

Harmony: The Color and Depth of Music

Harmony You Can Feel (A Kid's Guide Through Vibrations and Colors)

Imagine you're holding a big paintbrush. With one color, you can paint a simple shape. But if you dip that brush into two colors at once – say red and blue – you get a brand new color, like purple. **Harmony in music is a little like that** – it's what happens when we have more than one note sounding together, creating a new "color" of sound. If melody is like a single line or a single color, harmony is like **mixing colors or stacking notes** to make the music richer and more interesting. Even if you can't hear the music with your ears, you can *feel* it through vibrations in your body. In fact, the famous composer Beethoven was deaf and would bite a wooden stick pressed against his piano to feel the notes vibrate ¹ ! This shows that music isn't just about hearing – it's about feeling too.

Think of notes as friends. When one note plays alone (like a friend singing solo), it has a certain feeling – maybe happy, maybe sad, maybe calm. But when another note joins in at the same time, they create something new together. It's like friends talking or singing at the same time. If they choose notes that get along, the sound is **harmonious**, meaning it feels smooth or pleasing (kind of like friends sharing a fun secret). If they choose notes that clash a bit, the sound might feel tense or "wobbly" – like friends playfully arguing – which can make the music feel exciting or spooky. Either way, **harmony is what we call this teamwork of notes**, and it can make music sound **fuller and deeper** than a single note on its own.

To understand through touch, try this: place your hand on a piano or a guitar while someone plays. If they play one note, you might feel a steady buzz. If they play two or three notes together (a chord), the vibration under your hand changes – it might feel stronger or more complex. Those combined vibrations are different notes mixing their energies. Even if you're a deaf five-year-old, you can stand near a speaker or instrument and **feel how multiple notes together make the air vibrate in a richer way** ² ³ . It's almost like feeling two people jump at once versus one person – the combined jump shakes things more! That shaking you feel is harmony working its magic through vibration.

Colors, Layers, and Feelings

We can also imagine harmony with colors and layers. **One note is like one color** – maybe a bright yellow or a calm blue. When two or more notes sound together, it's like mixing those colors: blue with yellow makes green, red with blue makes purple. In music, a **chord** (multiple notes together) makes a mood or "color" that's different from any of the single notes by themselves ⁴ . A major chord (which has certain notes combined) might feel like a warm, sunny color (happy and stable), while a minor chord might feel like a cool, cloudy color (sad or thoughtful). Harmony gives music its colors – **emotional colors**. If melody is telling a story, harmony is the background scenery and mood lighting for that story. It can make a simple tune feel joyful, dreamy, scary, or peaceful depending on which notes (colors) are added underneath.

Harmony also works like **layers in a sandwich or cake**. Think of a song as a big cake: the melody might be the top icing – it's what you notice first. But the harmony is like the cake layers underneath that icing, giving it height and flavor. A cake with one layer is fine, but a cake with three layers and yummy filling in

between is even more exciting! In the same way, harmony adds layers of sound under the main tune. Sometimes harmony is low and rumbling (like chocolate cake layers – rich and supportive), and sometimes it's light and high (like a fluffy sponge layer). These layers make each bite of music more flavorful. When you feel music, harmony might be the part that makes your tummy or chest buzz with those low vibrations or your fingertips tingle with higher vibrations.

Examples You Can Imagine and Feel

Let's explore a few examples of harmony in music – you might not know the songs yet, but you can imagine what they feel like:

- **Gospel Choirs:** Imagine standing in a big room with **a choir – many people singing together**. Each person picks a different note to sing, but all those notes fit together in a chord. When they sing a chord, it's like a rainbow of sound. You could feel the floor and walls shaking a little with all their voices. Gospel music often uses rich harmonies where the voices blend like a beautiful patchwork quilt, each voice a different color patch. The result is a **warm, powerful sound that can lift your spirits**. If one singer is like one beam of light, a gospel harmony is like sunlight through a prism, breaking into many colors. The harmony adds *soul* and strength – in a church choir you might feel the music not just in your ears but in your heart and even in your bones, because so many voices together create strong vibrations. Gospel chord progressions (the way chords go from one to another) often feel like they **fill you with warmth and hope** ⁵ ⁶. Next time you feel a group singing, notice how the combined voices give a sense of **togetherness** – that's harmony making a simple tune into something powerful and uplifting.
- **The Beatles:** This was a famous band where the members loved to sing together. Think of it as a few best friends singing a lullaby in slightly different tones. For example, when The Beatles sang **"This Boy"** or **"Because"**, three of them (John, Paul, and George) sang three different notes that fit perfectly. One might carry the main tune while the others chose higher or lower notes that matched. The result? A **sweet, complete sound – like a musical hug**. Their voices created a *harmonic blend* that made their songs shine with emotion. In early Beatles songs, one took the lead melody and the others often sang notes just above or below it, creating a **sense of fullness and brilliance in their sound** ⁷ ⁸. You can imagine one singer as the outline of a picture and the other singers coloring it in with harmony. Many people find that when the Beatles' voices join, the song suddenly feels richer – that's those musical "friends" working together. If you could feel a Beatles harmony, it might feel like a gentle vibration around you, almost like a cat's purr – comforting and warm.
- **Alice in Chains:** This is a rock band that did something interesting with harmony. Two singers, Layne and Jerry, often sang together but not in the sweet, perfectly matched way of a choir. **They chose notes that were a bit edgy together – creating a spooky or haunting harmony**. It's like when you mix a little bit of a sour flavor with sweet – it's not purely sweet anymore, it's more complex and intriguing. These harmonies sometimes gave a *chill* or shivery feeling. In fact, musicians note that **Alice in Chains used very unusual (even dissonant) harmonies, which gave their music a darker, haunting sound** ⁹. Imagine two notes that are close together, almost fighting – when they sing those at the same time, it's tense but in a cool way, like the feeling of a suspenseful story. If you put your hand on a speaker playing an Alice in Chains song, you might feel a strong vibration that isn't smooth but kind of buzzy – that "buzz" is the rough harmony creating tension. And then, when the music resolves to a calmer chord, you feel relief. Their harmony is like the thrill of a tiny scare in a fun ghost story – it makes the music feel emotionally **deep and raw**.

- **Eurythmics:** This duo from the 1980s made **New Wave** pop music with electronic instruments. One of their famous songs, “**Sweet Dreams (Are Made of This)**”, has a *steady chord pattern* playing on a synthesizer (an electronic keyboard) over and over. Those chords are the harmony – they stay mostly the same while the singer, Annie Lennox, sings the melody on top. The effect is hypnotic, like watching a rotating colorful light. The **synth chords create a mood: a bit mysterious, a bit driving**. If you were to feel this song, you’d sense a pulsing vibration because the chord (harmony) repeats in a rhythm. The harmony here is not lots of voices like a choir, but layered electronic tones forming chords. It adds a dreamy, **textured background for the melody** – kind of how a soft glowing sky might sit behind a foreground object in a picture. Sometimes Annie even harmonizes with her own voice (through multi-tracking in recording), adding **a second layer to her singing that enriches the sound**. New Wave bands like Eurythmics often used **major and minor chords to set an emotional tone – melancholic yet hopeful – and slow, pulsing harmonies that you can sway to** ¹⁰. It shows harmony doesn’t always have to be lots of people; it can be a few notes on a keyboard held together, creating the emotional **color wash** behind the lyrics.

- **Willie Nelson (Outlaw Country):** Willie Nelson is a country singer known for his gentle voice and guitar. In a lot of his songs, you hear **his voice singing the melody and his guitar (or band) playing chords under it**. Those guitar chords are the harmony. They might be simple – often country music uses just three or four chords (for example, a **I-IV-V progression** like G-C-D in a song) that repeat. But even if it’s simple, it does an important job: it gives the melody a **home**. Think of a folk song singer strumming and singing – the strummed chords make a cushion for the voice. In a song like “*On the Road Again*” or “*Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain*”, the chords change in patterns that feel familiar and stable (major chords that sound happy or resolved, with an occasional minor chord to add a wistful feel). This **simplicity in harmony gives country music its honest, down-to-earth mood** ¹¹. Sometimes Willie adds a twist – he loves jazz, so occasionally he might throw in a surprising chord, or his band might include a **dominant 7th chord** (which is a little twangy or bluesy-sounding) to add color. But mostly, it’s like the melody is a story and the harmony is the **open prairie beneath it**, broad and steady. If you’re near a guitar when it strums a country chord, you feel a warm, resonant vibration – not too complicated, very welcoming. That’s how harmony functions here: **welcoming and supportive**, never stealing the show from the singing, but making sure the song feels complete and satisfying.

