

## The Evolution of Harmony

Harmony is “the structure of music with respect to the composition and progression of chords” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Vertical and horizontal notions are incorporated in several aspects of music study, whether one is discussing the longitudinal phrasing of a Haydn String Quartet, or the balancing of voices for a single chord in a Mahler Symphony. The dictionary definition embraces the wealth of knowledge and ability in the term “harmony” which continues to develop to this day. The birth of music dates from before 500 Anno Domini (AD) during ancient times where the concept of harmony and counterpoint did not have pre-existing rules and focused on pure consonances. The *Seikilos Epitaph* is the earliest completely notated work in existence; the Greek text of the melody was notated for a single voice consisting of fifths, thirds, and stepwise motion. The evolution of music continues to stem from pre-historic times, with each era introducing and expanding innovative notions of harmony and counterpoint.

Music had a divine origin which was articulated through theorists and philosophers. Harmony during the ancient times focused on the pure ratios of music: octave, fifth, and fourth. The harmonic system was created during this time with the introduction of notes, intervals, scales, and modes. Three general forms of tetrachords were used: diatonic, chromatic, and enharmonic; however, these terms were created centuries later. The basis of several compositions in later centuries evolved from the modal scales developed from the species of octaves. Greek music theory focused on horizontal harmony through the relationship between tones, semitones and ditones. Some concepts from the Ancient Greeks were passed on to the Middle Ages, however others were forgotten and later reappeared during the Renaissance. The Middle Ages brought more monophonic compositions specifically through Gregorian chants. During this era, music was strongly linked with mathematics through quadrivium education. Harmony was largely based on the eight church modes, and concepts of harmony began to have more stacked and vertical qualities through polyphonic music. Two-voice and three-voice canons brought innovations for polyphonic music through the *Ars nova* period. It is difficult to describe early music with modern concepts of harmonic analysis since music was not analyzed the same way musicians do today. Early music is more often described in sonorities and general modes.

Works by Guillaume de Machaut (c.1300-1377) are classified under the *Ars nova* era of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Machaut was well known for his *Messe de Notre Dame*, a polyphonic mass. His concept of harmony through this masterpiece did not consist of one single tonal center and instead, explored 2 modes. The relationship between consonances and dissonances were crucial to his works. Although he was best known for innovative music forms and rhythms, his music continued to focus on pure consonances with clear and purposeful dissonances. Vertical dissonances were often unintended results of purposeful horizontal movement. Cadences were clear and everything was “tonal” in the modern sense of the term, with exploratory incorporations of thirds and sixths, in addition to perfect consonances. As stated in *Grove Music Online*, “older types of counterpoint and vertical technique was succeeded by a newer type” which came with the following era (Cohn et al. 8).

Fast-forwarding to the Renaissance period, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c.1525–1594) viewed harmony with extreme care for sonorities. He balanced melodic independence with a successful collaboration of all voices as a whole unit. During the early periods, one voice was often composed alone first, followed by one voice added at a time. Palestrina had a strong focus on smooth melodic progressions with extremely cautious treatment of dissonances. Horizontal movement of melodies was his primary focus with the vertical roles coming secondary. Polyphony and homophony were strong musical trends with a focus on tertian sonorities and fauxbourdon. The Renaissance era focused on the alliance of perfect and imperfect consonances, with semitones serving as a bridge between consonances, and strategically placing dissonances on weak beats for less emphasis.

The Baroque era came with the *Doctrine of Affections* and a shift in trend towards the use of expressive dissonance. Music genres and forms continued to evolve with each successive era, with Operas blossoming in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Stable and homogeneous harmony was the consensus during the 17<sup>th</sup> and mid 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Tonality became reduced to one or two modes, either major or minor. Homogeneous harmony from the Renaissance continued through the Baroque era, with innovative ideas of tonal sequences, lyricism, ornamentation, and contrapuntal motion. The master of counterpoint, Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750) viewed harmony with formulaic rules; however, the use of strict rules allowed him to explore harmonic innovations that influenced centuries to come. Modal music was no longer popular, with tonal systems dominating compositions. His view of dissonance was purposeful, incorporating several dissonant vertical chords and horizontal progressions with constant modulations even within a single measure. J.S. Bach equally proportioned his works with intentional relationships

between key areas and size. In contrast to homophonic trends, Bach often wrote in four-part harmony with strong counterpoint techniques in perfect balance. Bach's sense of harmony allows melodies to be independent of one another while also connecting in any arrangement of voices. As notated in *Grove Music Online*, the Baroque era had a focus on three main chords: tonic, dominant, and subdominant, with other chords formulated out of these relations (Cohn et al., 2001).

