign of harmonic deficiency. The study follows a comparative, voice-leading-oriented method based on Schenkerian analytical tools and investigates the interaction between the physical structure of the instrument, performance mechanics, and compositional choices. While traditional harmonic theory often treats omitted chord members as a weakening of sonority, the classical guitar presents a distinct compositional environment in which incompleteness may function differently. Focusing on selected works by Fernando Sor, Mauro Giuliani, Dionisio Aguado, Matteo Carcassi, and Luigi Legnani, the study analyzes how incomplete sonorities can function coherently within tonal and contrapuntal contexts. The findings suggest that harmonic clarity is often preserved through contextual voice-leading, registral placement, tendency-tone resolution, and prolongational design. The article therefore proposes that chordal incompleteness in classical guitar music should be understood as a regular component of idiomatic writing. In this respect, the study also suggests the need for more instrument-oriented and holistic approaches to analyzing guitar repertoire. It further emphasizes that examining guitar works, which have received relatively limited attention in traditional harmonic theory, may contribute to a broader understanding of polyphonic music.

Keywords

Classical guitar • ; chordal incompleteness • voice-leading



“ Citation: Bakır, M. (2026). Chordal incompleteness as an idiomatic feature of voice-leading in early nineteenth-century classical guitar music. *Konservatoryum–Conservatorium*, 13(1), 159–179. <https://doi.org/10.26650/CONS2026-1910618>

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Konservatoryum–Conservatorium

<https://cons.istanbul.edu.tr/>

e-ISSN: 2618-5695

Chordal Incompleteness as an Idiomatic Feature of Voice-Leading in Early Nineteenth-Century Classical Guitar Music

Introduction

Incomplete chordal structures are a common feature of the classical guitar repertoire from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From the perspective of conventional harmonic theory, omitted chord members are generally discussed within the norms of part writing, chord completion, and seventh-chord resolution (Kostka et al., 2013, pp. 82, 202, 204–205). However, the classical guitar provides a different compositional environment from that of keyboard or orchestral textures. Its physical structure, including the limited number of strings and the spatial organization of pitches on the fretboard, creates a distinct framework for harmonic and contrapuntal writing.

As a result, incomplete chordal structures in guitar music often emerge not simply as harmonic reductions but as natural outcomes of instrumental and idiomatic conditions. Guitar composers regularly balance harmonic clarity and technical feasibility, adapting tonal structures to the mechanical realities of the instrument. Consequently, omitted chord members may arise from several interacting factors, including instrumental constraints, performance-related difficulties, idiomatic texture types, and, in some contexts, deliberate compositional decisions.

Despite the frequent appearance of such sonorities in the repertoire, their structural and musical implications have received limited systematic attention in the analytical literature. Studies on nineteenth-century guitar music have mainly focused on stylistic history, performance practice, and repertoire, while the relationship between instrumental idiom and voice-leading design remains less explored. Although several historical methods and modern analytical studies address harmony, fingering, texture, and idiomatic writing on the guitar, chordal incompleteness has rarely been treated as a systematic voice-leading problem in the early nineteenth-century classical guitar repertoire. To be more specific, one of the most important historical sources, Sor's *Method for the Spanish Guitar*, should be mentioned. While this resource covers harmonic usage, sonorities, and compositional aspects of the guitar, it does not provide a systematic theory of incomplete chordal structures (Sor, n.d., pp. 5–6, 36–37). Another fundamental resource from the related period, Aguado's *Nuevo método para guitarra* (1843), mainly discusses chord usage and shapes, suiting the aspects of a guitar method (as seen in its name) without touching on any analytical assessments about incomplete chordal structures (Aguado, 1843; pp. 72–78). Thomas F. Heck's *Mauro Giuliani: Virtuoso Guitarist and Composer* is also an important modern source for understanding Giuliani's life, works, and historical position in the early nineteenth-century guitar repertoire (Heck, 1995, pp. xi–xiii, 159–161, 190–192). However, this study mainly provides biographical, historical, and repertorial context rather than an analytical discussion of incomplete chordal structures. Among modern studies, Daniel C. Tompkins' *FRETworks: Idiomatic Voice Leading on the Guitar* is one of the most related conceptual studies on voice-leading on the guitar (Tompkins, 2015, pp. 1–2). However, its analytical focus is mainly on fretboard topology, transformational relations, and twentieth-century guitar repertoire, especially Villa-Lobos and Elliott Carter, rather than on chordal incompleteness in early nineteenth-century classical guitar music (Tompkins, 2015, pp. 5, 13). Jonathan Leathwood's recent work on harmonic levels and linear analysis in Giulio Regondi's guitar music is also closely related to the analytical perspective of the present study (Leathwood, 2024, p. 5). Nevertheless, its focus is on harmonic reduction and larger-level voice-leading in Regondi's music, rather than on chordal incompleteness in earlier classical guitar repertoire. Another recent study was conducted by Culler. *Improvising Early-Nineteenth Century Guitar Music: The Application of Partimento Rules*

with Realizations Informed by the Music of Mauro Giuliani and Fernando Sor (Culler, 2023). This study aims to provide a realization of the theory on the guitar by using partimento applications, improvisation, and counterpoint (Culler, 2023, pp. iii, 7, 12–14); however, chordal completeness is not its real focus. Culler also notes that publications examining the relationship between partimento practice and the guitar are still limited, mentioning Pignatiello's guitar version of Fenaroli's *Regole musicali* among these few related resources (Culler, 2023, p. 129). As for general harmony and voice-leading books, these sources might be expected to provide an important theoretical background for evaluating chordal structures and contrapuntal coherence (Kostka et al., 2013; Salzer & Schachter, 1989, pp. xvii–xix). Nevertheless, they do not specifically examine chordal incompleteness as an idiomatic voice-leading problem in classical guitar writing. Therefore, examining incomplete chordal structures offers a way to clarify how tonal harmony was adapted to the particular limitations and possibilities of the guitar.

Accordingly, this study attempts to build an instrumental-specific voice-leading model by employing a qualitative analytical approach. To analyze the excerpts, analytical tools afforded by Schenkerian analysis are used, which helps to see voice connections and resolution of tendency notes more explicitly. The wide acceptance of the Schenkerian approach to analyze tonal music and its tools that are applicable to almost all instruments producing clear pitches is the main motivation for this decision. In this respect, in the early 19th century, the structure and music of the guitar can naturally be a medium for the utilization of Schenkerian methods. Another reason is the rarity of guitar-specific studies that incorporate the Schenkerian approach in their analytical assessments. We hope that this study will provide a valuable addition to this neglected area.

In addition, voice-leading reductions, which employ analytical concepts similar to Schenkerian methods, clarify the underlying structural coherence. However, these reductions should not be understood as strict Schenkerian graphs; rather, they serve as practical analytical devices designed to illuminate the voice-leading implications of incomplete chordal structures. In addition to these tools, some hypothetical voicings using imagined complete versions were created to compare the hypothetical complete and original incomplete voicings. It is believed that using these comparisons will be beneficial to assess whether the incomplete voicings were made as a result of technical/playing constraint (or constraints) or compositional choice (or choices).

