

# Synchronic versus Diachronic Approaches to Teaching Tonal Harmony: A Response to Christopher Doll

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In ‘Definitions of “Chord” in the Teaching of Tonal Harmony’, Christopher Doll asks the question: ‘Should [we] use pop-rock excerpts only to the extent that they can serve as illustrations of classical idioms, or instead engage pop-rock music on its own terms?’<sup>1</sup> I believe we indeed should engage pop-rock on its own terms, yet I also believe there is nothing wrong with additionally using pop-rock music examples to illustrate ‘classical idioms’ (or what I will refer to as the ‘tonal system’). In this response I would like to explain briefly how my own approach is both similar to and different from Doll’s.

An important matter to clarify is the kind of harmony class we have in mind. In his well-known textbook *Harmony*, Walter Piston explains:

we ... define the common practice of composers over a period of about one and a half centuries, assuming arbitrarily that time stood still for composers, that Bach, Mozart, Chopin and Dvořák were contemporaries and that harmonic practice did not even change, let alone evolve.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, when we talk about the ‘common practice’, we are using a synchronic subterfuge in order to explain certain harmonic concepts. These concepts do not all appear in any single work, nor even in any single era. In fact, we can say that SATB drills (what Doll refers to as ‘part-writing exercise[s]’), which are used extensively at conservatories, exploit the harmonic syntax of Classicism, the voice leading of the Baroque, and chromatic and formal concepts of Romanticism. I will not pass judgment here on the values of this kind of approach for our

students. But it seems clear that when we teach ‘common-practice’ or ‘classical’ harmony, we are explaining concepts from different eras or, at best, concepts that composers from different eras used in very diverse ways. Yet all these composers have something in common: their harmony shares the same ‘feeling’ of tonality that we call the ‘tonal system’. We can all agree that Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Mozart’s and Brahms’ symphonies, and U2’s ‘With or Without You’ are all examples of tonal music – that they all employ the tonal system.

If we understand that the basis for undergraduate harmony classes is the tonal system itself, then we are justified in using any excerpt from any style that allows us to explain a specific tonal harmonic concept in the best possible way. Just as no teacher cares if an excerpt comes from Bach, Mozart, or Brahms, so too should we not care if an excerpt comes from U2. We should feel free to use any piece of tonal music to explain any tonal concept. For this reason I prefer to use the term ‘tonal harmony’ to describe my curriculum, rather than Piston’s ‘common-practice harmony’ or Doll’s ‘classical harmony’. I have been using examples from pop-rock in my tonal harmony classes for the past ten years – especially in aural-recognition harmony exercises – because I try to find the best example I can in order to explain a specific harmonic concept. Sometimes I swap one example for another example in a completely different style because I realize the other is better. This approach has allowed me to successfully teach tonal-harmony classes in which there are students from different specialties, not only classical but also flamenco and jazz.

In his response to Doll, Joseph P. Swain says the ‘pop-rock and traditional ... repertoires are

1 *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* 18/2 (2013), 91, right column.

2 Walter Piston, *Harmony* [1941], New York: Norton, 1978, 451.

built of musical languages too distinct to admit of profitable integration in pedagogy.<sup>3</sup> On the contrary, I agree with Doll when he replies that ‘While there are unquestionably significant differences in the harmonic syntaxes of pop-rock and classical repertoires, such differences would appear to be no more insurmountable than would the syntactical differences between, say, a Corelli trio sonata and a Chopin prelude’ (see current issue, p. 184, right column). Teachers and students come face to face every day with the differences between Baroque, Classical, and Romantic harmony. One good example can be seen in the traditional doubling rule for first-inversion major and minor chords that states we should either double the bass – though only if it is  $\hat{1}$ ,  $\hat{4}$ , or  $\hat{5}$  – or double the root; this is Mozart’s practice. However, when students try to check this rule against Bach’s chorales they realize it often does not apply. Bach was in between two theoretical worlds, those of his modal predecessors and of his tonal successors. Although Bach is like Mozart in that he considers a  $\frac{3}{2}$  chord to be a chordal inversion, he followed the doubling practice of his ancestors, who did *not* think in terms of chordal inversion and who allowed doubling of *any* of the notes.<sup>4</sup>

