

Levels of Harmony

English Grammar and Tonal Harmony

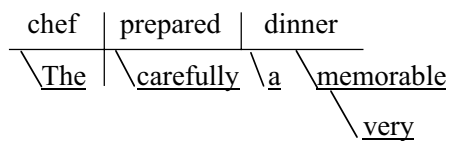
Reviewing a little English Grammar will help us make a point about tonal harmony. Consider this sentence:

The chef carefully prepared a very memorable dinner.

Much of the meaning of the sentence is conveyed by its most essential parts—the subject and the predicate—which would appear in unmodified form as follows:

chef prepared dinner

While this telegraphic style is not elegant, it does get the idea of the sentence across, just as would a I–V–I progression. The other words in the sentence flesh it out and help describe the subject and predicate. The whole sentence can be diagrammed to show the function of each word:



The grammar of tonal harmony has some similarities to spoken language, but it is not quite so well understood. While we might draw an analogy between chord functions and parts of speech, no one has designed a system of diagramming harmony as precisely as English sentences.

Levels of Harmony

Play this phrase (Ex. 1) slowly.

Example 1. Haydn, Sonata No. 33, II.

Adagio

pf *p*

d: i vii[°]6 ♯ i⁶ iv V ♯ i V

The basic tonal motion of the phrase—the skeletal subject and predicate—is made up of the i–V progression formed by the chords that begin and end the phrase. But how do the other chords *function*? How do we evaluate their relative importance? The roman numerals give us a hint, but more analysis is

required. One way to approach such an analysis is to try to hear the chords as originating at different levels: some levels are rather fundamental to the structure, while others are more ornamental.

Play the first two measures again. One way to hear this fragment is as an arpeggiation from *i* to *i*⁶ that is filled in by the *vii*^{0₅} (or *vii*^{0₆}-*vii*^{0₅}). We might diagram these relationships on different levels as follows.

i - - - - -
i - - - - *i*⁶
i - *vii*^{0₅} - *i*⁶

The second part of the phrase is more involved. The *V* chord predominates, but the *iv* is an important dominant preparation. The root position *i* serves not as the goal of the phrase but as part of the prolongation of the *V* chord. Least important of all is the *V*⁶, which is an arpeggiation of the more fundamental root position *V* chord that precedes it. These relationships might be summarized in this way.

- - *V* - - - - -
iv - *V* - - - - -
iv - *V* - - - *i* - *V*
iv - *V* - *V*⁶ - *i* - *V*

When we put the two halves of the phrase together, the diagram should show *i* and *V* as the most significant chords, with the *iv* coming in at the next level. The function of every other chord in the phrase must also be made clear.

i - - - - - *V* - - - - -
i - - - - - *iv* - *V* - - - - -
i - - - *i*⁶ - *iv* - *V* - - - - -
i - *vii*^{0₅} - *i*⁶ - *iv* - *V* - - - *i* - *V*
i - *vii*^{0₅} - *i*⁶ - *iv* - *V* - *V*⁶ - *i* - *V*

Are there other ways to hear this phrase? Certainly. But we have gone a step beyond mere chord labeling by showing how a listener or performer might interpret this passage.

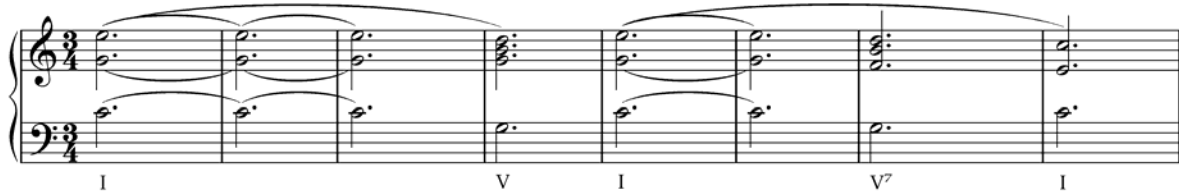
While Example 1 is incomplete in the sense that it ends with a HC, Example 2 contains a parallel period with complete harmonic motion away from *I* and back again.

Example 2. Haydn, Sonata No. 35, III.

C: I V½ I⁶ V₅ I V I V½ I⁶ IV V⁷ I

This excerpt can be seen as an elaboration of the progression presented in Example 3.

Example 3.



The other chords in Example 2 include a dominant preparation (IV), arpeggiations (I⁶), and chords that embellish the arpeggiations (V⁴₂ and V⁶₅). The chord functions might be diagrammed as follows.