The main research question motivating this study is whether incomplete chordal structures can function coherently within voice-leading and harmonic contexts despite the omission of one or more chord members. More specifically, this study asks how such structures achieve musical coherence and which instrumental, technical, and compositional factors contribute to their formation. In addition, related to the main research question, we can ask whether chordal incompleteness can be regarded as an idiomatic feature of guitar music rather than a deficient feature.

Understanding chordal incompleteness as an idiomatic feature rather than a deficiency is important for several reasons. First, it can help music analysis pedagogy by encouraging students and researchers to evaluate guitar music according to specific conditions of the instrument. Second, it can contribute to historical performance practice, as performers may better understand why composers preferred certain reduced voicings. Finally, it may support broader theoretical discussions by showing how instrumental design can shape harmonic clarity and voice-leading coherence.

This article examines incomplete chordal structures in selected works by Fernando Sor, Mauro Giuliani, Dionisio Aguado, Luigi Legnani, and Matteo Carcassi. This article examines incomplete chordal structures in selected works by Fernando Sor, Mauro Giuliani, Dionisio Aguado, Luigi Legnani, and Matteo Carcassi. These composers belong to the early nineteenth-century classical guitar tradition, a period in which the six-string guitar became increasingly central to solo, didactic, and virtuosic repertoire (Tyler & Sparks, 2007, pp. 235–

236, 242). Through a close analytical reading of representative passages, this study identifies the main factors that generate incomplete chordal structures and shows how these structures may still function coherently within tonal and contrapuntal contexts. Rather than treating chordal incompleteness as a deficiency, this article argues that it should be understood as an idiomatic feature of guitar voice-leading shaped by the interaction between harmonic logic and instrumental design.

CAUSES OF INCOMPLETE CHORDAL STRUCTURES IN CLASSICAL GUITAR MUSIC

Incomplete chordal structures in the classical guitar repertoire may arise from several interacting factors related to the instrument, performance technique, texture, and compositional design. Unlike keyboard instruments, the guitar imposes particular structural and technical constraints on the distribution of voices. For this reason, composers often adapt harmonic structures in ways that prioritize playability, textural clarity, and idiomatic writing over complete chordal realization.

In this context, the omission of one or more chord members does not necessarily imply harmonic weakness. Rather, such omissions can function as practical and musically coherent solutions shaped by the physical properties of the instrument and the demands of performance, a perspective supported by guitar-specific discussions of fingering, chordal positions, and idiomatic voice-leading (Sor, n.d., pp. 5–6, 36–37; Tompkins, 2015, pp. 1–2). The following subsections examine these factors and show how they contribute to the formation of incomplete chordal structures in early nineteenth-century classical guitar repertoire.

The examples in this section do not cover all cases of chordal incompleteness in the repertoire. They were chosen because they clearly show the three main causes discussed in this study: instrumental constraints, playing difficulties, and compositional or textural choices. In some passages, the reason for incompleteness is straightforward and linked to one factor, such as the limited number of strings or a difficult position shift. In other cases, multiple factors may be involved. Therefore, the examples are classified by their most dominant cause, even if other factors also contribute to the missing chord members.

Each composer is used to illustrate a specific feature of incomplete chordal structures. Legnani and Sor provide clear examples of how the physical structure of the guitar may limit the distribution of voices. Aguado and Carcassi show how left-hand configuration, stretching, and position changes can lead to incomplete chordal structures even when complete versions are theoretically possible. Sor also demonstrates how right-hand usage and rapid arpeggiated motion may reduce the number of available voices. Finally, Carcassi and Giuliani present cases in which chordal incompleteness is closely related to compositional choice and textural design rather than to a simple technical limitation. Thus, the selected excerpts offer a methodological basis for understanding different types of chordal incompleteness before moving to the detailed analytical discussion.

Instrumental Constraints

Certain incomplete chordal structures originate directly from the structural properties of the guitar. The instrument provides only six strings, and the spatial arrangement of pitches across the fretboard may restrict the simultaneous realization of all chord members within a given register. In such cases, the omission of a chord tone is not a compositional preference but a practical consequence of the instrument's physical limitations.

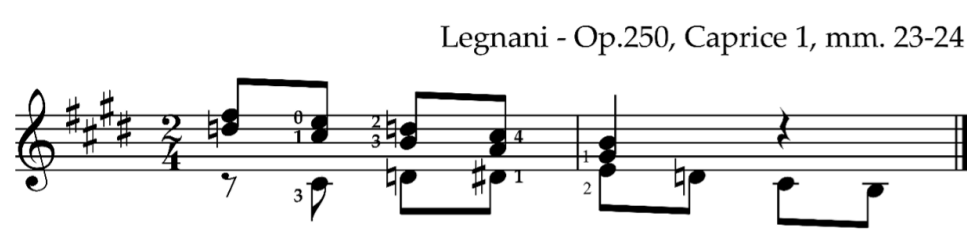
Example 1

A representative example of an incomplete sonority caused by instrumental constraints can be observed in Luigi Legnani's *Caprice No. 1* from Op. 250 (bars 23–24). In this passage, a D# half-diminished seventh chord appears without its third (F#). The omission results from the spatial arrangement of the voices on

the instrument. The three sounding chord members occupy adjacent strings, leaving no available string to accommodate the missing third within the given register. Consequently, the incomplete sonority emerges as a direct outcome of the guitar's structural limitation rather than a compositional preference.

Figure 1

Legnani, Caprice No. 1, Op. 250, bars 23–24



Example 2

Another example of incompleteness resulting from instrumental constraints can be found in Fernando Sor's *Allegretto* from Op. 33 No. 1 (bars 64–68). In this passage, the reduction in the number of voices produces incomplete tonic sonorities. The available strings are occupied by the most structurally important tones of the harmony, leaving no additional space to include all chord members simultaneously. As a result, the omission of certain chord tones emerges as a practical consequence of the guitar's limited number of strings.

Figure 2

Sor, Allegretto, Op. 33 No. 1, bars 64–68



Playing Difficulties

In addition to structural limitations of the instrument, incomplete chordal structures may also arise from technical difficulties in performance. In some passages, a theoretically complete voicing is possible, but awkward left-hand formations, rapid position shifts, or demanding right-hand patterns make its practical realization unstable. In such cases, the omission of a chord member functions as a practical adjustment that preserves both playability and musical clarity.

Left-Hand Configuration Constraints

Some incomplete chordal structures arise from difficult left-hand configurations. In such cases, a complete voicing may be theoretically possible, but wide stretches, awkward fingerings, or fixed barre positions make its practical execution unstable. As a result, one of the chord members is omitted in order to preserve fluency and control in performance.

Example 3

An example of this situation can be found in Dionisio Aguado's *Polonaise* from *Four Rondos Brillants*, Op. 2 No. 2 (mm. 50–51). In bar 50, the ascending melodic motion in parallel thirds, together with the barre and the held bass, creates a difficult left-hand configuration. As a result, a complete voicing cannot be realized at a single moment.