Harmony Adds Emotion and Movement

Why do we even need harmony? Because it adds **emotional color and structural depth** to music. Harmony can make music feel **stable or tense**. When a chord is gentle and stable (what musicians call *consonant* – like a nice sounding combo), you feel at ease – it’s like everything is in its right place, no tension. When a chord is tense (*dissonant* – notes kind of rub against each other), you might feel excitement or like the music wants to go somewhere next ¹² ¹³. This tension and release is a lot like a story: there’s a problem (tension) and then a solution (release). Harmony creates those “problem” and “solution” moments in music. For example, in a scary movie soundtrack, you might feel a creepy, dissonant harmony build up – it makes your heart race a bit – and then when the scene is over, the music might land on a calm chord, and you breathe out. Even if you can’t hear the dissonance, you might *feel* it as an unsettled vibration, and the consonance as a smooth one.

Harmony also helps shape the **structure of music**. Certain harmonies signal changes – like **when a song goes from a verse to a chorus, often the chords might shift to lift the music higher**, giving the chorus a bigger feel. Harmony gives music a sense of **direction** – like a map of where the melody will go next. It’s the **support system** under the tune: sometimes cheering it on with bright major

chords, sometimes empathizing with a sad lyric with minor chords, sometimes creating suspense with unusual chords. Without harmony, a melody can feel lonely; with harmony, it gains context and support.

So, whether you *feel* it through the floor, hear it in a choir, or sense it like colors in your mind, **harmony is all about notes teaming up**. They create emotional vibes – happy, sad, tense, or peaceful – and add layers so music isn't flat but has depth (like 3D!). It's amazing that just by combining notes, we can change how music makes us feel so much. Next time you experience music, try to notice this: a single note is nice, but when another joins in, something special happens. That special something is **harmony** – the magical way notes combine to create a whole new feeling.

(Even Beethoven knew the power of harmony and vibration, proving you don't need to hear to love music – you can feel the “colors” of notes working together! ¹)

The Building Blocks of Harmony (Technical Breakdown for Advanced Learners)

Now that we've explored harmony in a hands-on, imaginative way, let's dive into a fuller **music theory breakdown of harmony**. We'll look at what harmony really means in musical terms, how it's constructed, and how it functions across different contexts. This section will cover intervals, chords, tension versus resolution, diatonic and non-diatonic harmony, harmonic rhythm, voice leading, and examples from various genres (from metal to gospel to funk, country, and new wave). We'll also include some listening exercises to sharpen your harmony-listening skills and connect harmony to other musical elements like melody, texture, form, and dynamics.

What Is Harmony?

In music theory, **harmony** generally refers to the combination of notes sounding at the same time, and the study of how those combinations progress. One useful definition is: *Harmony is the composite product when individual musical voices group together to form a cohesive whole* ¹⁴. In other words, if melody is the horizontal aspect of music (notes over time, one after the other), harmony is the **vertical aspect** – notes stacked on top of each other in time ¹⁵. When you hear a singer accompanied by a guitar or piano chords, or an orchestra playing different notes that form chords, you're experiencing harmony. Even two notes played together form a simple harmony (an interval). When three or more specific notes sound together, we typically call that a **chord** ⁴.

For example, imagine an orchestra: the flute might play a high **A**, the violin might play a **C#** at the same time, and the trombone might play an **F#**. Individually they are just three notes, but **together those notes form an F# minor chord**, a harmony of that moment ¹⁶. Harmony, then, is not a single part but the *overall sound* of multiple parts at once. It's what gives music depth – instead of a single line, you have **multiple voices interacting**. This interaction can produce **pleasing effects or tension**, and it provides the context for a melody. A melody accompanied by different harmonies can feel completely transformed.

We often analyze harmony by looking at **chord progressions** – sequences of chords (harmonies) over time. Composers might write a specific series of chords to underlie a melody, or in some music, they imply chords and let the musicians fill them in. In any case, understanding harmony means understanding how those chords are built and how they relate to each other.

Intervals: The Building Blocks of Harmony (Consonance & Dissonance)

At the most basic level, **intervals** are the building blocks of harmony. An *interval* is simply the distance in pitch between two notes ¹⁷. If you play two notes at once, you get an interval (for instance, playing C and E together makes a major third interval). Intervals can also be heard one after the other, but for harmony we're mostly concerned with simultaneous intervals.

Intervals have different sonic qualities. Some intervals sound **stable and pleasant** to most Western ears – these are called **consonant intervals**. Others sound **tense, clashing, or needful of resolution** – these are called **dissonant intervals**. In Western music tradition (which has evolved over centuries), intervals like the unison (two of the same note), octave (notes 12 semitones apart, like C to the next higher C), perfect fifth (C to G), and major or minor thirds (like C to E, or C to E♭) are considered relatively consonant ¹⁸. They blend nicely; the sound waves have simple frequency ratios (e.g., an octave is 2:1 frequency ratio) which our ears interpret as smooth ¹⁹. In contrast, intervals like the minor second (C to C♯ – very close together), major second (C to D), or the tritone (e.g., C to F♯) are considered dissonant – they have more complex ratios and create a sense of **clash or unrest** ¹⁸ ²⁰. For instance, a **major seventh interval** (like C up to B) is fairly dissonant by itself – the notes seem to rub together in an unstable way – whereas a **perfect fifth** is very consonant, having a hollow, open sound.

It's important to note that consonance and dissonance exist on a **spectrum, not a strict binary** ²¹. And context matters: what was considered dissonant in one era or style might be acceptable in another. Historically, for example, **medieval music** considered even thirds somewhat dissonant, whereas today major/minor thirds are basic consonances in common practice harmony ²². Musical cultures outside the West have their own concepts of consonance/dissonance too. But generally, **consonance = stability, "rest"**, and **dissonance = tension, "need to move"**. One music dictionary defines it succinctly as *consonance is an impression of stability and repose, whereas dissonance is an impression of tension or clash when certain tones sound together* ²³.

In practical terms, if you play a dissonant interval or chord, you often feel like it "wants" to go to another interval or chord to resolve the tension (usually a consonant one). Our ears tend to crave that resolution. This is the essence of **tension and resolution** in harmony: using dissonance to create musical questions or suspense, and then answering or relaxing them with consonance ¹³. A classic example: in tonal music, a **leading tone** (like B leading to C in a C major scale) and the interval of a **tritone** (like F-B) create tension that "begs" to resolve to a more stable interval (C-G or C-E, etc.). When it resolves, listeners experience a sense of relief or closure.

To summarize: - **Consonant intervals/chords** feel settled, pleasant, or at rest (e.g., a major chord, which consists of a root, major third, perfect fifth, is commonly heard as happy or stable). - **Dissonant intervals/chords** feel unsettled, biting, or suspenseful – they often "want" to move somewhere else ¹² ¹³. (e.g., a chord with a lot of tension like a dominant seventh or a chord with a tritone will want to resolve to something calmer).

Most music **balances both**. As one source humorously notes, "*Most good music has a combination of consonance and dissonance.*" ¹³ Dissonance provides the drama, and consonance provides the resolution. Without any dissonance, music can sound bland; without any consonance, music might sound too chaotic or ungrounded (though some modern pieces intentionally push those boundaries).

Chords: Vertical Harmony and How It's Built

When we stack multiple notes together, we get **chords**, which are the DNA of vertical harmony. The simplest chords in Western music are **triads** – three-note chords consisting of a root, a third, and a fifth. For example, a C major triad is C (the root), E (a major third above C), and G (a perfect fifth above C). This chord is consonant (major third and perfect fifth are both relatively consonant intervals) and has a “happy” or “resolved” character. A C minor triad would be C, E ♭ (minor third), G – similar structure but with a minor third which gives a sadder flavor.

A chord can be described by its quality (major, minor, diminished, augmented, etc.) which tells us about the types of intervals it contains. A **major chord** has a major third and a perfect fifth above the root. A **minor chord** has a minor third and perfect fifth. **Diminished chords** and **augmented chords** are more dissonant: a diminished triad (like B-D-F) has two minor-third intervals stacked and creates a tense, unstable sound; an augmented triad (like C-E-G♯) has two major thirds and sounds dreamy or unresolved. These qualities give chords unique colors.

Chords can extend beyond three notes: **seventh chords** add another note (the seventh above the root). For instance, a **dominant seventh chord** built on G (in C major key) would be G-B-D-F. It's called “dominant” because it's built on the 5th scale degree (dominant) and has a strong tendency to resolve to the I (in this case, G7 resolves to C). That F (the minor seventh above G) in G7 is what makes it dissonant – it forms a tritone with the B – creating that classic tension that needs resolution. Indeed, **seventh chords have varying degrees of dissonance that need to be resolved to consonance** ²⁴. Resolve how? Usually by moving to a chord where those dissonant notes move stepwise to become part of a consonant chord (e.g., in G7 → C, the F resolves down to E, and B resolves up to C, making a satisfying C major chord).