Yet even though there are many differences between the harmony of Bach, Mozart, and Brahms, we can teach them together. Similarly, although the harmony of these masters is often distinct from pop-rock harmony, the differences are not always as deep as they seem. For example, the  $\text{sus}_4$  chord, which Doll identifies as idiomatic to pop-rock theory and practice, can also occasionally be found in Brahms’ works as  $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{3}$  suspensions that do not resolve; for instance, a few appear in the *Andante Molto* section of the second movement to Brahms’ Third Piano Sonata. Granted, this kind of sonority is not *idiomatic* to traditional practice in the same way that it is to pop-rock, and it is certainly not a part of traditional harmonic theory. But it does appear in the music on occasion. Indeed, some traditional harmonic idioms were born from this kind of resolution-less sonority: e.g., the Neapolitan chord historically derives from a minor chord on  $\hat{4}$  that features a non-harmonic

minor sixth above the bass, a sixth that fails to resolve to the chordal fifth.<sup>5</sup> My point here is that the Western canon and pop-rock music are definitely similar enough to allow for a happy coexistence in the tonal harmony classroom. Moreover, by incorporating pop-rock into the tonal harmony classroom from the beginning, we send students a very clear message that an appreciation for pop-rock is something they should not be ashamed of.

So far I have discussed how I use pop-rock music as merely one possible source of examples for teaching the tonal system. This is the synchronic portion of my curriculum, which comes first. Later, depending on the student’s specialty, it is possible to switch to a more style-specific, diachronic approach. In this portion, students can learn about important harmonic concepts that are not necessarily common to all tonal styles, concepts such as Bach’s modal chorale harmonizations and pop-rock’s subtonic cadences (e.g.,  $\flat\text{VI}$ - $\flat\text{VII}$ -I). In his response to Swain, Doll states that he himself prefers to concentrate on one style (Bach’s) for the first portion of his curriculum, and then later ventures into Classical, Romantic, and post-1900 styles (including pop-rock). My own progression from a synchronic approach to a diachronic approach may seem very different from Doll’s, but in reality it is different only in its organization. When Doll is teaching Bach, he is actually teaching two things: the harmonic features that are particular to Bach’s style, and the harmonic features of the subterfuge that is the tonal system (his ‘classical harmony’). In other words, he teaches diachronically and synchronically at the same time. My own preference is to start with the latter and eventually move to the former, just as schools of jazz often begin with triadic tonal harmony before moving to jazz-specific harmony.

Regarding the definition of ‘chord’, I think it is desirable to offer an overall definition at the beginning of the curriculum that treats any combination of two or more different pitches as possibly creating a chord. The most important word in that definition is ‘possibly’, because the specific number of pitches depends

3 Dutch Journal of Music Theory 18/2 (2013), 108, left column.

4 See Diether de la Motte, *The Study of Harmony: An Historical Perspective*, Dubuque, IA: William C. Brown, 1991, 42-50.

5 *Ibid.*, 111-115.

on the stylistic context. In a traditional tonal style, the minimum is three notes. In jazz, it is necessary to have four notes (a triad in jazz is actually incomplete);<sup>6</sup> I call this 'quadtriadic' ('cuatriadic') harmony.<sup>7</sup> In pop-rock, at least two notes are necessary to create a chord. Thus, my overall definition of 'chord' is very inclusive, although not quite as inclusive as Doll's: for me, chords contain at least two notes, while Doll allows 'any and every sonority' to be a chord (i.e., including single notes).

Finally, I would like to comment briefly on Swain's statement that 'Since the harmonic content of many recent pop-rock songs is little more than a lazy oscillation of i and VII, maybe harmony is not really the locus of interest in music.' Aside from the fact that most pop-rock harmony does not merely oscillate between i and VII, the issue that troubles me here is that of judging complexity and quality. Composers, and indeed artists from all fields, know how difficult it is to create a masterpiece that is simple. Harmonically speaking, it is more surprising to analyze the second movement of Dvořák's Ninth Symphony than a complex excerpt by Wagner, because the harmony in the former is far from unique and can be easily systematized. Just because something is simple does not mean it is bad or easy to create, and just because something is complex does not mean it is good or difficult to create.

In any event, this exchange of views in the *Dutch Journal of Music Theory* has encouraged us to think, and thus helped us to move forward. I am convinced this is what is really important.

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6 See John Valerio, *Jazz Piano Concepts and Techniques*, Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1998, 5.

7 I prefer the term 'quadtriadic' harmony to the more common term 'jazz' harmony because this system is not exclusive to jazz, and because jazz does not always use quadtriadic harmony. We can even use quadtriadic harmony to analyze works from triadic styles, from Romanticism to pop-rock music, in order to gain insight that is unavailable through traditional triadic harmonic analysis.