A similar difficulty continues in bar 51. Here again, stretching, parallel thirds, and a fixed first-finger position make a complete chord impractical. The omitted tones, however, do not damage the harmonic clarity of the passage.

Figure 3

Aguado, Four Rondos Brillants, Op. 2 No. 2, bars 50–51



Example 4

Another example appears in Matteo Carcassi's *Rondo* from Op. 10 (mm. 23–24). Here, skipped melodic motion and a relatively fast harmonic pace create a difficult left-hand configuration. A complete four-part realization would require awkward fingering and would make the connection between successive chords less practical. For this reason, the written three-part voicings preserve fluency without harming harmonic clarity.

Figure 4

Carcassi, Rondo, Op. 10, bars 23–24



Position-Shift Constraints

Another common source of incomplete voicings arises from position shifts on the guitar. In some passages, a theoretically complete chord can be played in a different position of the fingerboard. However, reaching this position within the required tempo may demand a rapid and unstable shift. In such situations, composers often prefer a more stable hand position even if it results in the omission of a chord member. This approach preserves rhythmic precision and overall fluency in performance.

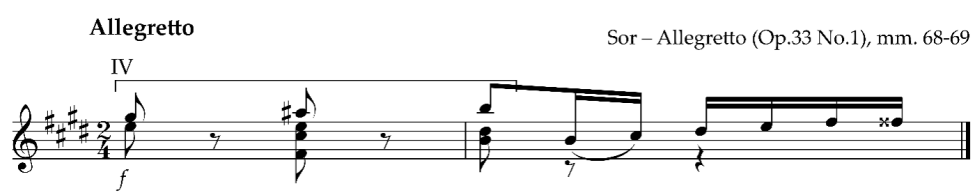
Example 5

An example can be observed in Fernando Sor's *Allegretto* from Op. 33 No. 1 (mm. 68–69). Here, a complete four-part realization of the tonicized B major chord is technically possible, but it would require a rapid shift to a new position at the point of resolution. Within the written tempo, this movement would create an unnecessary technical difficulty.

For this reason, Sor preserves the more stable position and omits the fifth of the triad. Even with this reduction, the harmonic and cadential motions remain clear.

Figure 5

Sor, Allegretto, Op. 33 No. 1, bars 68–69



Example 6

Another example of position-shift difficulty can be found in Dionisio Aguado's *Adagio* from *Four Rondos Brillants*, Op. 2 No. 1 (m. 17). In this passage, a complete form of the dominant-seventh chord is technically possible, but it would require a difficult shift together with a change of left-hand formation.

For this reason, Aguado chose a more practical voicing and omits the third of the chord. Even so, the harmonic function remains clear within the passage.

Figure 6

Aguado, Four Rondos Brillants, Op. 2 No. 1, bar 17



Right-Hand Texture Constraints

Incomplete voicings may also arise from constraints related to right-hand coordination. Certain guitar textures require rapid and continuous plucking patterns that limit the number of voices that can be executed simultaneously. In such situations, maintaining a theoretically complete chord would demand additional simultaneous plucking or unstable finger movements. To preserve rhythmic stability and clarity of articulation, composers may reduce the number of voices and omit chord members.

Example 7

An example of this type appears in the coda of Fernando Sor's *Allegretto* from Op. 33, No. 1 (mm. 129–136). In this passage, a fast arpeggiated texture is combined with a more active bass melody. Under these conditions, the earlier four-part texture could not be maintained in the same way.

As a result, one of the inner voices is omitted and the texture is reduced to three parts. Even with this reduction, the harmonic framework remains clear.

Figure 7

Sor, Allegretto, Op. 33 No. 1, coda (bars 129–136)

Allegretto

Sor – Allegretto (Op.33 No.1), mm. 129-136

Compositional Choice and Textural Design

In some passages, incomplete chordal structures do not arise primarily from instrumental limitations or playing difficulties, but rather from compositional decisions and textural design. In such contexts, composers intentionally prefer reduced voicings to preserve textural clarity, maintain idiomatic figurations, or support a specific musical pattern. The omission of certain chord members—most often the fifth—does not weaken the passage's harmonic function because the surrounding musical context sufficiently implies

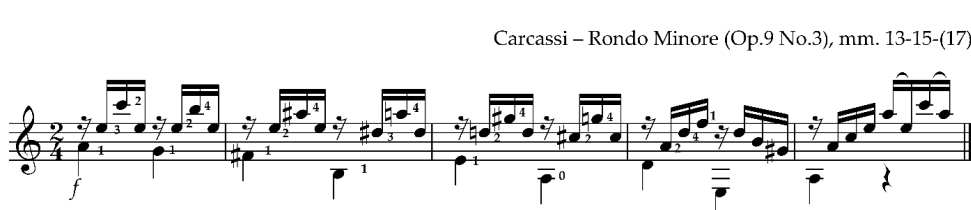
the missing tones. Instead, these reductions contribute to a more transparent texture and smoother musical flow, demonstrating that incomplete voicings may function as an idiomatic feature of classical guitar writing rather than merely as a technical compromise.

Example 8

An example related to textural design can be found in Matteo Carcassi's *Rondo Minore* from Op. 9 No. 3 (bars 13–15). In this passage, a sequence of dominant-seventh harmonies is presented within a continuous three-part arpeggio pattern. Because the figuration remains unchanged, the seventh chords appear without their fifths. This reduction allows the arpeggiated texture to remain stable while preserving harmonic clarity.