We can keep stacking thirds to get **ninth chords, eleventh chords, thirteenth chords**, etc., which are common in jazz and gospel. These are called **extended chords** and they add more color (and often more dissonance if left unresolved). For example, a C[♯]9 chord (C-E-G-B-D) adds a D on top of a Cmaj7 – it sounds lush and dreamy. A C[♯]7 ♭9 (C-E-G-B ♭ -D ♭) would be much tenser (used in, say, a spicy gospel or Spanish-influenced harmony). Each added note changes the flavor.

It's worth noting that harmony doesn't always come from block chords moving in sync. **Counterpoint** is an approach (common in Baroque music, for example) where multiple melodies intertwine, and the harmony is the combination of those independent lines. In counterpoint, composers carefully control the intervals formed between lines at any given moment, following rules to balance consonance and dissonance. This is a more horizontal way to create harmony (melodies overlapping), but the result is still harmony – just conceived differently. In contrast, a lot of contemporary music (pop, rock, etc.) uses a melody with **homophonic** accompaniment – clearly defined chords supporting it, moving together rhythmically ⁷. Both approaches create harmony, but the texture differs.

Summary of chordal harmony principles: - Harmony is often analyzed as chords and chord progressions. A **series of chords** under a melody outlines the harmonic structure ²⁵. - Chords are built by stacking intervals (mostly thirds in tertian harmony). Basic ones are triads; extended ones add sevenths, ninths, etc. - Chords have functions in a key (like the **tonic** chord feels like “home”, the **dominant** chord drives tension that wants to resolve to tonic, the **subdominant** leads to dominant, etc.). This brings us to the idea of **tension and resolution** in chord progressions.

Tension and Resolution: The Heart of Harmonic Progression

We've touched on this when discussing consonance and dissonance, but let's dig deeper into how **tension (instability) and resolution (stability)** drive the movement of harmony. A piece of music is often interesting because chords create expectations and then fulfill them (or sometimes surprise or delay them). This has been a central concept in Western tonal music for centuries.

A classic example is the **V – I (Dominant to Tonic)** resolution. In the key of C major, a G7 chord (V⁷) is tense: it contains the notes G-B-D-F. The interval between B and F is a tritone (dissonant) and B is the leading tone that strongly wants to go to C (the tonic note). When the music moves from G7 to a C major chord (C-E-G), it feels like a musical sigh of relief. That is resolution. The **dissonant chord (V7)** demands resolution to the **consonant chord (I)**. In a minor key, the same concept: V (often a major V even in minor key, thanks to harmonic minor scale) resolves to i (the minor tonic). This tension-resolution pattern is foundational to tonal harmony (think of the end of countless classical and pop songs that end on a big I chord after a V or V7 chord, giving closure). As a source from a music fundamentals course states, a “dissonant chord leaves the listener with a feeling of expectation. It takes a consonant chord to complete the gesture created by a dissonance.”¹³ . In other words, **dissonance (tension) asks a question, and consonance (resolution) answers it.**

There are other common tension-resolution pairs: - **IV -> I (Plagal cadence)**: Often called the “Amen” cadence (because of its use in hymns on the word “Amen”), moving from subdominant to tonic. This is a gentler resolution than V-I, but still gives a sense of closure (just with less tension to start with, since IV is not as unstable). - **ii-V-I or I-vi-ii-V (circle-of-fifths)**: In jazz and classical, a progression like ii-V-I has the chords leading by fifths (e.g., Dm -> G7 -> C). Each chord creates a pull to the next: ii leads to V, V leads strongly to I. It's a longer setup and resolution. - **Dissonant chords resolving by step**: e.g., a **suspension** (where a note is held over into a chord where it doesn't belong, creating dissonance, then it resolves down by step to a chord tone). Suspensions create lovely tension and resolution moments. A 4-3 suspension, for instance, means the fourth above the bass (dissonant) resolves to a third (consonant)²⁴ . - **Appoggiaturas and accented passing tones** in melody also create harmonic tension that resolve – not chords per se, but they briefly introduce dissonant notes against the chord that then resolve into harmony.

In more modern music or non-Western styles, resolution might be less strict, but even ambient or film music uses the idea: building up harmonic tension (perhaps a swell on a complex, dissonant chord cluster) to create suspense, and then releasing it (maybe dropping to a simple consonant chord) for emotional impact^{26 27} . Some film scores intentionally **don't resolve** to keep you on edge – a technique also found in 20th-century concert music that sometimes avoids resolution altogether for effect²⁶ .

Dissonance doesn't always need immediate resolution – styles vary. In fact, in the 20th century, many composers experimented with *keeping* dissonance or resolving it in unexpected ways (leading to atonal music, polytonality, etc., where the old rules of resolution were stretched or broken)²⁸ . In those cases, the *concept* of tension is still there, but the listener isn't given a traditional resolution; this can evoke feelings of continuous tension or ambiguity, useful in certain artistic contexts. For instance, horror movie soundtracks might sustain dissonant clusters without resolving to maintain dread. Still, the basic human reaction to harmonic tension and release remains a key expressive tool.

To master harmony, one should learn to identify where the **tension points** are in a progression (which chords or intervals are creating stress) and how they resolve (or don't resolve). This is fundamental to composition and analysis. It's like understanding grammar in language – which parts of the sentence create a question and which provide the answer.

Diatonic vs. Non-Diatonic (Chromatic) Harmony

Now let's talk about **where chords come from**. In any given key, there is a set of notes (the diatonic scale) and a set of basic chords built on those notes. **Diatonic harmony** refers to chords or notes that *belong to the key* – they are built using only the notes of the home scale. **Non-diatonic (chromatic) harmony** involves chords that include notes outside the basic key signature.

For example, if we are in the key of C major (which has notes C D E F G A B – no sharps or flats), **diatonic chords** would be the ones you get by harmonizing the C major scale: - I: C major (C-E-G), - ii: D minor (D-F-A), - iii: E minor (E-G-B), - IV: F major (F-A-C), - V: G major (G-B-D), - vi: A minor (A-C-E), - vii°: B diminished (B-D-F).

A song that uses only those chords (and no accidentals outside C major) is sticking to diatonic harmony. **Strictly diatonic music will have no notes outside the key – no sharps or flats added beyond the key signature** ²⁹. This creates a certain “purity” or clarity of key, but it can also limit color. Common simple folk songs or children's songs might be fully diatonic.

However, composers often like to spice things up by borrowing. **Chromatic harmony** is when we use notes (and hence chords) that are *not* in the original key's scale ³⁰. The simplest example: in C major, using an F# note or chord involving F# would be chromatic, since F# is not in C major. Why do this? One big reason is **modulation (changing keys)** or temporary tonicizations. To move from one key to another, you often need accidentals. For instance, if you want to **move from C major to G major** (the dominant key), you'd start introducing F# (since G major scale has an F#). An F# over a C major context is chromatic – a new color that signals a shift. Indeed, **to change key to a non-relative key, a composer must use some chromatic harmony** ³¹. Even within one key, adding chromatic chords can add tension or interesting color. Common chromatic chords include: - **Secondary dominants**: These are dominant seventh chords applied to scale tones other than the tonic. For instance, V of V. In C major, the dominant (V) is G. The dominant of G is D (and D's dominant seventh chord is D7 = D-F#-A-C). That D7 chord is not diatonic to C (because of F#), but it **leads strongly to G**. So if you insert a D7 chord in a C major progression (say you go from C -> D7 -> G -> C), you temporarily tonicize G. D7 is a *secondary dominant*. It adds a bright leading tone (F#) that wasn't in C major, pulling to G. This is a very common chromatic device to enrich a progression. - **Borrowed chords (modal interchange)**: Borrowing chords from the parallel minor or major. In C major, you might borrow the iv chord from C minor (an F minor chord, F-A♭-C, which has A♭, a non-diatonic note). That A♭ gives a soulful or unexpected twist. For example, The Beatles and many others use the “♭VI” (A♭ major in C) or “♭VII” (B♭ in C) chords for a surprising change of color, even if they stay in overall C major. These are borrowed from the C minor palette or modes. They stand out because they introduce chromatic notes (A♭ or B♭) briefly. - **Diminished 7th chords** that don't belong to the key, often used as leading-tone chords to various targets (like vii°7 of V, etc.). These are full of tension and often chromatic. - **Augmented 6th chords, Neapolitan chords**, etc.: In classical harmony, these are special chromatic chords used to intensify pull to certain chords (often the V). For example, a Neapolitan in C minor is D♭ major (♭II), which has a ♭ in it – definitely chromatic, and it usually goes to V. It has a dramatic sound. - **Modulations**: fully changing the key center mid-piece is usually facilitated by a pivot chord or a direct chromatic alteration. When you modulate, you essentially declare a new diatonic collection, but getting there often involves chromatic movement.

