

## The Concept of Harmony. A Structural Perspective

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**Abstract:** *The problematic in tonality and tonal composition are not tied to harmony or counterpoint, but are the result of their combination. In the more elaborate compositions, harmony and counterpoint have very well defined functions, thus resulting a set of clear basic principles in composition development. One of these principles consists in the idea that, harmonic progressions are the structure of the composition and the contrapuntal progressions and chords are the ones that enrich and create the flow of it.*

**Key-words:** *harmony, prolongation, schenkerian analysis, structural hearing, harmonic progression*

### 1. Harmony

In a few words, harmony is the mixture of pitches that are produced simultaneously. This term is generally used equally in the general sense of a series of concurrently sounded notes and for a single occurrence of pitches sounding together, where it is synonymous with chord. Together with melody and rhythm, it is one of the three primary elements of music.

In most researches on this subject, we can find different approaches of the relationship between chords and tonality, the best known of these being the one of Hugo Riemann (*Simplified Harmony* – 1895) who uses mathematic theories that enlighten the functions of chords and the relation between them. The tonal system is considered to be an equilibrate one, with the tonic in the middle.

#### 1.1. Schenkerian harmony

Schenker's harmony treatise (1906) appeared into a series of three books under the title *New Music Theories and Fantasies*. Schenker was not preoccupied with the functional relations but took into consideration the dynamic harmonic model, wanting to show how the tonal system is derived from nature, the metaphors that he used representing a very convincing way of understanding this. Schenker clearly separates

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the harmony and the counterpoint, considering that the other theorists combined them in a wrong way. He introduces the principle of repetition as a corner stone in establishing the concept of motif. He also speaks about great musical fragments that can be considered elaborations of more simple structures.

Like many other theorists, Schenker begun with the harmonic series, from which, in his opinion, only the first five are audible by man, these constituting the base unit of tonal music – triad – to which he attributed mystic properties, naming it “the chord of nature”. Schenker considered that the first interval of the harmonic series (excepting the octave) is the perfect ascending fifth, which is the principal movement in tonal music. That meant that dominant chord is the most important after the tonic chord (Riemann sustained that the dominant and the subdominant are equally important in the tonal system). In addition, this ascending fifth in the harmonic series represented the reason for which the tonal system is best understood as a circle of fifths. Another Schenkerian theory is that the minor tonality is a man-made alteration of “the chord of nature” having an expressive purpose.

Beside counterpoint and the progression of chords that derive from it, there are progressions based on the harmonic relations between certain notes. Since the relationships between these notes are harmonic, the progressions resulted are called harmonic progressions. The relative distribution of contrapuntal and harmonic chords or the predominance of some of them inside a phrase, period, etc, represents a decisive factor in the interpretation and understanding them (phrases, etc.). That is why it is essential to recognize the basic contrasting differences of harmony and counterpoint. F. Salzer offers a simple and conclusive example of differentiation – a melodic line formed of a descending third, which he treats first contrapuntally and then harmonically, representing the descant of a counterpoint with three voices and of a harmonic progression (four voices). In the first case, because the bass line had to resolve on C, on tonal reasoning, the usage of B and D (in soprano) simultaneously is compulsory (a D in the bass line causing a parallelism). In the middle voice G is sustained for the first two notes, which is followed by F, which then goes to E. Thus, the formed chords are the result of moving lines at every voice, the connections having a strict contrapuntal base.

In the second case, although the same chords are used another result is reached. Here, is not important to find a satisfactory counterpoint for the given melodic line, but of a harmony, which means finding chords associated to C major.

