

A GUIDE TO THE TERMINOLOGY OF GERMAN HARMONY

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It may strike some as odd that there could be such a thing as German harmony as opposed to English harmony. After all, the phenomena in question—chords, keys, progressions, modulations—are presumably perceived much the same in Bonn as in Boston. But the words used to describe these perceptions derive from different traditions, traditions influenced not only by different music theorists but also by famous pedagogues whose textbooks have consolidated divergent national terminologies.

At the core of present-day German terminology stands the colossus of Hugo Riemann, a musical scholar of vast erudition who produced work in practically every field of music history and theory. His writings, never timid, frequently created such a stir that they could still dominate discussions a generation after his death. In addressing the subject of harmony, Riemann set himself characteristically grandiose goals: to uncover the roots of “musical logic” and to discern the underlying dynamics of “musical syntax.” Drawing on the scientific work of Helmholtz, the dialectics of Hegel, and the speculative musical theories of Hauptmann and von Oettingen, he formulated his famous theory of functions. Its central claim is that every chord represents one of three functional categories: tonic, dominant, or subdominant. The categories themselves are of course shared in the English tradition, and their names go back to Rameau and the beginnings of modern harmonic theory. But what separates the German tradition is the extent to which these categories have reshaped the terms for other chords and their interrelationships.

The German names for triads on the so-called primary or tonal degrees of the major or minor scale (I, IV, V) are familiar to English-speaking musicians: “tonic,” “subdominant,” and “dominant.” But the names for the so-called secondary degrees may strike the English reader as foreign in both sound and concept. In the major mode, triads on degrees two, three, and six—“supertonic,” “mediant,” and “submediant” in English—are known as the “subdominant parallel,” the “dominant parallel,” and the “tonic parallel,” commonly abbreviated Sp, Dp, and Tp. Here one sees cast the long shadow of

Riemann. The name of each secondary triad connects it with a primary triad, and so with one of Riemann's three functional categories. The relationship supporting this connection, what the Germans call the "parallel" relation, is known in English as the "relative" relation: the association of major and minor scales sharing the same diatonic pitches (e.g., A minor and C major). To complete the reduction of the major-mode diatonic triads to the three harmonic functions, all that remains is to interpret the triad on the leading tone as an incomplete dominant seventh chord (often symbolized as "D 7" with a diagonal slash through the "D").

At this point German harmony still does not depart markedly from English harmony. Both traditions presume harmony to be "functional," though the meaning of this term is less clear in English than in German. Both are ultimately descended from Rameau, though filtered through various theories of fundamental progressions based on the primacy of root movement by fifth. Both are often expressed in terms of Roman numerals, writers in German using only upper-case letters, writers in English often using upper-case letters for major and augmented triads, lower-case letters for minor and diminished. And both traditions symbolize triadic inversion or chordal elements beyond the triad with the venerable figures of the thoroughbass.

Yet in its treatment of the minor mode, German harmony demonstrates the penchant for bold systematization that was a hallmark of later 19th-century German scholarship. While English harmony generally discusses the minor mode as an analogue of the major mode, German harmony has been greatly affected by Riemann's decision to treat minor as the inversion of major. The consequences of his decision have been far-reaching, and at one time, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, resulted in a vast symmetrical constellation of chords and relationships known as "dualistic" harmony.

Riemann's goal was to provide for each chord or relation in the major mode a corresponding, and inverted, chord or relation in the minor mode. But the goal of thoroughgoing dualism conflicted with aspects of his own theory of functions, with factors of harmonic practice, and with major-minor relationships that are analogous and parallel rather than inverse and symmetrical. Several compromises were necessary, and their cumulative effect in the face of the continuing desire for symmetry was the creation of an entire new class of chords, the *Leittonwechselklänge* explained below.

From the perspective of dualistic harmony, the presence of the reference tone—the root—of a major triad at the *bottom* of both a perfect fifth and a major third (c in c–e–g) requires the reference tone of a minor triad to be located at the *top* of a perfect fifth and

a major third (**g** in **c–e♭–g**). With this point in mind, let us create the three secondary triads in minor by inverting their major counterparts. In C major, the tonic parallel (Tp = A minor) differs from the tonic triad (T) by a single tone, an **a** one whole step above the fifth of the chord. So in C minor, the tonic parallel should differ from the tonic by a single tone one whole step below the fifth of the chord. The “fifth,” however, is **c** itself, since the Riemannian root of this minor chord is **g**. The tone below the fifth is thus **B♭** and the tonic parallel of C minor is consequently E♭ major, symbolized as “tP” (upper case representing major, lowercase minor). Following the same line of reasoning, the subdominant parallel in C major (Sp = D minor) has its C-minor counterpart in an A♭-major triad (sP), and the dominant parallel (Dp=E minor) its counterpart in a B♭-major triad (dP).

If one class of secondary chords—the parallel chords—could be formed by exchanging a primary chord’s *fifth* for the tone above it in major or below it in minor, then a second class of chords could be formed by exchanging a primary chord’s *root* for the tone below it in major or above it in minor. The tone involved in this exchange (*Wechsel*) is the leading tone (*Leitton*), either the tone a half step below the root in major or a half step above the “root” in minor. The result is a tonic *Leittonwechselklang*, customarily abbreviated Tl in the major mode, tL in the minor mode. As one might expect, there are also subdominant and dominant *Leittonwechselklänge*. In C major the complete set is Tl = E minor, Sl = A minor, and Dl = B minor. In C minor the inverted set is tL=A♭ major, sL=D♭ major, and dL=E♭ major. (One will occasionally see the term *Gegenklang* [lit. “contrast chord”] in place of *Leittonwechselklang*. The term *Gegenklang* emphasizes the contrast of mode and the major-third relationship between a function and its corresponding *Leittonwechselklang*.)