Diatonic vs chromatic really affect the feel. Diatonic harmony tends to feel *stable, familiar, and firmly in one key*. Chromatic harmony adds *surprise, richness, and sometimes ambiguity*. In the Romantic era (19th century), composers like Wagner pushed chromatic harmony to the extreme, delaying resolutions and moving through distant key areas, which created very emotionally charged music (sometimes you hardly know what the key is because chromatic notes keep it fluid). In jazz, chromatic approaches (like

approach chords, tritone substitutions, etc.) are common to add color. Pop music often stays largely diatonic but will throw in the occasional chromatic chord for effect – for instance, a song in C major might have an A \flat major chord for a dramatic flair (\flat VI) or use a secondary dominant like an E7 (which has G \sharp) to tonicize the vi chord (A minor). These moments are ear-catching.

To put it simply: - **Diatonic harmony** = using only the “normal” chords of the key (all notes belong). Think of it as sticking to the basic palette. - **Non-diatonic (Chromatic) harmony** = adding notes/chords from outside. Think adding a splash of a new color to the palette for accent or modulation.

Both are tools. If you only use diatonic chords, the music can be very cohesive and clear (which might be desired). If you use chromatic chords, you can create more complex emotions or traverse through different keys and moods. Many songs use predominantly diatonic harmony but with one or two chromatic chords to heighten emotion at key points.

Harmonic Rhythm: The Timing of Chord Changes

Moving from *what* chords to play to *when* to play them: **harmonic rhythm** is the rate at which chords change in a piece of music ³². It's basically the *rhythm of the harmony* as opposed to the rhythm of the melody. Some music has a slow harmonic rhythm (chords last for a whole measure or several measures before changing), while other music has a fast harmonic rhythm (chords change on every beat or every two beats, etc.). Neither is inherently better – they just create different feels.

For example: - A typical blues or folk song might change chords only once every bar or every two bars (I for a bar or two, then IV for a bar, etc.) – that's a moderate harmonic rhythm. - A punk rock song might blaze through chords rapidly, changing every half a bar or on off-beats even. - A Bach chorale might change chords every beat (since each beat in a 4/4 measure could have a different chord under the four-part texture). - In contrast, **funk music** or modal jazz might vamp on one chord for an extended time (very slow harmonic rhythm) but have lots of activity in rhythm and melody over it ³³ ³⁴.

The choice of harmonic rhythm greatly affects the **feel and structure** of a piece. A slow harmonic rhythm can create a sense of calm, space, or groove (depending on style). For instance, many funk songs sit on one chord for a long stretch – the interest comes from rhythmic interplay and basslines rather than chord changes. This gives a *hypnotic, steady feel* because the tonal center doesn't shift around – it's like staying on one color and exploring its shades. On the other hand, a fast harmonic rhythm can add urgency, complexity, or forward momentum. Musical theater songs or complex prog-rock pieces often have quicker chord turnovers to match fast-moving lyrics or elaborate melodies.

One could also vary harmonic rhythm within a song. Perhaps verses have slower changes (letting the story develop), but the chorus picks up the harmonic rhythm for excitement – or vice versa, depending on the emotional contour. A chorus might actually slow the harmonic rhythm to feel more anthemic and broad (sustaining big chords for longer).

Consider an example from classical music: **Johann Pachelbel's “Canon in D”** has a very regular harmonic rhythm – the chord progression (I-V-vi-iii-IV-I-IV-V in D major) changes every two beats or so and repeats over and over. That steady loop gives a sense of inevitability and calm; meanwhile the violin melodies weave faster notes on top, but the harmony anchors it with its slow, predictable pattern. Contrast that with something like the bridge of The Beatles' “Something” which has a quicker succession of chords (and some chromatic ones) – the faster harmonic rhythm there heightens the emotional peak.

Technically, to determine harmonic rhythm you'd map out each chord and see how long each lasts relative to the meter. If chords change every measure in 4/4, harmonic rhythm is one chord per bar. If they change twice per bar, that's faster. If a chord stretches for 8 bars, that's very slow harmonic rhythm.

From an analytical perspective, **harmonic rhythm can also emphasize form**. Often, important structural points (like a transition or climax) might be accompanied by a change in harmonic rhythm. For instance, a bridge might suddenly slow down the rate of chord changes to contrast with a faster harmonic rhythm in verses. Skilled songwriters and composers manipulate this element to control energy: speeding up chord changes can increase intensity (more harmonic events in a given time), while slowing them can let a moment breathe or give a sense of grandeur.

In summary, harmonic rhythm is *when the chords change and how frequently*. It's the pulse of the harmony layer. A clear definition: *"Harmonic rhythm is the rate at which chords change, or the duration of chords within a chord progression – essentially, the rhythm of the harmony."* ³² If you tap your foot to each chord change, you're feeling the harmonic rhythm. It can be **strong or weak** (changing on strong beats vs. weak beats), **fast or slow** ³⁵, and it's an often overlooked aspect of composition that greatly affects a song's feel.

Voice Leading: Smoothly Connecting Chords

When chords do change, how do they change? **Voice leading** is the art of moving each note (voice) in a chord to the next chord's notes in a smooth, logical way ³⁶. It's about the horizontal motion of each individual voice within the vertical harmony. Good voice leading often means **minimizing leaps** and finding stepwise (or common tone) connections between chords so that the chord progression sounds cohesive and pleasing.

For example, consider moving from a C major chord (C-E-G) to an A minor chord (A-C-E). These two chords share some notes: C and E are common to both. A simple voice leading approach would keep those common tones in place (so if one voice was singing C, it can stay on C; another on E stays on E) and only move the G down to A (a small step of a whole tone). This way, instead of all voices jumping to new places, two voices remain and one moves by a short distance. The result is a **smooth transition** where the listener easily hears the connection. If instead we had all voices take big leaps to different notes, the chord change would sound more abrupt or disjointed.

Basic principles of traditional voice leading (from common-practice harmony) include: - **Keep common tones** between chords, if possible, in the same voice. - **Move voices by the smallest intervals needed**. Prefer step (or small skips) over large leaps, unless you have a melodic reason. - **Avoid parallel perfect intervals** between voices (especially parallel octaves or fifths in classical voice leading rules), because they can make the parts lose their independence and sound empty. - **Ensure each voice has a sensible melodic line**. Even if we're thinking in chords, each voice (soprano, alto, tenor, bass in four-part writing, for example) should be singable on its own and move logically (not random jumps). - **Resolve tendency tones properly**: e.g., in classical voice leading, the leading tone (7th scale degree) resolves up to the tonic, and chordal sevenths (like the F in G7) resolve down to the third of the next chord (F -> E if G7 goes to C). This avoids awkward clashes and satisfies the ear's expectations ³⁷.

In modern contexts, strict rules are relaxed, but the concept of smoothness is still valuable. If you play a progression on piano and it sounds choppy, try using **inversions** of chords to get closer voice leading. Inversions reorder the chord notes so that you can often move by step. For instance, going from C (C-E-G) to F (F-A-C), you could play C in root position (C-E-G), then F in second inversion (C-F-A). The voices would move: C stays C (common tone), E goes to F (step), G goes to A (step). Nicely connected. If you played both in root position (C-E-G -> F-A-C), the voice leading would be larger jumps: C to C (common

tone), E jumping to A (a 4th), G jumping to F (a whole step but downwards, crossing perhaps the others depending on arrangement). Not as smooth.

Voice leading is crucial in arranging for multiple instruments or voices. A string quartet or choir with good voice leading will sound lush and connected; with bad voice leading, it might sound like random block chords or even get muddy if everyone moves in the same direction at once. Even in a rock band, voice leading considerations can apply: for instance, a guitarist might choose a chord voicing that has minimal movement from the previous chord to create a certain effect, or bass lines will often move stepwise connecting chord roots (walking bass lines in jazz are an example of voice leading in the bass that connects the harmony smoothly).

A clear definition: *“Voice leading in music describes how notes within individual parts move when transitioning between chords. It involves making each note progress to the next chord with the smoothest change possible, minimizing awkward leaps.”* ³⁶ ³⁸. When done well, voice leading can **enhance the emotional resonance** of chord progressions ³⁹ – the chords flow into each other in a lyrical way, rather than sounding like disjointed blocks.

In classical training, students practice voice leading by writing four-part chorales, focusing on how each of the four voices (soprano, alto, tenor, bass) move from chord to chord. In contemporary music, one might practice by taking a chord progression and playing it in different inversions, aiming for minimal movement. It's also a reason why skilled accompanists will often **avoid jumping to root position for every chord** – they'll use nearest inversions to create a line for their hands.

One more example: Listen to **Max Richter's “On the Nature of Daylight”**, often cited for beautiful string arrangements. The chords shift gradually, and each string part moves to the next note in a stepwise motion, creating a seamless, almost **liquid** harmonic change ³⁹. That is voice leading at work, making the progression feel like it's *sighing* from one chord to the next.