The Age of Enlightenment had an enormous impact on classical music. Prior, music was reserved for the highly educated and noble families. Enlightenment scholars opened opportunities for middle and lower-class musicians to appreciate and learn music, with amateur musicians increasing. With this shift in audience and musicians, composers were able to explore a new spectrum of music. Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's (1756–1791) musical style spreads through almost every genre. His concept of harmony would not be described in words and instead, would be articulated in his musical language through his prodigious talent. Clarity and balance, both rhythmical and harmonically, were important for his works. He indeed incorporated Baroque features such as contrapuntal themes and irregular phrases. His concept of harmony often included a virtuosic top voice with structured accompanimental voices underneath that have basic rhythmic components. Tonal chords and progressions that allow for smooth melodic fluidity and dialogue exist in his compositions. Mozart's concept of dissonance is generally incorporated as dramatic effect for listeners.

Known as one of the “Three Bs,” Johannes Brahms had a strong focus on counterpoint through his skill with rhythm and meter. Although the romantic era consisted of several composers bringing extreme innovations in tonality and structure, Brahms continued to maintain the structure from the classical era with his unique voice through harmony and rhythm. His concept of harmony was relatively conservative compared to his counterparts; however, his harmonies are often described as dense and heavy with meaning. Brahms's concept of consonance and dissonance serves as a partnership for thematic development, with dissonances serving a clear purpose in the music.

Following the romantic era, ideas of impressionism developed in France, with clear musical motives from composers such as Debussy, Ravel, and more, which paralleled that of the art movement. Europe was no longer the sole home of classical music. Shifting to the United States of America, composer Béla Bartók's (1881–1945) compositional style focused on the mixture of folk music and modernism. With a Hungarian background, his melodies and harmonies were greatly influenced from his country's folk music. Harmony during this period shifted from the traditional sense of the term. Composers were no longer emphasizing consonances and tonal centers; there was a shift towards extreme innovations with pitch symmetry and reoccurring motives. Rather than focusing on how to treat dissonances, the main area of focus was on the presentation of motives and their development throughout the piece. Unlike the romantic era, composers had a major shift in mindset towards harmony.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, American composer John Cage (1912–1992), brought a whole new level of “harmony” to the mix through his avant-garde style. His view of harmony was far from the traditional sense of typical pitches and sounds; he incorporated electroacoustic music and unconventional uses of instruments. Terms such as dissonance, consonance, chords, and tonality were no longer used in the same way; the sheet music itself was also art. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought a new spectrum of color and sound to the world of classical music.

The evolution of harmony has taken several diversions that have led to today's society. The longitudinal progression of pitches is an important concept for harmony. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance periods, the motion of pitches was limited because of pure sonorities and sacred music. With each succeeding era, composers continued to influence each other and inspire new concepts of progression. As modern-day performers, each repertoire is approached through the lens of that specific era's musical trends and styles. Rhythmic fluidity has remained relatively unchanged with progressive stacking of elements together, but the fundamental principles still exist. Modal scales were discarded during the Classical, Romantic, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century; however, new contemporary compositions have started to explore modal theory in new ways. Analysis of harmony is also crucial for tonal purposes, specifically in classical, romantic, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century works. Understanding the role of each note or chord in relation to the other notes allows for a performer to explore a variety of expressive options when playing. The concept of music analysis continues to be re-interpreted. In the Middle Ages, harmonic analysis was not practiced; it was introduced centuries later while studying older works. However, in modern society, analysis has been approached in several different manners that influence music education.

In the modern age, harmony has become a very subjective concept with several questions left unanswered in the realm of compositions. Why was this specific voicing used? Did the composer try this chord? What if the entire piece was in a different key? So many questions can only be answered by the composers themselves, yet we

continue to question every aspect of harmony. Continuing to study the evolution of harmony and its role in every era and composer's work, will allow for informative decisions to be made in how to proceed with new music for years to come, and how the style of harmony in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be defined.

### References

- Cohn, R., Hyer, B., Dahlhaus, C., Anderson, J., & Wilson, C. (2001). Harmony. *Grove Music Online*. Retrieved 6 Sep. 2020, from <https://0-www-oxfordmusiconlinecom.library.juillia rd.edu/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000050818>.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Harmony. In *Merriam-Webster.com dictionary*. Retrieved September 5, 2020, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/harmony>