Figure 8

Carcassi, Rondo Minore, Op. 9 No. 3, bars 13–15

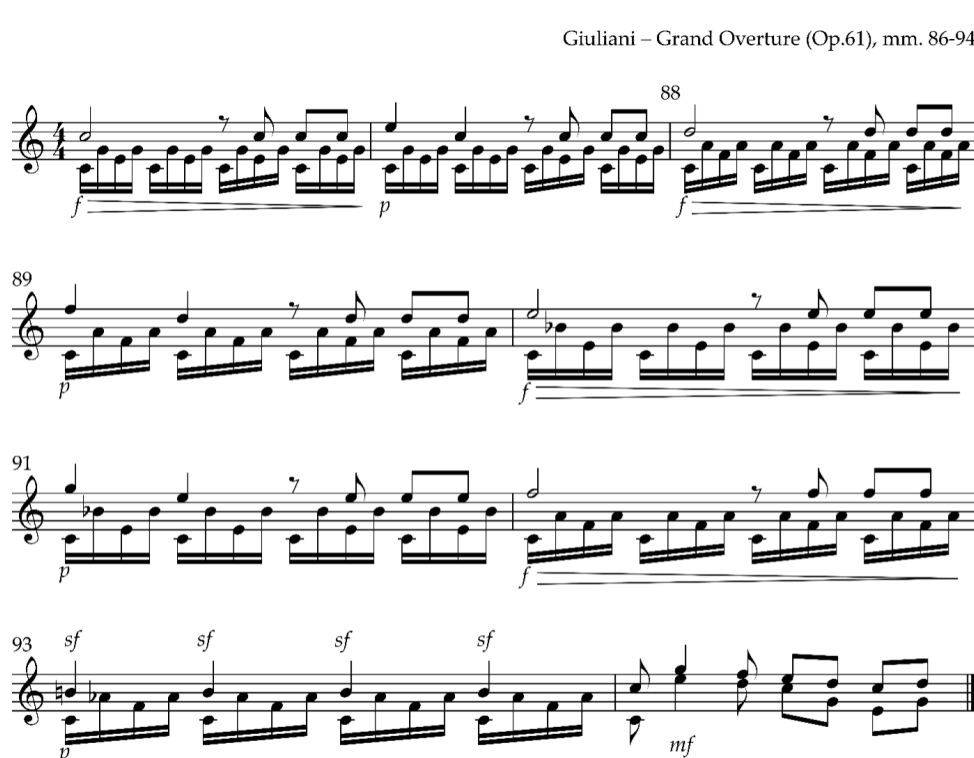


Example 9

Another instance of incompleteness related to compositional design can be observed in Giuliani's *Grand Overture*, Op. 61 (bars 86–94). In this passage, a four-part texture is maintained within an arpeggiated accompaniment supporting a melodic upper line. During local tonicization, a dominant-seventh chord appears without its fifth. The omission allows the composer to preserve the four-part arrangement and maintain the clarity of the texture without introducing an additional voice.

Figure 9

Giuliani, Grand Overture, Op. 61, bars 86–94



TAXONOMIC CLASSIFICATION OF INCOMPLETE CHORDAL STRUCTURES

This taxonomic view provides a clearer framework for understanding the structural variety of incomplete chordal structures in early nineteenth-century classical guitar music. Selecting excerpts from the works of five prominent composers of the related era, the examples listed in Table 1 are analyzed in detail in the following section. Each work was selected not only for being a piece of these major composers, especially because they are not from the pedagogical works of these composers. Pedagogical studies from the related period include intentionally easier chordal structures than professional concert pieces, providing suitable learning material for students and nonprofessional players. Thus, the excerpts were chosen from more demanding pieces in terms of performance level.

Table 1 summarizes the selected examples according to the composer, work, chord type, omitted chord member, and main reason for incompleteness. This table does not present a statistical survey of the entire repertoire. Rather, it provides a taxonomic overview of the representative cases analyzed in this article.

Table 1

Taxonomic Classification of Incomplete Chordal Structures in the Analyzed Guitar Repertoire

Article location	Composer	Work	Measures	Chord type	Omitted member	Main factor
Example 1; Analysis 2	Legnani	<i>Caprice No. 1</i> , Op. 250	23–24	Half-diminished seventh	Third	Instrumental limitation; string-layout constraint
Analysis 1	Legnani	<i>Caprice No. 1</i> , Op. 250	29–32	Dominant seventh	Third	Compositional choice
Example 8; Analysis 3	Carcassi	<i>Rondo Minore</i> , Op. 9 No. 3	13–15	Dominant seventh	Fifth	Arpeggiated textural design
Analysis 4	Giuliani	<i>Adagio con grand espressione</i> , Op. 15	1–2	Implied triad	Third	Two-part texture; prolongational context
Example 6; Analysis 5	Aguado	<i>Adagio</i> , Op. 2 No. 1	17	Dominant seventh	Third	Position-shift constraint
Example 5; Analysis 6	Sor	<i>Allegretto</i> , Op. 33 No. 1	68–69	Major triad	Fifth	Cadential resolution; position-shift avoidance
Example 7; Analysis 7	Sor	<i>Allegretto</i> , Op. 33, No. 1, Coda	129–136	Triadic/arpeggiated sonorities	Fifth; seventh	Right-hand texture constraint; reduction of part number

Note. The table summarizes the representative examples analyzed in the article. The classification is based on the omitted chord member and the main factor contributing to chordal incompleteness.

As the table shows, the selected examples include both single-cause and multi-factor cases, indicating that chordal incompleteness in the analyzed repertoire reflects recurring idiomatic tendencies rather than isolated or accidental cases.

VOICE-LEADING IMPLICATIONS OF INCOMPLETE VOICINGS

The previous sections have shown why incomplete chordal structures occur and how they can be classified according to their structural features. However, an important question still remains: how do these incomplete sonorities function within the voice-leading framework of the music? In many cases, the omission of a chord member does not weaken the harmonic structure. Instead, the surrounding musical context, including melodic motion, bass progression, and implied harmony, compensates for the missing

tone. The following analytical examples examine how incomplete voicings operate within the voice-leading structure of selected passages from the classical guitar repertoire.

The analytical observations presented in this section follow a voice-leading oriented approach (Cadwallader et al., 2020, pp. 3–4; Salzer & Schachter, 1989, pp. xvii–xix). In several figures, simplified reductions are used in order to clarify underlying linear motions and harmonic connections. In some passages, analytical ideas that are associated with Schenkerian theory—such as linear progressions, implied tones, and registral continuity—are employed as interpretative tools (Cadwallader et al., 2020, pp. 38–39, 77–81, 117–118, 143–145). However, the figures presented here should not be understood as strict Schenkerian graphs; rather, they serve as practical reductions designed to illuminate the voice-leading implications of incomplete chordal structures (Cadwallader & Gagné, 2011). In certain cases, hypothetical or imagined voicings are also introduced in order to illustrate alternative realizations and to evaluate the musical consequences of these incomplete sonorities.

Each example will demonstrate how incomplete chordal structures function within harmonic and voice-leading contexts. For the sake of analytical clarity, all pitch references in this section are treated as written rather than sounding pitches, although the classical guitar sounds one octave lower than notated.

Legnani – *Caprice No.1* (Op.250)

Analysis 1, Bars 29–32

The first analytical example is taken from Luigi Legnani's *Caprice No.1* Op.250. In this passage, an incomplete chordal structure appears within the guitar-idiomatic texture. The sonority in question occurs as a half-diminished seventh chord lacking its third.

At first glance, the omission of the third may seem problematic, since this chord member contributes significantly to the harmonic identity of the sonority. However, a closer examination of the surrounding context shows that the harmonic function remains perceptible. The outer voices form a clear voice-leading framework that supports the progression, allowing the listener to infer the missing chord member through contextual implication.

From a guitar-technical perspective, the omission is closely related to the physical constraints of the instrument. The distribution of the voices within the passage requires a compact spacing that must be accommodated on the available strings. Under these conditions, adding the missing third would require a different string distribution or a substantial change in the hand position, both of which would disrupt the efficient fingering of the passage.

As shown in Figure 10.2d, a four-part rendition of the dominant prolongation in bar 31 can produce proper voice movement, which suits the conventional norm. In addition, there are two workable left-hand shapes for executing the first part of the dominant harmony. Both of these fingerings are easy for fluent playing on the guitar. For a performer who is adequate for playing Legnani's Caprices, these four-part versions would undoubtedly be playable. As a result, the real motivation for eliminating the crucial third should be related to aesthetical (or compositional) decisions of the composer. A reading of the passage using Schenkerian idioms can be illuminating in uncovering Legnani's musical motivation.