## **2. Harmonic relations**

As mentioned before, the concept of harmony is more complex than a simple analysis of individual chords, of their intervallic structure and the diverse functions that these can have, taking into consideration larger structures that govern larger fragments. In order to illustrate this aspect, Schenker analyzed in an essay (Drabkin 1996, 59) Mozart’s

Symphony no. 40, K550. The figure below represents a graphic analysis, in which the harmonic organization of the first movement is presented, from the beginning to the reprise (measure 166), which in turn has as a purpose, in the context of this course, the presentation of the concept of harmony at a macro structural level. This represents a scheme, which is far level wise from the surface of the music, of a larger structure.

b. m. 1 34 38 44 101 134 153 166 (Reprise)

Tonality: G minor I - -(sec.V)-III 5-6 -(sec.V)-V- I-

Fig. 1. W. A. Mozart, *Symphony no. 40*, K550

The outside voices of the chords that result from the harmonic reduction, at a macro structural level (double whole notes), contain the succession I-III-V-I, both III as well as V being preceded by their dominants. The secondary important structures are also shown here (e.g., motion 5-6 that end measure 101). Figure x presents the basic succession of harmonies that form the progression that ties the entire fragment. One can observe the fact that while the superior voice maintains the D, the bass follows an arpeggio movement on the triad of G minor.

It is important to mention the fact that the terms *tonality* and *modulation* are used by those who operate with the concepts of Schenker's analysis with reservations. An example is the B flat major chord in measure 44, which can be considered as being I in B flat major, the following progression could be seen as modulation of the tonality G minor to B flat major. Even though it is correct to assume this, when analyzing the whole fragment, governed clearly by the harmony of G minor, B flat represents III and D major the dominant (V).

### 3. Harmonic progressions

The fundamental harmonic progression (in its form as an authentic cadence): I-V-I can be modified by adding II, III or IV, resulting in compose authentic cadences. These present the harmonic element in music in its concentrated form. Although counterpoint does not imply any harmonic rule, in realizing harmonic progressions one can't totally ignore the rules in counterpoint. The essence of counterpoint is found in the flow of horizontal lines, which, in three voice counterpoint results in chords connected only on the premises of voice leading. Harmonic progressions are based on the relations between the chords, these having harmonic function, in Schenker's opinion, only if they are found in one of the progressions mentioned before as authentic cadences – when referring strictly to reductions.

#### 4. Harmonic prolongations

Harmonic progressions can fulfil two functions: *structural* – in order to determine the course of music and of *subordination* to a harmonic progression from a lower level. In the four measures from Bach's Chorale no. 192 *Gottlob, es geht nunmehr zum Ende*, BWV 321, one can notice the structural difference between two harmonic progressions, the first two measures prolonging from an harmonic point of view the tonic, followed by V (Salzer 1962, 269).

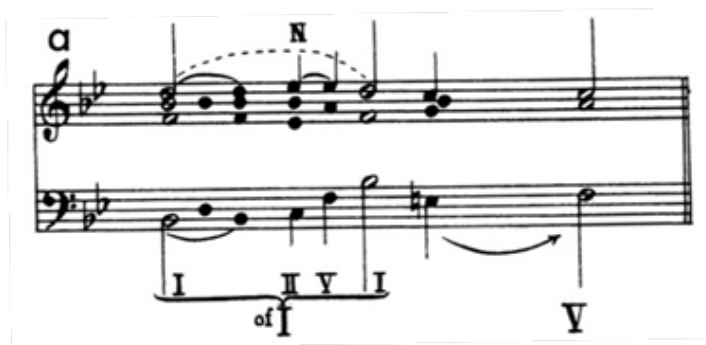


Fig. 2. J. S. Bach, *Chorale no. 192 Gottlob, es geht nunmehr zum Ende*, BWV 321, mm. 1-4

The harmony of the tonic can be prolonged by harmonic chords that can appear under the shape of *complete or incomplete harmonic progressions* or under the shape of a *dominant* (which can be a *chord* or a *complete or incomplete harmonic progression*, playing the role of dominant) that precedes the tonic.

Any component of a harmonic progression can have harmonic prolongations (not just contrapuntal). Thus, Salzer says that there are three situations in which the other degrees of the progression (excepting the first degree) have harmonic prolongations: *the seventh dominant chord attached* (case that resembles dominant/progression with the role of dominant that precedes the tonic), *incomplete harmonic progression* (if it is a prolongation of a harmonic chord) or the *complete harmonic progression* (as a prolongation to a harmonic chord).