This is clearly not a simple system. Three functional categories can appear in any one of three chordal guises in either of two modes, eighteen possibilities in all: T, Tp, TI, t, tP, tL, S, Sp, Sl, s, sP, sL, D, Dp, Dl, d, dP, dL. Why all this complexity? Perhaps the central reason is that this ingenious, occasionally convoluted system enabled Riemann to achieve a grand and masterful synthesis of both the old and the new in late 19th-century music. Ostensibly remote triads could be interpreted through the traditional terms of the I–IV–V–I, or now T–S–D–T, cadential schema. A sequence of A♭-major, B♭-major, and C-major chords, for example, could be neatly interpreted as a subdominant (sP) to dominant (dP) to tonic (T) progression in C-major, a reading of these chords not without support in certain late-Romantic cadences. And a chord that often perplexes harmony students, the Neapolitan chord of D♭ major in a C-major

context, could be shown to be nothing more than a minor-mode subdominant *Leittonwechselklang* (sL).

The rise and partial fall of Riemann's system follows that of the late 19th-century harmony to which it was wedded. Thus in the first decades of the 20th century it was reaching new heights of complexity while simultaneously being undermined by doubts over its fundamental premises. In the course of this ferment several different symbolizations of the system arose. Today many are unfamiliar even to German musicians and are footnoted by Professor Dahlhaus where they occur. Two special symbols that nevertheless still retain some currency are the plus sign (+) and the degree sign (°). The plus sign next to a note name or chord symbol indicates that the lower tone of the "fifth" is the reference tone. Thus "+ **d**" would mean that **d** is the reference tone of the major triad **d–f#–a**. The degree sign indicates the inverse relationship—that the upper tone is the reference tone. Thus "°**a**" would mean that **a** is the reference tone of the minor triad **d–f–a**. Readers wishing a fuller account of the complete range of functional harmonic systems and their symbols should refer to the book by Renate Innig (*Systeme der Funktionsbezeichnung in den Harmonielehren seit Hugo Riemann* [Düsseldorf: Gesellschaft zur Förderung der systematischen Musikwissenschaft, 1970]).

The overtly dualistic elements of Riemannian harmony were among the first to fall out of favor, though earlier in this century their presence can still be strongly felt. For example, prewar German writers routinely used the term "dominant harmony" to refer not to a type of chord, V, but to a type of harmony based on a tonic with *two* dominants: an upper one, V, and a lower one, IV. And the notion of there being both a lower leading tone (**b** in C major) and an upper leading tone (**a**♭ in C minor) is a matter of course for someone like Ernst Kurth. In more recent years the notion of *Leittonwechselklänge* has faded somewhat, but the concept of parallel chords remains strong and firmly entrenched in the standard terminology.

The remaining terms current in German writings on harmony have well-known English equivalents because they derive from a shared tradition antedating Riemann, that of *Stufentheorie* or "the theory of fundamental progressions." *Stufe* is an ambiguous term. Literally "step" or "scale degree," it connotes not only the diatonic triad on a particular scale degree but also that degree as the harmonic root of several possible chords and as a participant in one or more fundamental progressions, somewhat like a Roman numeral in English theory. The "IV" chord is thus the scale degree IV "writ large" (and in this sense one might view the theory of fundamental progressions, *Stufentheorie*, as the apotheosis of the thoroughbass).

Now just as in Riemann's theory of functions, the theory of fundamental progressions attempts to reduce the diversity of possible chord successions to an underlying model of one preferred progression, in this case V–I or the circle of fifths. The result, often achieved through “supposition” (= sub-posing; i.e., placing a conjectured bass a third or fifth below the real bass), is a profusion of “dominant” relationships. Those involving chromatic tones and known as “secondary dominants” in English are termed *Zwischendominante* or *Wechseldominante* in German and generally symbolized by a “D” in parentheses. A *Doppeldominante* is also a secondary dominant—the dominant of the dominant. It may be symbolized by two overlapping “D”s. (The fully dualistic system also requires the complementary symbol of two “S”—the subdominant of the subdominant.) Finally, in cases where a dominant implies a tonic but the tonic is not realized in the music, the implied chord can be placed within square brackets. Thus, in a C-major context, (D)[Tp] might indicate an E-major chord *not* followed by an a-minor chord. That is, the square brackets indicate a missing tonic parallel (a-minor) which is preceded by its dominant (the major triad or dominant seventh chord on E).

Some may at first be put off by the overt theorizing apparent in German harmony, wishing perhaps that a choice be made once and for all between Riemann's *Functionstheorie* and the older *Stufentheorie*, or possibly believing that so-called linear theories have settled all earlier disputes. Yet this ongoing conflict between antithetical theories, with its attendant uncertainties and complexities, has special merits. In particular, whereas an English-speaking student may falsely believe that he or she is learning harmony “as it really is,” the German student encounters what are obviously theoretical constructs and must deal with them accordingly. The sophisticated historical view of harmony that can arise within this tradition of competing theories is evidenced in Professor Dahlhaus's *Studies on the Origin of Harmonic Tonality*.