Figure 10.1b illustrates a simplified reduction of the passage. This reduction highlights the underlying voice-leading connections and demonstrates that the harmonic progression remains structurally coherent despite incomplete surface sonority. In this respect, incompleteness should not be interpreted as a harmonic deficiency, but rather as an idiomatic solution that reconciles voice-leading continuity with the physical limitations of the guitar.

Finally, it may be purported that in such a robust cadential progression, Legnani could have aimed to protect textural continuity, considering using incomplete voicings unnecessary. Such cases illustrate how incomplete chordal structures can function as idiomatic voice-leading solutions in early nineteenth-century guitar repertoire.

Figure 10.1

a) Excerpt b) Schenkerian interpretation, *Caprice No.1 (Op.250)*, Bars 29–32

ANALYSIS 1

Legnani - Op.250, Caprice 1

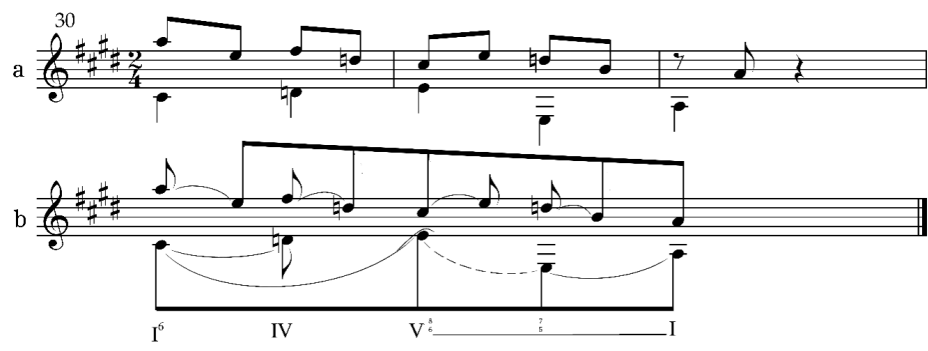
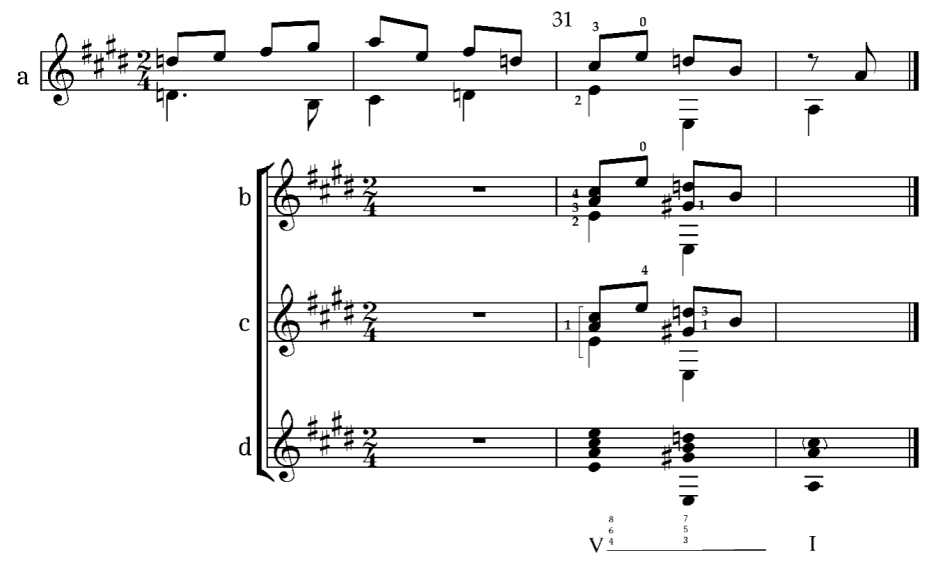


Figure 10.2

a) Excerpt b) Alternative fingering c) Another alternative fingering d) 4-part voice-leading summary, *Caprice No.1 (Op.250)*, Bars 29–32

Legnani - Op.250, Caprice 1



Analysis 2, Bars 23–24

Another example from Legnani's *Caprice No.1* appears at the end of bar 23, where an incomplete D# half-diminished seventh chord lacking its third, F#, is used. This sonority functions as the leading-tone seventh chord to the dominant and participates in the half-cadential articulation on E major in bar 24, which also prepares the modulation toward A major. Since the omitted tone is the third of the chord, one may initially think that its absence weakens the harmonic clarity of the sonority. Yet a closer examination of the passage

suggests that this incompleteness is generated mainly by a physical limitation of the guitar rather than by a compositional preference.

At this point, it is useful to consider how the chord is formed in its immediate voice-leading context. In the last half-beat of bar 23, the upper two parts move downward toward the upper voices of the following E major triad, while the bass rises chromatically to the root E. This contrary motion produces a compressed sonority whose main function is contrapuntal. The written chord members—D#4, A4, and C#5—must be placed on adjacent strings, namely the fourth, third, and second strings. As a result, the registral gap between the bass and the upper voices cannot accommodate the omitted F#4 within the same practical distribution. One may imagine a complete version of the sonority, but such a realization would require another spacing and another technical arrangement, and would not be realistic in relation to the immediate execution and connection of the passage.

From the viewpoint of harmonic effect, however, the omission does not create a serious problem. The chord still contains the most important tendency tones (Cadwallader et al., 2020, p. 53). D# functions as the local leading tone to E, while A forms a tritone with it and moves toward the expected consonance in the following harmony. C# also participates in the directed motion of the half cadence by resolving downward. Thus, although the sonority is incomplete on the surface, its contrapuntal and harmonic tendency remains fully clear.

Figure 11 illustrates the passage in reduction and clarifies the underlying voice-leading relations. In this example, the missing chord member does not weaken the progression. On the contrary, the incomplete sonority functions as an idiomatic solution shaped by the physical layout of the guitar while preserving the harmonic and contrapuntal continuity of the passage.

Figure 11

a) Excerpt b) Imaginary continuum c) Impossible addition (red note) d) Schenkerian interpretation, *Caprice No.1 (Op.250)*, Bars 23-24

ANALYSIS 2

Legnani - Op.250, Caprice 1, mm. 23-24



The figure illustrates the passage in reduction and clarifies the underlying voice-leading relations. It shows four staves (a, b, c, d) representing different interpretations of the passage. Staff a is the original excerpt. Staff b shows an 'imaginary continuum' where the missing chord member is filled in. Staff c shows an 'impossible addition' with a red note. Staff d is a Schenkerian interpretation showing the underlying voice-leading structure with Roman numerals I⁶, ii⁶, and V, and a red note indicating the impossible addition.

Carcassi – *Rondo Minore* (Op.9 No.3)

Analysis 3, mm. 13–15

The *Minore* section of Carcassi's *Rondo* from Op. 9 No. 3 presents a succession of incomplete seventh chords within a continuous arpeggiated texture. From bar 13 to the beginning of bar 16, the passage is built from four-note arpeggios arranged in a three-part structure. While bar 13 contains complete A minor and E minor triads, bars 14 and 15 introduce a descending-fifth sequence of dominant-seventh chords: F#7, B7, E7, and A7. In each of these sonorities, the fifth is omitted.