In summary, voice leading is about how each component of a chord moves to form the next chord. Good voice leading = chords connect gracefully; bad voice leading = chords may connect with jarring jumps or unintended clashes. Composers and arrangers pay attention to this to ensure the harmony doesn't just have the right chords, but that it *flows*. Harmony and voice leading go hand-in-hand ⁴⁰: choosing the chords (harmony) and choosing how the notes get from one chord to the next (voice leading) together shape the listener's experience of the chord progression.

Harmony Across Genres: Case Studies

Harmony is a universal element of music, but different genres use it in unique ways. Let's explore how harmony functions and is stylized in **heavy metal, gospel, funk, outlaw country, and new wave** (drawing on the examples mentioned earlier like The Beatles, Alice in Chains, Eurythmics, etc., as touchstones).

Heavy Metal (and Hard Rock)

Heavy metal often brings to mind aggressive guitar riffs and powerful chords. Harmonically, metal can range from very simple to quite complex, but a few features stand out: - **Power Chords and Modal Simplicity**: The core of much metal rhythm guitar is the *power chord*, which is essentially an interval (a perfect fifth, sometimes with the octave) rather than a full triad. For example, a power chord on C would be C and G (maybe another C an octave up). Notably, power chords have **no third**, so they are neither major nor minor – this gives them a neutral, but powerful sound that stays consonant even at high volumes with distortion (distortion adds extra overtones, which can make full triads sound messy;

power chords avoid the more complex intervals that distortion would exacerbate). This means a lot of metal harmony is built on **open fifths**, which are actually a very consonant interval, creating a strong and bold effect without clarity of major/minor (it leaves mood somewhat ambiguous or reliant on melody).

- **Modal and Non-Diatonic Progressions:** Metal often employs modal scales (like Phrygian, Aeolian, etc.) and will use flattened scale degrees for effect. For instance, metal songs in a minor key might use a \flat II or \flat VII chord for a darker feel.
- **Common metal progressions replace classical V-I cadences with more modal moves** ⁴¹. A classic move in metal (especially influenced by Black Sabbath and similar) is the \flat VI- \flat VII-I progression in a minor context ⁴¹. If we're in E minor, that would be C major (\flat VI) to D major (\flat VII) to E minor (I). These chords (C and D in E minor) are borrowed from the E natural minor (Aeolian) scale – they avoid the leading tone (D#) of harmonic minor. The result is a more modal sound (no strong leading tone pull, which actually contributes to metal's sometimes “endless” or non-resolving sound). Another common one is \flat VII to I alone (D to E in E minor, giving that signature “Iron Man” type feel). These **avoiding of the V chord** makes the harmony sound *open-ended or circular* rather than resolved in a classical sense ⁴¹.
- **Dissonance and Complexity in Leads:** While rhythm guitars might stick to fifths, metal lead guitar and vocal harmonies can introduce more complex intervals. Bands like Iron Maiden popularized **harmonized guitar leads**, often in **parallel thirds or sixths**. For instance, two guitars playing the same melody but one a third above the other – this creates a consonant harmony line (mostly thirds which in a minor key can actually create moments of minor and major thirds that add drama). Some metal leads even use dissonant intervals intentionally for an eerie effect (diminished fifths, etc.). **Alice in Chains**, as mentioned, used vocal harmonies that were sometimes in unusual intervals (not just the standard third above the lead, but sometimes a fourth or a tritone) which produced a **dark, dissonant harmony giving their music a unique haunting quality** ⁹.
- **Tritones and Diminished Harmony:** The tritone (a.k.a. the “devil’s interval” historically) is embraced in metal. Black Sabbath famously used the tritone in songs like “Black Sabbath” (the main riff centers on a tritone). Diminished seventh chords or just the interval of a diminished fifth might appear in riffs or chord progressions to heighten a sense of evil or tension. *Dissonance is welcomed as part of metal's emotional palette*, which often aims for darkness, power, or aggression. One guitarist said certain metal riffs with tritones make him feel “seasick” due to the dissonance ⁴² – that uneasy feeling is exactly what the composer might want for a creepy atmosphere.
- **Extended chords?** Unlike jazz or gospel, metal doesn't frequently use extended tertian chords (like maj7, 9ths, etc.) in the traditional sense – those can sound too “soft” or jazzy. However, metal sometimes uses **suspended chords** (like adding a 2 or 4 instead of the 3, for example Csus2 = C-D-G), which add a slight dissonance or ambiguous quality, and **chromatic passing chords** or chugs that aren't full chords (just chromatic approach notes in riffs). Progressive metal or “djent” might play with more complex chord voicings, even polychords, but that's more niche.
- **Overall:** Metal harmony tends to emphasize **power, modal atmospheres, and strategic dissonance**. It often avoids the typical sweet major/minor resolutions (no “I'm going home to tonic now” V-I moment; instead you might cycle around or end on the root power chord without a leading tone resolution). When analyzing metal, you might talk about the collection of pitches (is it using natural minor? Phrygian mode – common for that flat 2 sound which is very metal? Harmonic minor for that exotic leading tone sound used in neoclassical metal?), and note the lack or presence of traditional cadences. Also note any parallel harmony in guitars or vocals as a signature of the style.

Gospel

Gospel harmony is essentially the language of rich, church-based, soul-stirring chords. It has roots in church hymns, blues, and jazz. Key features:

- **Extended Chords and Rich Voicings:** Gospel is famous for its lush chords – lots of **7ths, 9ths, 11ths, 13ths** and added tones. A simple major chord might be too plain; a gospel pianist will likely add a dominant 7th or a major 7th, and use **inversions and passing tones** liberally. For instance, a basic I-IV-V progression in gospel might be “dressed up” with dominant chords: If the song is in C, the V chord G might be played as a **G7 \flat 9** or **G13** to give more

tension before resolving to C. Gospel harmonies frequently include **diminished seventh chords as passing chords** (they can function as leading-tone chords into a target chord). It's said that "*Gospel chord progressions really bring out the warmth of harmony and richness of sound*" ⁵ – indeed, a hallmark is that almost every chord is colored. **Major seventh chords** provide warmth, **dominant sevenths** provide soul and tension, **diminished chords** provide that signature gospel passing flair. - **Dominant Function & Circle Progressions:** Gospel uses a lot of circle-of-fifths movement (similar to jazz). **2-5-1 turnarounds** are extremely common – e.g., before landing on the I (the home chord), you might hear a ii7 – V7 – I, or even a string: VI7 – ii7 – V7 – I. The last three chords in many gospel songs often follow a **ii-V-I pattern** ⁴³, giving a strong resolution (for example, in C: Dm7 – G7 – C). This brings a satisfying closure. Secondary dominants and *secondary ii-V's* are everywhere to tonicize different chords (like V/V, etc. as mentioned). Essentially, gospel took the functional harmony of hymns and infused blues/jazz elements, so you get **complex tensions resolving beautifully**. - **Chromatic Passing Chords (Modal Interchange):** Gospel musicians are masters of borrowing chords from parallel modes or even entirely unrelated keys as passing movement. A common trick: approaching a chord by its own diminished or by a chord a half-step above or below. For example, if moving to a C major, you might throw in a D \flat 7 chord just before it (acting like a \flat II or tritone-sub of V, for the theory nerds). It adds a sudden colorful crunch that resolves smoothly. Another example: a move from I to IV might be preceded by a I \sharp dim or a II \flat 7 (like a secondary dominant to the IV). These are fleeting but add so much color. - **Vocal Harmony:** In choir-style gospel, you often have 3 or 4-part harmony (soprano, alto, tenor, bass voices in a choir) singing homorhythmically (same words/rhythms) but different notes, forming those big chords. Often these are *tight harmonies* (notes close together, yielding a "close" voicing) creating a **dense and powerful choral sound**. Other times, one section might carry the melody and others provide response chords ("call and response" tradition). The harmonic style can be similar to jazz choir arrangements – lots of 7th chords and such, but delivered with the soulful execution of gospel. - **Feeling and Emotion:** In gospel, harmony serves to **heighten emotion** at every turn. A plain major chord might become a *Major 7* at a tender lyric to sound more poignant, or a *Dominant 9 with a sharp 5* during a modulated key change to raise the roof with tension and excitement. As one article puts it, *gospel progressions are loved for their soulful, uplifting feel defined by intricate harmonies, dominant chords, and syncopated rhythms* ⁴⁴. The harmony is central to that "lifting up" sensation – those surprise chords that make the congregation go "Amen!" in delight. - **Common Progressions:** Aside from the ubiquitous 2-5-1s, gospel sometimes uses some signature moves like the "**gospel walk-up**" or "**walk-down**": a series of chords climbing or descending diatonically or chromatically. For example, I – I/ \flat VII – IV/VI – ii $^\circ$ – V (etc.) – not to get too in the weeds, but these walk-ups/downs lead the bass in steps while the chords above shift, creating a sense of a journey. Another is the \flat VII – IV progression (in C, B \flat to F to C) which has a plagal flavor but richer (B \flat brings in a blue note feel against C). - **Modulations:** Gospel songs love key changes, often going up by half-step or whole-step for effect on repeats. To do this, they frequently use harmony tricks to pivot: e.g., end a chorus on a dominant that's reinterpreted as the dominant of the new key, or use a chromatic approach chord to the new key's tonic. When you hear a gospel choir modulate and everyone cheers, it's that harmonic shift causing a wave of emotion. - **Overall:** Gospel harmony is **complex but purposeful**. Every dissonance is prepared and resolved (in the traditional sense) to give a feeling of spiritual release. It borrows freely from jazz theory but keeps a certain direct, passionate quality (unlike jazz which can be cerebral, gospel aims for the heart and gut). For a learner, gospel is a great teacher of advanced chords in functional progression. It shows how using *all* the colors (diminished, augmented, secondary dominants, etc.) can still sound unified and powerful when rooted in strong voice leading and common goals (resolving to "Amen" moments). The result is a **warm, rich, and often exhilarating harmonic experience** ⁵ ⁶.