Any chord can be preceded or followed by its dominant, which must be taken into consideration only if viewed through its relationship with the chord that it belongs to and which it prolongs. Therefore, there is no harmonic relation between the dominant of a chord (excepting the case of the dominant of the tonality) and the chord that it precedes or follows. In the case of IV, the dominant is a tonic chord with a minor seventh (which emphasizes the role of the dominant). The dominant of the dominant (V degree) is the major chord of the supertonic, that can be precede itself by its

dominant. A more special case is the diminished seventh chord which, although does not belong to the chords or prolongation of progressions, can have a similar role to the attached dominant. The resemblance consists in the tendency to lead towards the next chord and the difference is that it does not have a harmonic tendency, but a rather contrapuntal/melodic one, in rapport to the chord that it prolongs.

The component degrees of a harmonic progression (other than tonic, case that was discussed previously) can have more complex prolongations than the attached dominant, these being preceded by complete or incomplete harmonic progression. Hence, the degrees II, III, IV or V are able of having their own progressions.

Salzer reminds of the importance the main progression, closer to the background of the analysed fragment, which needs to be considered as a whole. He states that this is possible only if the course of music is well established. It is most important, that according to the fragment that is being analysed (phrase, period, section, etc.), that the prolongations of the degrees that make up the main harmonic progressions to be considered as such. Any prolongation, simple or complex, represents a detail in the relation with the course of music as a whole. Salzer also attracts the attention on a mistake, which could lead to the loss of contact with the base structure – considering details as structural events – which in turn has as a consequence the loss of architectonic conception of the phrase, period, section or even the whole work, making impossible to perceive the tonal tension inside the structural progression.

In order to define how a sound is prolonged, one must decide how a sound is extended in a particular piece and whether a syntax has been established. In terms of tonal prolongation, Larson describes it as being similar to ornamentation (Larson 1997, 107)

## **5. Harmony and voice leading**

In harmonic progressions, of small or large proportions, as the one presented before, voice leading and harmony are inseparable. Taking into consideration the dominant seventh chord, one can observe the fact that in strict counterpoint this chord is a passing dissonance, while in harmony, this chord is a harmonic entity, the seventh being absorbed by the dominant chord. Beside the specific schenkerian harmony consonant chords, there are chords of seventh (including the diminished) that form as a result of delays and chords that result from linear motion (neighbor notes or passing notes) which can't be classified as harmonic chords.

## **6. Harmony and diminution**

The understanding of harmonic relations is fundamental in studying schenkerian analysis, because they have a decisive role in the decisions made during the analytical process. It is most important the way in which harmonic connections are made and

how the harmonic relations interact with the functions of voice leading and melodic functions of the voices that form chords. In addition, it is important the differentiation between chords with harmonic function and those with ornamental or passing function, this issue being explained largely in the following chapter.

The diminutions (neighbor notes, passing notes, etc.) that were presented in previous chapters can be notes belonging to chords and so chords can be diminutions (neighbor chords, passing chords, etc.)

## 7. Structure

Given the fact that the chords fulfill structural or prolongation functions, by playing harmonic or contrapuntal roles, one can say that the chords inside a harmonic progression have a structural purpose (in close connection to the meaning and direction of the phrase, period or a fragment analyzed as a whole) and the contrapuntal chords have the purpose of prolongation. Hence, harmonic progressions represent the structural points of the phrase (period, section, etc.) and the harmonic chords extend (prolong) these points or tie them together, having a function of voice leading or ornamentation, all of which carry the generic title of prolongation chords. there is also an interdependent relation between the functions of the notes that make the melodic lines and the functions of the chords, passing notes, ornamentation or prolongation that are sustained by chords with the same functions. This is also true for notes that have a structural function.

The idea of construction, based on the concepts of structure and prolongation, is the one that gives coherence, and which makes the phrases, periods, sections or entire compositions to become prolongations of one basic structural progression. Salzer underlines (Salzer 1962, 116) the fact that from the connections created between structure and prolongation comes coherence, the understanding of the most complex musical units being strictly tied to the ability to recognize them.

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