The main reason for this incompleteness is the interaction between the harmonic change and textural design. The arpeggio pattern remains constant throughout the passage, even though the harmony changes from triads to seventh chords. If each dominant-seventh chord is realized in a complete four-part form, the texture becomes denser and technically less practical. In this sense, Carcassi preserves the continuity of figuration by omitting the least characteristic member of each seventh chord.

Figure 12 compares the original setting (a) with a hypothetical version (b) in which the missing fifths are added (In bar 13 other members are added)¹. This imagined realization shows that completed chords would require more difficult formations and would disturb the fluency of the arpeggiated motion. Thus, the reduction in chordal completeness is not a sign of harmonic weakness, but a practical and idiomatic adjustment that allows the sequence to remain playable and texturally consistent.

From the viewpoint of harmonic effect, these omissions do not create a serious deficiency. Since the omitted member is always the fifth, the identity of the dominant-seventh chords remains clear (Kostka et al., 2013, pp. 204–205). Simultaneously, the sequential motion and directed intervallic pattern of the arpeggios provide a strong sense of continuation. Figure 12c and b clarify that the voice-leading remains smooth and coherent, even though the sonorities are incomplete on the surface.

Therefore, this passage shows that incomplete seventh chords in classical guitar music may arise from the need to preserve an idiomatic textural pattern. Here, chordal reduction supports both the continuity of the arpeggio and the clarity of sequential voice-leading.

¹In the hypothetical four-part realization, some of the dominant-seventh chords would require wider left-hand stretches and less comfortable chord shapes than those found in the original version. The completed version would also create a less idiomatic right-hand distribution, since the added inner tones would disturb the regularity of the arpeggiated pattern.

Figure 12

a) Excerpt b) Hypothetical version c) Imaginary continuum showing linear intervallic patterns d) Schenkerian interpretation, Carcassi – Rondo Minore (Op.9 No.3), mm. 13-15

ANALYSIS 3

Carcassi – Rondo Minore (Op.9 No.3), mm. 13-15-(17)

Giuliani – *Adagio con grand espressione* (Op.15)

Analysis 4, mm. 1-2

At the opening of the second movement, Giuliani presents a thin texture that is based mainly on two parts. In such a setting, incomplete chordal structures appear naturally. The first dyad, consisting of G4 and B4, does not create analytical difficulties. However, on the second beat, the bass D4 and the melodic figure above suggest an implied D major harmony lacking its third, F#. Since the omitted tone is the third of the chord, its absence may initially seem unusual and therefore calls for a closer explanation.

From a performance viewpoint, omission can be connected to a practical constraint in the written design of the passage. Figure 13b shows a hypothetical version in which the missing F# is added². In such a realization, a complete D major triad can be played in the second position, with the bass root held while the upper notes unfold in the melody. Yet this solution creates a difficulty when the melody reaches C5. The finger that is needed to sustain the root would also be required for the continuation of the melodic line, making the complete version impractical within the written motion. In this respect, the omission of the third is closely related to the interaction between harmonic support and melodic continuity on the instrument.

At the same time, the harmonic context makes the incomplete sonority fully understandable. The D major harmony should not be heard in isolation, but as part of the larger opening idea, which extends over one and a half measures. As Figure 13d indicates, the passage forms a third-progression within a prolongation of G major. After the initial B4, the melodic line centers on A4, which is prolonged by an ascent to D5 and a return to C5. The bass D supports the A4 and gives it local prominence. As a result, the second beat produces a clear sense of D major harmony, even though the third is not sounded explicitly.

²In the hypothetical complete version, the root D would need to be sustained while the melodic line continues above it. This creates a fingering conflict when the melody reaches C5, since the same finger would be required both for holding the bass support and for continuing the upper motion.

A further point concerns the structural status of incomplete sonority. The implied D major does not function as an independent harmonic goal; rather, it acts as a contrapuntal sonority connecting the root-position tonic G major with its first-inversion form at the beginning of the following bar (Cadwallader et al., 2020, pp. 42–44, 70–74). In this sense, incomplete harmony is subordinate to the larger tonic prolongation. Because of this subordinate role, the missing chord member does not damage the harmonic clarity of the passage. Voice-leading remains smooth, and harmonic meaning is conveyed through melodic direction and context rather than through full vertical completeness.

This example clearly shows that an incomplete sonority may still project a convincing harmonic identity when it is supported by a strong linear and prolongational framework. Here, the omitted third does not weaken the progression; instead, the passage demonstrates how a two-part texture can imply a fuller harmonic meaning through voice-leading continuity and contextual support.

Figure 13

a) Excerpt b) Hypothetical version: x indicates the problematic area c) Schenkerian interpretation d) Further reduction, Giuliani – *Adagio con grand espressione* (Op.15), mm. 1-2

ANALYSIS 4

Giuliani – *Adagio con grand espressione* (Op.15), mm. 1-2-(4)



G: I 6

Aguado – *Adagio* (Op.2 No.1)

Analysis 5, m. 17

A notable incomplete dominant-seventh chord appears at the second beat of bar 17 in Aguado's *Adagio* from Op. 2 No. 1. This four-part sonority lacks its third, D#, which is not only an important chord member for defining the dominant quality but also the leading tone of the key (Cadwallader et al., 2020, p. 53). For this reason, the omission immediately raises an analytical question: Why does Aguado duplicate the root instead of including such a significant note? A closer examination suggests that the answer lies mainly in performance considerations, although the broader harmonic context plays an important role.

A complete version of this dominant harmony can be played using a barre shape in the seventh position³. However, this solution would require a difficult position change from the fourth to the seventh position,

³This solution would involve both a rapid position shift and a reconfiguration of the left hand from an open-string setting to a barre-based shape.

along with a change from an open-string formation to a barre-based chord shape. Within the immediate context of the passage, this would create an unstable and an unnecessarily difficult transition. Therefore, Aguado chooses a more practical voicing in the second position and sacrifices the third of the dominant. This more comfortable solution makes use of the open second string, B₄; if D[#]5 were placed there instead, the melody notes G[#]4 and F[#]4 could not be executed in the written way⁴. Thus, the omission of the third is best understood as an idiomatic adaptation to the technical realities of the instrument, rather than a sign of harmonic weakness.

At the same time, the harmonic context helps explain why the absence of the leading tone does not produce a serious deficiency. The incomplete dominant-seventh chord stands between two tonic harmonies in the root position and functions within a prolongational progression rather than a strong cadential one (Cadwallader & Gagné, 2011; Caplin, 1998, pp. 24-25, 42-43). Therefore, the dominant does not need to project its full harmonic weight. The melodic descent from F[#]4 to E₄, together with the expected downward resolution of the chordal seventh to the third of the tonic harmony, provides a smooth and convincing continuation. As a result, the lack of D[#] is not felt as strongly as it would be in a more exposed cadential setting.