Funk

Funk music is primarily about **rhythm and groove**, but it has its own harmonic habits: - **Static Harmony / Vamps:** Many funk songs sit on one chord for long stretches (James Brown's "Sexmachine"

basically grooves on a single dominant 7 chord for entire sections). This means the harmonic rhythm is slow (one chord over many measures) ⁴⁵. Instead of chord changes, funk emphasizes **syncopation, rhythmic hits, and interplay**. However, sitting on one chord doesn't mean the harmony is boring – funk often uses very flavorful chords as the vamp. **Extended chords are a hallmark of funk**, such as dominant 9th chords, 11th chords, minor 11ths, etc. ⁴⁶ ³⁴. For example, the famous funky chord often cited is the **Dominant 9 (e.g., E9 or E7 #9)** – Jimi Hendrix used E7 #9 in “Purple Haze”, and funk guitarists use that sharp-nine sound for its bite. Earth, Wind & Fire or Stevie Wonder funkier tunes use lots of 7#9, 13th chords, etc. - **Modal Influences**: Because funk might stay on one chord, it often implies a mode rather than moving through a progression. A funk tune might essentially be in Mixolydian mode on the I chord (hence the I7 chord vamp). This gives a bluesy, dominant feel throughout without a need to resolve. Some funk (Parliament, etc.) will hang on I7 and occasionally go to the IV7 (like a blues does) – but again, functionally it's not about a cadence, it's about cycling grooves. - **Chord Progressions (when present)**: Funk isn't devoid of changes. Songs can have progressions but they tend to be **simple and circular**. A common one is I – IV – back to I (think of Sly & The Family Stone's “Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)” – basically an A7 vamp with a D7 hit). Another is moving between minor chords in a modal way; e.g., a funk tune might vamp between a minor i and a minor iv chord (kind of a Dorian mode vibe). **Stevie Wonder** used sophisticated progressions in some songs (mixing major and minor modes, or chromatic passing chords), but the core groove often still centered on a repeating pattern you can jam over. - **Rhythmic Placement of Harmony**: Funk guitars often use **percussive strumming** and will frequently play **chord “stabs” on off-beats**. The **syncopation** combined with chords creates interesting emphasis. The harmony might not change, but the *way* it's voiced and struck gives it life. *“The rhythmic placement of chords is crucial in funk – strumming or hitting chords off the beat contributes to the distinctive groove.”* ⁴⁷. So, harmony in funk is as much about *execution* as content. - **Unique Voicings**: Funk (and related R&B) guitarists often use specific voicings to get a certain tight sound – e.g., **9th chords with the root omitted** for that classic chunk, or **“quartal” voicings** (chords built in fourths) which give a more modern, less tonal sound (Herbie Hancock did this on keys; funk guitarists sometimes do, especially when comping over static harmony to create interesting color). These voicings contribute to **texture** more than progression – they make one chord sound richer. - **Bass and Harmony**: In funk, the bass is very active and provides a lot of the harmonic framework. A funky bassline might imply chords by outlining tones or playing melodic lines that hit chord tones on strong beats. Because the bass might play the *root and flat 7* back and forth, you sense a dominant 7 chord even if the guitar is mostly doing rhythmic scratching. The **interplay between bass and chordal instruments** can create the harmonic feel collectively (for example, the guitar might just play a snippet of a chord voicing accent, while the bass is emphasizing the harmony). - **Key centers**: Funk often stays in one key center (doesn't commonly modulate mid-song), reinforcing the idea of groove. It might have a bridge that goes to say the IV or a relative minor or something for contrast, but then it comes back. The emphasis is not storytelling via harmony but via rhythm and repetition. However, **by using extended harmonies (like adding 9ths, etc.), funk keeps that static harmony interesting** – it has internal movement in the chord (the dissonances within the chord give flavor) even if the root doesn't change ³⁴. - **Summary**: Funk's motto could be **“keep it on the one”** (meaning the downbeat, the home chord) – hammer that groove. Harmonically, that means **less chord progression, more chord expression**. The chords used are often **rich (7ths, 9ths, etc.)** to thicken the stew ⁴⁸, and any changes serve the groove rather than a classical narrative. A funk arranger might ask: what chord can we stay on that everyone can jam around? Or if we change chords, how do we do it without losing danceability? (Often by common tones or predictable alternation so it doesn't feel like a jarring key change). Funk shows that you can create a whole mood with basically one or two chords by focusing on rhythm and timbre – a contrast to genres that rely on long progressions. As a result, funk harmony might be the simplest in terms of number of chords, but the **voicings and rhythmic usage of those chords are sophisticated**.

Outlaw Country (and Country in General)

Outlaw country refers to the movement in the late 60s/70s (Willie Nelson, Waylon Jennings, etc.) that rebelled against the slick Nashville sound, but musically it's still very much within country/folk traditions. Harmony in country music (classic country, not talking modern country-pop which might borrow more pop harmony) tends to be **straightforward and strongly diatonic**: - **Three-Chord Simplicity**: The backbone of country harmony is often the **I, IV, and V (the primary triads)** ¹¹. Many country songs are three-chord songs – perhaps with the occasional **ii or vi chord** (the minor chords) thrown in for color. This simplicity gives country its approachable, folky feel. For example, in key of G, the chords G (I), C (IV), D (V) might carry the entire song. These are all diatonic major chords and establish the key solidly. It's common to also include **V7** (dominant seventh on the V) because blues and folk influences creep in – so in G, a D7 leading back to G is common, giving a little tension but nothing too fancy (just the basic leading tone). - **Relative Minor and the vi chord**: Some country songs use the relative minor (vi chord) to evoke a *mournful* feel within a major key context. For instance, in key of C major, the vi is A minor. A progression might go I (C) – vi (Am) – IV (F) – V (G) – I, which is common in ballads. It's still diatonic. The vi allows a touch of *sadness* without leaving the key. - **Occasional ii and V of V**: A bit of borrowed charm: sometimes a country song will use a **secondary dominant** to approach the V chord. For example, in key of C, an A7 chord might appear to lead into D7 (which leads to G). This is more common in Western swing or more jazz-tinged country, but even something like “Jambalaya” by Hank Williams uses a secondary dominant (II7). Outlaw country artists like Willie Nelson, who loved jazz, might sneak in **chromatic chords or swing-style turnarounds**. But generally, it won't stray far – it'll come back to home base quickly. Willie's song “Crazy” (made famous by Patsy Cline) actually has quite sophisticated pop/jazz chords, but that's an outlier written in a jazzy style. - **Mixolydian Touches (♭VII chord)**: Country and Southern rock sometimes use the **♭VII (flat seven) chord**, which is borrowed from the Mixolydian mode or from the parallel minor. In key of D major, that would be C major chord. This chord has a rootsy, rockabilly flavor (it's like the “honky-tonk” sound). For instance, the classic progression I – ♭VII – IV – I is heard in many country-rock tunes. Waylon Jennings' “Are You Sure Hank Done It This Way” essentially revolves around a I – ♭VII vamp. That ♭VII adds a bluesy feel (because it implies the flat 7 scale degree used in dominant seventh chords and blues scale). It doesn't feel as “foreign” or unstable as other chromatics; the ♭VII to I has a feeling of plagal resolution (sort of a IV of IV). - **Folk and Gospel Influences**: Country harmony inherited from church hymns (IV-I “Amen” cadences) and folk songs (which often stick to I-IV-V or use modal mixtures). For example, the **II major chord (not as a dominant)** sometimes appears – e.g., in key of C, an unexpected D major (II) might show up (this might be thought of as V/V, but sometimes it doesn't resolve to V directly, it could just be a brightening of the ii chord). This happens occasionally and gives a uplifting feel. Also, **the minor iv chord in a major key** can appear for pathos at the end of a phrase (common in older pop too, sometimes called the “Picardy minor” in reverse – like in key of C major, use an F minor before going back to C major for a wistful sound). Willie Nelson's “Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain” mainly sticks to I, IV, V, but many country songs use a quick V/V or a minor ii as a passing chord. - **Vocal Harmony**: In terms of arrangement, country often features **vocal harmonies in close thirds**. A lead singer might be accompanied by another singing a third above (or below occasionally) to thicken the chorus or certain lines. Think of the classic duets or the sound of a band like Alabama or the Eagles (country-rock) – the harmonies are tight and usually consonant (thirds and sixths mainly, rarely any harsh dissonances). This creates that sweet sibling-harmony sound (like Everly Brothers as an influence on country harmony). - **Pedal Steel and Fills**: The pedal steel guitar or fiddle in country often provides harmonic fills – sliding into chord tones or extensions (like a sliding seventh or ninth). They sometimes outline chords or add a sustained note that color the chord (e.g., sustain the 6th or 9th of a chord for a lush effect). But the underlying chords remain simple; the instruments' embellishments just decorate them. - **Outlaw country specifically**: While not drastically different in chord vocab, the outlaw movement sometimes incorporated a bit more rhythmic drive (borrowed from rock) and was less likely to have elaborate string sections or anything. The harmonies remained **honest and unembellished** – which actually was part of

the “outlaw” ethos, sticking to the raw basics instead of the over-produced Nashville sound which by then might include more pop/jazz chords. So ironically, outlaw country might be even *more* diatonic and simple, leaning into those folkly three-chord structures as a statement of authenticity. For example, Waylon’s “Lonesome, On’y and Mean” is basically a minor blues (i, \flat VII, \flat VI sort of vibe). Willie’s “Whiskey River” (as we checked) is in G: it uses G, C, D predominantly with a brief E7 (secondary dominant to A minor maybe) and A7 (secondary to D) ⁴⁹ – so yes a touch of chromatic secondary dominant to drive the chorus. But it’s all very much within expected patterns – nothing to confuse the ear, it’s music to tell stories plainly. - **Summing up country:** Country harmony prioritizes **strong, straightforward progressions** that support the vocal storytelling. It’s often **highly diatonic (major and minor chords in the key) with occasional borrowed chords from blues (dominant 7s) or parallel modes** for flavor. The effect is usually **comforting, familiar, and tonal** – you always feel the key center strongly. The use of mostly primary chords gives it that “homey” feel. When you hear a country song, you can often predict where the harmony will go (in a satisfying way), and that predictability is part of the genre’s charm – it’s about the lyrics and emotion, with harmony providing a sturdy, unpretentious backbone. Even when someone like Willie jazzes things up, it’s done tastefully and still resolves the way a country listener would expect (lots of authentic cadences, etc.). In essence, *“Country uses mostly plain major and minor chords, often the I-IV-V progression, sometimes adding a minor vi or a dominant seventh for spice”* ¹¹ ⁵⁰ – it sticks to what works and what serves the song’s tale.

New Wave (80s Synth-Pop and beyond)

New Wave in the late ‘70s and ‘80s was a broad genre, but generally it meant a modern, pop-rock approach often incorporating synthesizers and influenced by punk’s simplicity but also drawing on earlier pop/rock. Harmony in new wave varied by artist (compare The Police vs. Eurythmics vs. Depeche Mode and you have differences), but some tendencies: - **Blend of Major/Minor with Modal Quirks:** Many new wave songs use conventional major/minor progressions but will incorporate a **modal shift or borrowed chord for effect**. For example, a song might be mostly minor but use the major IV chord (borrowed from Dorian mode) or use a \flat VII (from Mixolydian) even if overall it’s in major. This gives a slightly less bluesy, more “European” sound as opposed to straight rock’n’roll. A track like A-ha’s “Take On Me” is in A major but uses a \flat VII (G chord) which gives it a bright anthemic lift characteristic of a lot of ‘80s pop. Eurythmics’ “Sweet Dreams” is in C minor (mostly sticking to i and V and VI chords as the hook) but could be interpreted as C natural minor (Aeolian) for the most part – some analyses say it’s in C Dorian for parts ⁵¹. The new wave sound often avoids overly bluesy V7-I cadences; it might leave some progressions unresolved for a cooler vibe. - **Synthesizer Pedal Tones and Sustained Harmony:** With the advent of synth pads, new wave artists could hold long chords or pedal tones under sections. This meant sometimes the harmony is implied by a static pad while bass moves or vice versa. For instance, in some new wave ballads, you might have a **pedal bass note and changing upper chords** creating suspensions and a sort of modal sound. Or a droning open string on guitar (U2, though more post-punk, often used drones). - **Extended Chords / Add Chords:** While not to the level of jazz, ‘80s synth-pop loved the lush sound of **add9 or maj7 chords** for that dreamy quality ⁵². A major chord with a major 7 (which is the same as add 7 in that case) instantly gives a nostalgic, slightly bittersweet feel (think of a song like “Forever Young” by Alphaville, which uses major and major7 chords). The **maj7 chord smooths transitions and adds richness** – it’s explicitly noted in synthwave (a retro style emulating new wave) that *“the use of maj7 chords smooths out transitions and adds harmonic richness”* ⁵². New wave tracks like Ultravox’s “Vienna” have some sophisticated chords (like major 7ths and minor 9ths) to get that cinematic sound. - **Use of Sus2/Sus4:** Some new wave (and related genres) use **suspended chords** for texture. The Police (more on the rock side of new wave) often used sus chords (“Every Breath You Take” famously revolves around sus4 resolving). These chords add a little tension but not strong dissonance (the 2 or 4 replaces the 3, delaying the resolution). - **Progression Types:** You see a lot of **circle-of-fifths or stepwise bass progressions** in 80s pop. For example, I-V-vi-IV is a classic pop progression (not unique to new wave, but prevalent). Also common are those “heroic”

progressions with \flat VI and \flat VII in a minor key (which we touched on – that’s very synth-pop, e.g. the progression $i - \flat$ VI – \flat VII in minor). A concrete example: **“Don’t You (Forget About Me)” by Simple Minds** is in G major but the main hook alternates between I (G) and IV (C) and throws in \flat VII (F) – giving a stadium, anthemic feel. **Eurythmics’ “Here Comes the Rain Again”** oscillates between minor i and major III and major \flat VII – a sort of Mixolydian mix – which contributes to its moody atmosphere. These are not chord changes you’d find in 12-bar blues or ’50s rock; they have a sophisticated, almost melancholic flavor. - **Lack of Blues Dominants:** New wave largely moved away from the blues-based dominant seventh sound. If V chords appear, they’re often straight major (no flat 7) or even sus. The “avoidance” of dominant seventh (except when intentionally adding a touch of soul, like some new wave that crosses into blue-eyed soul) means the harmony can feel a bit cooler or more detached. It’s more common to outline progressions with triads or add9 than with heavy V7 tensions. Instead, any tension often comes from **non-functional chord shifts** (like moving by thirds, e.g., A minor to F major to C major – not a classical cadence, but common in pop). - **Atmosphere via Harmony:** New wave and synth-pop frequently aimed for atmospheric or emotional vibes (nostalgia, futurism). Harmony was a tool to achieve that. The genre loved **minor keys for a sense of melancholy**, but usually balanced by strong pop hooks so it’s not too dark. The contrast of a minor key verse and a relative major chorus was a trope (like verse in A minor, chorus in C major kind of feel). Additionally, adding that **major 7th or 9th** on a sustained synth chord gave a “wash” of feeling – cinematic and rich. - **Example to illustrate:** Take **Tears for Fears – “Everybody Wants to Rule the World”**. The verse progression (in E major) goes something like: E – D – A (so I – \flat VII – IV in E, which is non-diatonic because of D, borrowed from mixolydian). The chorus goes C#m – G#m – A – E – F# (touching the vi and iii and IV, then I, then V – mixing relative minor chords into the progression). The overall effect is uplifting yet wistful – thanks to those borrowed chords and the interplay between major and minor modes. - **In summary:** New wave harmony took the basic rock/pop vocabulary and *refined* it with a few jazz/pop inflections (major 7ths, add9s) and modal borrowings (\flat VII, \flat VI, etc.). It generally stays tonal (we’re not talking wild atonality here), but it isn’t as blues-based as earlier rock. The result is often **catchy but sophisticated** – you might not analyze it as deeply when listening, but those chord choices are a big part of why a song feels *80s dreamy* or *new-wave cool*. They evoke certain emotions: major 7ths = nostalgia, \flat VII = anthem-like breadth, minor key + major IV = poignancy, etc. New wave showed that pop music can use some *colorful chords* and still top the charts, creating moods that define an era. (And indeed, modern synthwave revival explicitly cites these harmonic techniques to get that *warm, nostalgic cinematic* feeling ¹⁰.)