Figure 14 illustrates the passage and its reduction. The figure clarifies that the omitted third does not obscure the harmonic function of the sonority. Instead, the passage shows how a dominant-seventh chord may remain effective even without its most characteristic upper tendency tone, provided that the voice-leading context is clear. In this respect, incomplete sonority functions as a practical and idiomatic solution that preserves both the performability and harmonic intelligibility.

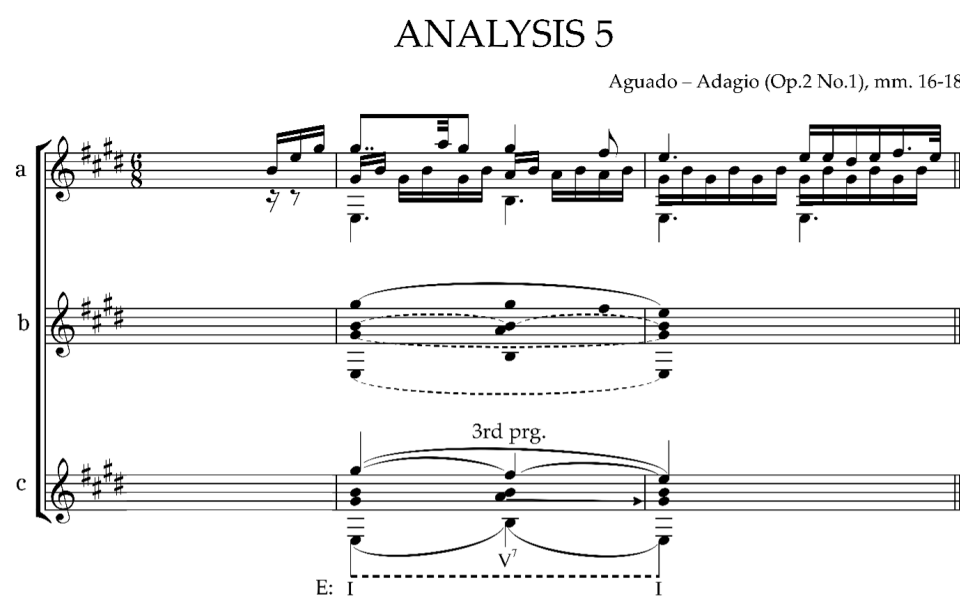
This example demonstrates that even the omission of a structurally important chord member may be acceptable when sonority is placed within a prolongational context. The passage therefore supports the broader argument of this study: incomplete chordal structures in classical guitar music often reflect the interaction between instrumental limitation and voice-leading logic.

Figure 14

a) Excerpt b) Imaginary continuum c) Schenkerian interpretation, Aguado – *Adagio* (Op.2 No.1), m. 17

ANALYSIS 5

Aguado – *Adagio* (Op.2 No.1), mm. 16-18



⁴The more practical second-position voicing depends on the open second string. Replacing this pitch with D[#] would interfere with the written melodic design and make the passage much less workable on the instrument.

Sor – Allegretto (Op.33 No.1)

Analysis 6, mm. 68–69

Between bars 68 and 69, Sor uses an authentic cadence to tonicize the dominant, B major. At the end of bar 68, the applied dominant seventh of B major appears in the root position and in four parts. It resolves in the following bar to the tonicized B major, but this time the chord is written in three parts, omitting its fifth, F#. In musical terms, this reduction creates no problem. Rather, it presents a typical case in which an incomplete triad results from playing difficulty.

A complete four-part version of the tonicized B major can be imagined in the seventh position, using a small barre on the upper strings together with the remaining chord members in a compact voicing (Figure 15b). Although this shape is not especially difficult in itself, the real problem lies in reaching it. In the written version, both the applied dominant and the following tonicized chord remain in the fourth position. In contrast, the complete version would require a rapid shift to the seventh position at the point of resolution. Within the required tempo, such a movement would introduce unnecessary technical risk and could disturb cadence timing. For this reason, Sor preserves a more stable position and omits the fifth of the tonicized triad⁵.

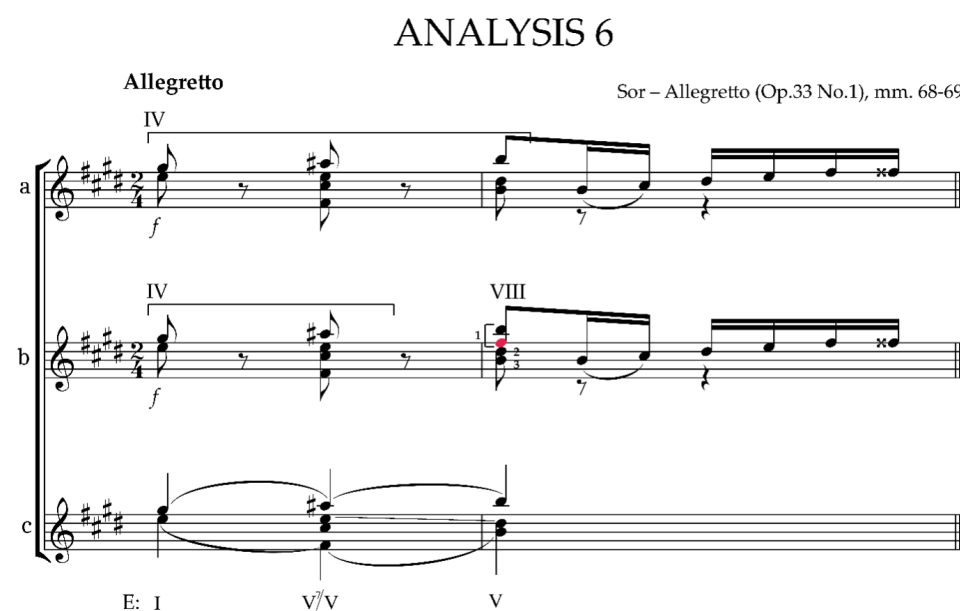
From the viewpoint of voice-leading, this omission does not weaken the progression (Caplin, 1998, p. 27; Kostka et al., 2013, p. 202). The applied leading tone A# and the chordal seventh E resolve in the expected way (Kostka et al., 2013, pp. 202, 204–205), while the bass moves by a fourth to the tonicized harmony. In this respect, the essential cadential tendencies remain fully clear, and the missing fifth does not create any real deficiency. Figure 15c shows that the incomplete tonicized triad functions effectively within its harmonic context. Therefore, the passage demonstrates how a practical guitar solution may preserve both the fluency of performance and the clarity of the cadence.

Figure 15

a) Excerpt b) Alternative rendering using the 7th position. The Added note is marked in red. c) Schenkerian reduction, Sor – Allegretto (Op.33 No.1), mm. 68–69

ANALYSIS 6

Allegretto Sor – Allegretto (Op.33 No.1), mm. 68–69



E: I V⁷/V V

⁵The hypothetical complete B major chord can be formed in seventh position with a small barre on the upper strings. The difficulty lies less in the voicing itself than in the rapid position shift needed to reach it from the preceding sonority.

Analysis 7, mm. 129–136

The coda of Sor's *Allegretto* begins with a texture that is highly idiomatic for the guitar. It combines continuous arpeggiation with a melodic line in the bass and avoids a clearly independent accompaniment pattern in the usual sense. In the opening segment of this coda, the tonic harmony is prolonged through a model-and-sequence design (Caplin, 1998, pp. 11-12, 181). The first three bars present a four-part E minor texture in which the open sixth and first strings double the root, whereas the other chord members are supplied by the open third and second strings. In this way, a full and guitar-friendly sonority is maintained within a rapid arpeggiated pattern. However, in the following segment, from bars 132 to 136, the number of parts is reduced from four to three, even though the same tonic harmony continues. This change raises the question of why the earlier four-part texture cannot be maintained.

The main reason lies in the changing rate of the bass melody. In the first three bars, the bass uses a simple two-note pattern per bar, alternating between the root and fifth. From bar 132 onward, however, the bass becomes more active and articulates four notes per bar, occupying each eighth-note pulse. Although the upper open strings are still retained (1st E and 2nd B), the faster pace of the bass melody makes it impossible to preserve the previous number of voices similarly. One of the middle voices, especially the repeated G in the inner register, can no longer be maintained without creating a technical conflict with bass motion. Thus, the reduction of part number is not caused by harmonic insufficiency, but by the interaction between a more active bass melody and the practical limits of right-hand execution⁶. Even if the active bass melody does not interfere with the register of the middle G, the resulting right-hand plucking pattern would still be highly problematic.

At this point, the guitar-specific nature of the problem becomes especially important. If the earlier four-part texture were to continue unchanged, some notes of the middle voice would have to coincide with the notes of the melodic bass, and the right hand would be forced to produce repeated simultaneous plucks in a very rapid pattern. Within the actual tempo and character of the coda, this would create a demanding and unstable movement. The written three-part version therefore reflects an idiomatic solution: the texture is thinned slightly so that the arpeggiated motion and bass melody can remain clear and fluent.

From the viewpoint of harmonic structure, this reduction does not weaken the passage. Tonic harmony remains fully clear throughout the progression, and the omitted inner tones belong only to the foreground level. Figure 16 illustrates this point by showing the underlying voice-leading summary and the reduction in part number. The larger prolongation of E minor remains intact, and the incomplete surface sonorities do not disturb the continuity of the coda.

Therefore, this passage demonstrates that incomplete voicings may arise even when the harmonic field itself does not change. Here, the reduction in chordal completeness is produced by the increasing activity of the melodic bass and the demands it places on the right hand. The omitted tones do not create a harmonic deficiency; rather, they allow the texture to remain playable while preserving the directed voice-leading and the strong tonic coherence of the passage.

⁶A related performance-based reason may also be considered: if the earlier accompaniment pattern were continued while the new melodic motion unfolds, the resulting right-hand pattern would become unstable and impractical.



Figure 16

a) Excerpt b) Voice-leading reduction c) Alternative 4-part rendering producing very difficult right-hand usage, Sor – Allegretto (Op.33 No.1), mm. 129-136

ANALYSIS 7

Sor – Allegretto (Op.33 No.1), mm. 129-136

Allegretto



The figure displays three musical staves labeled a, b, and c. Staff a shows the original musical excerpt from Sor's Allegretto, measures 129-136, in G major (one sharp) and 2/4 time. It features a melodic line with eighth-note patterns and a bass line with chords. Staff b is a voice-leading reduction of the excerpt, showing the movement of individual voices (notes) between chords with dashed lines. It includes a label 'Em: I' and a dashed line indicating a measure. Staff c is an alternative 4-part rendering of the same passage, showing a different chordal structure and voice-leading. It includes a circled '3' and a dashed line indicating a measure.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined incomplete chordal structures in early nineteenth-century classical guitar repertoire not as simple signs of harmonic deficiency, but as idiomatic features of guitar voice-leading. The analytical examples have shown that such sonorities may arise from instrumental constraints, performance-related difficulties, textural design, and, in some cases, compositional choice. Yet, despite these different causes, reduced chordal completeness does not necessarily weaken harmonic meaning or contrapuntal coherence.

The taxonomic overview showed that the fifth is the most frequently omitted chord member in both triads and seventh chords. This is understandable, since it is usually the least characteristic member of sonority (Kostka et al., 2013, pp. 204–205). Simultaneously, the analyses have also shown that even more significant tones, such as the third, may be omitted without causing serious harmonic ambiguity when the surrounding context is sufficiently strong. In such cases, harmonic identity is preserved not by complete vertical sonority alone, but by contextual voice-leading, registral placement, tendency-tone resolution, and prolongational design.

In line with Schenkerian approaches to tonal analysis (Cadwallader et al., 2020, pp. 3–4, 42–44, 70–74, 117–118; Salzer & Schachter, 1989, pp. xvii–xix), a central point of this study is that incomplete sonorities in classical guitar music should be evaluated within their musical context rather than according to an abstract norm of complete chordal writing. In many of the passages discussed here, the omitted chord member is compensated for by the melodic direction, bass support, or structural implication. For this reason, chordal

incompleteness in the classical guitar repertoire should be understood as a functional and intelligible solution rather than a purely negative compromise.

The examples discussed here also point to a distinct voice-leading logic in classical guitar writing, shaped by the instrument's physical and idiomatic properties. This logic includes the functional sufficiency of partial sonorities, the role of texture in limiting chordal density, and the constant negotiation between harmonic intention and performability. In this respect, incomplete chordal structures may be understood not only as isolated technical solutions but also as evidence of a more specific classical guitar voice-leading practice. Although the present study does not aim to construct a complete theoretical system, the analytical findings suggest—in line with voice-leading theory (Salzer & Schachter, 1989, pp. xvii–xix; Cadwallader et al., 2020, pp. 117–118)—that the classical guitar repertoire invites a more instrument-centered understanding of tonal organization. This perspective may help explain why incomplete chordal structures in this repertoire often remain musically effective despite their reduced vertical form.

Ultimately, drawing on harmonic and voice-leading analysis, this article argues that chordal incompleteness in the early nineteenth-century classical guitar repertoire is neither accidental nor merely defective. Instead, it is one of the clearest signs of how tonal harmony was reshaped within an idiomatic instrumental language. In this sense, incomplete chordal structures reveal both the limitations of the guitar and the creativity with which composers transformed those limitations into coherent and effective voice-leading solutions.

Considering the limited interest in chordal incompleteness in the academic literature, we hope that this study will be a beneficial attempt to contribute to filling this gap by providing new insights and a comprehensive analysis. Besides this, we seek to stimulate further research and discussion within the academic community that covers chordal incompleteness for later periods and for other instruments. These possible additions to the academic literature can broaden perspectives on the voice-leading discipline by approaching the subject from more instrument-specific idioms.



Peer Review	Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest	The author has no conflict of interest to declare.
Acknowledgements	I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, Assoc. Prof. Dr. Jerfi Aji, for his invaluable guidance and support throughout my study.

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