Listening for Harmony: Exercises and Tips

Understanding harmony intellectually is one thing – hearing and *feeling* it in real music is another. Here are some exercises and pointers to train your ear and awareness for harmony. These will help you notice how harmony affects mood, how it supports melody, and how it functions in the overall arrangement of a song:

1. **Detect the Chord Changes:** Pick a song you like and **hum or listen for the bass line**. Often, the bass note is the root of the chord (especially in simple arrangements). Every time you hear the bass move to a new note and stay there, likely the chord has changed. Tap your foot to each chord change. This is identifying the **harmonic rhythm**. Does the song change chords quickly or slowly? For example, try The Beatles’ “*Let It Be*.” You’ll notice the chords change mostly every measure – that’s a moderate harmonic rhythm. Now contrast that with James Brown’s “*I Got You (I Feel Good)*,” which sits on a chord for a long time then has quick changes in a turnaround. Being aware of chord change frequency will attune you to the song’s structure (verse might have one pattern, chorus another).
2. **Major vs. Minor Feel:** On an instrument (or using a digital app if you don’t play one), play a C major chord (C-E-G). Then play a C minor chord (C-E \flat -G). Listen to how the mood shifts from

happy/bright (major) to **sad/melancholy** (minor). Now, when listening to songs, try to identify if the chords are major or minor by their feel. For instance, *"Happy Birthday"* starts on a major chord – it sounds fittingly happy. In contrast, *"House of the Rising Sun"* by The Animals is in minor – the first chord is A minor, giving it a somber tone. As an exercise, take a well-known melody and play it with different harmony: e.g., play *"Twinkle Twinkle Little Star"* but use minor chords instead of major – see how it drastically changes the vibe. This connects how **harmony dictates emotional color**.

3. **Consonance vs. Dissonance Awareness:** Listen to a piece of classical music known for tension, say Beethoven's *"Moonlight Sonata" (1st movement)*. When you hear a crunchy or tense moment, pause and see what's happening – often it's a dissonant interval or chord (Beethoven uses a lot of diminished chords in that piece). Then notice how he resolves it to a consonant chord and how *your body might relax at that point*. Even in rock or pop, listen for dissonant moments: In Queen's *"Bohemian Rhapsody,"* there are some striking harmonies (like the opera section) – try to pinpoint a weird chord (that's dissonance) and then the moment it resolves to something familiar (consonance). With practice, you'll start expecting resolutions and noticing when they're delayed, which heightens appreciation for the song's drama.
4. **Follow a Chord Chart:** Take a simple song and look up its chord chart (lyrics with chord symbols). As you play the recording, follow along the chords. This marries the theoretical with the auditory. For example, follow **"Stand By Me"** (which is a I-vi-IV-V progression repeating). See how the chord labels line up with what you hear: the I (major) feels resolved, the vi (minor) introduces a sweet sadness, the IV feels like it's building hope, the V adds a bit of tension that wants to go back to I. Pause and hum the root of each chord when it comes – you're training your ear to recognize the harmonic outline.
5. **Listen to Backing Vocals and Instrumental Harmony:** In many recordings, the lead melody can overshadow the harmony parts. Choose a song with strong backing vocals or interesting accompaniment – **The Beatles** are great for this. Listen to **"Because"** by The Beatles (or *"Nowhere Man"*) and concentrate solely on the harmony vocals (perhaps even find an a cappella version). Try to **separate the voices** in your mind. Can you sing along with one of the harmony parts instead of the main melody? This exercise strengthens your ability to hear individual voices in a chord. Similarly, in a band context, try to focus on the rhythm guitar or keyboard rather than the singer. In **"Sweet Child o' Mine"** by Guns N' Roses, for instance, during the chorus listen to what the guitar chords are doing under Axl's voice – that gives context to his melody. Or in **"Billie Jean"** by Michael Jackson, the chords are implied by synth stabs – notice how the bassline and those stabs outline minor chords that underpin the melody.
6. **Genre Spotting:** Make a playlist with an eclectic mix: a gospel choir song (e.g., *"Oh Happy Day"* by *Edwin Hawkins Singers*), a metal song (try *"Fear of the Dark"* by *Iron Maiden*, which has harmonized guitar lines), a funk song (*"Superstition"* by *Stevie Wonder*), a country song (*"On the Road Again"* by *Willie Nelson*), and a new wave song (*"Sweet Dreams"* by *Eurythmics*). As each plays, ask yourself:
 7. What is the role of harmony here? (Foreground, background, driving force, or static groove?)
 8. How does it make me feel? (Does the harmony in *"Oh Happy Day"* give you chills with those big choir chords? Does the static bassline and single chord groove of *"Superstition"* make you focus on rhythm instead?)
 9. Where should I listen for the harmony? (In gospel, listen to the choir; in metal, listen to the guitars; in funk, listen to the comping instrument and bass interaction; in country, listen for the fiddle/pedal steel or the vocal harmonies; in new wave, listen to the synth pads and how they

outline the chord changes.) By actively comparing, you'll sharpen your sense of how genres treat harmony differently. You'll hear that Iron Maiden's dual guitars at a key riff create a thrilling harmony – try humming one guitar line and have a friend hum the other, it sounds incomplete alone but powerful together. Or how “Superstition” essentially sits on an E \flat 7 chord – you can actually play just that chord on a keyboard and jam the whole song – recognizing that shows how **funk emphasizes one harmony and milks it using rhythm**.

10. **Map the Form via Harmony:** Often, song sections are defined by their harmony. Try to identify the form of a song by its chord progression. For instance, many pop songs have one progression for verses and another for chorus. Take “**I Will Survive**” by Gloria Gaynor: The verse and chorus actually use the same progression in this case (a circle-of-fifths loop in A minor). Take “**Someone Like You**” by Adele: verse and chorus have different progressions (and chorus lifts to a new chord for emotional impact). By noticing where the chords change pattern, you can mark, “Ah, new section here.” This also connects to dynamics and texture – often when the harmony shifts at a bridge, the instrumentation and dynamics shift too (e.g., things get louder or softer). This exercise will help you see how harmony underpins **musical form**.
11. **DIY Harmony Singing/Playing:** If you have a musical friend or a recording device, try this: sing a simple melody, then invent a harmony to go with it and sing (or record) that over it. Even just a third above or below at first. For example, take “You Are My Sunshine.” Record yourself singing it. Then play it back and try singing along but starting on a different note that fits – effectively creating a chord with your original voice. You'll quickly learn which intervals sound smooth (thirds, sixths) and which sound more clashy (seconds, sevenths). If you hit a dissonant interval, see how it resolves when you move to the next note. By literally *creating* harmony, you train your ear to predict and balance consonance/dissonance. Similarly on piano or guitar, play a note and find other notes that sound good or interesting with it. This will demystify harmony as something *active* you can do, not just observe.
12. **Notice Textures and Dynamics with Harmony:** Next time you listen to an orchestral piece or a film score, notice how **harmony + dynamics** = drama. For example, in a film score, when tension rises, often the orchestra might go to a dissonant chord *and* crescendo (get louder) – the combined effect is anxiety or excitement. When the hero triumphs, you might get a big consonant major chord *and* a fortissimo blast. In a rock ballad, the final chorus might add harmony vocals an octave or a third above (increasing the texture's thickness) *and* the band plays louder – giving a sense of climax. So try to **correlate what you hear in harmony with changes in volume and instrumentation**. A rich harmony might be played quietly for a tender effect, or a simple chord might be blasted loud for power – context matters. A great case is **Queen's “Bohemian Rhapsody”**: in the operatic section, they layer vocals to create huge chords (thick texture), yet at one point they sing “Galileo” on very high isolated notes (thin texture). How do those differences feel? The thick harmonies feel overwhelming and epic (they also push dynamics), whereas the single voice moments feel exposed. This shows how harmony interacts with texture and dynamics to serve the song's story.

By engaging in these exercises, you'll develop a multi-dimensional understanding of harmony. You'll start to **feel** harmony not just as an academic concept but as a living part of music that you can observe in real time. You'll notice how harmony supports melody (like pillars under a roof), how it influences the **texture** (thick chords vs. sparse open intervals), how it helps shape the **form** (providing contrast between sections, or a key change for a bridge), and how it works with **dynamics** (dissonance often used with louder dynamics for intensity, gentle harmonies with softer dynamics for intimacy, etc.).

Harmony truly is, as we titled, what gives music **emotional color and structural depth**. With trained ears, you'll hear the bluesy sorrow when a gospel choir hits a sweet minor 7th, or the triumphant resolution when an orchestra lands on a major chord after a long dissonant buildup. You'll appreciate the craft in a pop song's chord progression or a jazz standard's rich voicings.

Most importantly, improving your harmony listening skills allows you to enjoy music on a deeper level – you can listen *inside* the music. Instead of just hearing a song as a surface melody and beat, you'll hear the conversation of notes beneath, the layers of friends talking in musical “colors.” And whether you are analyzing Bach or jamming with friends, understanding harmony lets you communicate and create with a fuller palette. Enjoy the exploration – every song has a new harmonic story to tell if you listen for it!

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