I - - - - - V - I - - - - - V⁷ - I
 I - - - - - V - I - - - - - IV - V⁷ - I
 I - - - I⁶ - - - I - V - I - - - I⁶ - IV - V⁷ - I
 I - V⁴₂ - I⁶ - V⁶₅ - I - V - I - V⁴₂ - I⁶ - IV - V⁷ - I

This kind of analysis is much more subjective than sentence diagramming is, but it is important that the analyst consider the function of each chord, even if several interpretations are possible. In a levels analysis of a single phrase, the highest level will usually include only the I chord that begins the phrase and the V or the V-I that ends it. The next level will often include the ii or IV preceding the last V. Other chords that sometimes seem to be more significant than those surrounding them include these.

- Arpeggiations of important chords
- Root position I and V chords
- Goals of stepwise bass lines
- Tonicized chords (to be discussed in Chapters 16-17)
- Chords of longer duration

Various methods are used to expand upon the simple progression that serves as the background of a passage. Some of them have been seen in Examples 1 and 2. The simplest of all is *octave displacement* (see m. 6 of Ex. 2, soprano and bass). More interesting is *arpeggiation* (mm. 1-2 of Exx. 1 and 2), which can itself be embellished. Most often used to embellish arpeggiations are *passing chords* (mm. 1-2 of Ex. 1), although *appoggiatura chords* (m. 1 of Ex. 2) are also used. Another method is the *neighbor chord*, two of which are illustrated in Example 4.

Example 4.

Harmonic analysis for Example 4:

F: I I V⁶ I I IV⁶ I

The notation shows a piano accompaniment in 3/4 time. The treble clef has a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The bass clef has a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The chords are: I (F major), I (F major), V⁶ (C major), I (F major), I (F major), IV⁶ (B-flat major), and I (F major). The V⁶ and IV⁶ chords are marked with '(n)' for neighbor chords.

A familiar form of harmonic embellishment is the *six-four chord* (review Chapter 9). You will recall that many triads in second inversion serve as passing chords or as embellishments of tonic or dominant chords, while others come about as arpeggiations. Strong dominant preparation chords (usually ii or IV) are in a class by themselves. They often occur at metrically stressed points, and they are frequently embellished. In many cases you may feel that they rank with or just below the fundamental I and V chords in significance. The importance of these chords is reflected in their early appearance in the levels diagrams we have presented so far in this chapter.’

Examples from a Chorale

The chorale harmonization is a good source for the study of levels of harmony because it presents a large number of chords in a short space of time. Since most chorales modulate (change key) or contain tonicizations (see Chapters 16-17), we will have to restrict ourselves in this chapter, for the most part, to excerpts. The remainder of the examples in this chapter are drawn from Bach’s harmonization of “Nun ruhen alle Wälder.”

Example 5 shows the first phrase of the chorale. This phrase is obviously “about” the I chord, which appears in root position three times and occupies four of the eight beats in the example.

Example 5. Bach, “Nun ruhen alle Wälder”

Harmonic analysis for Example 5:

A^b: I IV vii⁰⁶ I IV⁶₆ V⁶₆ I

The notation shows a piano accompaniment in common time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The chords are: I (A-flat major), IV (D-flat major), vii⁰⁶ (G-flat major), I (A-flat major), IV⁶₆ (D-flat major), V⁶₆ (E-flat major), and I (A-flat major).

There is no root position V, a weaker V⁶₆ being used at the cadence. It can be heard as a neighbor chord to the I (Ex. 6).

Example 6.

(n)

(n)

A^b: I V₅ I

The preparation for the V₅⁶ is provided by the IV^{M6}₅ that precedes it. So far, our levels might be shown as:

I - - - - -

I - - - - - V₅⁶ - I

I - - - - - IV^{M6}₅ - V₅⁶ - I

The vii⁰⁶ that appears early in the phrase is a weak form of dominant harmony. Like the V₅⁶, it can be heard as a neighbor chord (Ex. 7).

Example 7.

(n)

(n)

A^b: I vii⁰⁶ I

The vii⁰⁶ is preceded by its own dominant preparation—a root position IV—which gives us this reading of the phrase.

I - - - - -

I - - - - - V₅⁶ - I

I - - - - - IV^{M6}₅ - V₅⁶ - I

I - - - vii⁰⁶ - I - IV^{M6}₅ - V₅⁶ - I

I - IV - vii⁰⁶ - I - IV^{M6}₅ - V₅⁶ - I

The third phrase of the chorale (Ex. 8) is essentially a I-V progression.

Example 8. Bach, “Nun ruhen alle Wälder”

A♭: V½ I⁶ vii⁰⁶ I ⁶ V

We choose the root position I over the I⁶ as the “original” version, with the arpeggiations embellishing it, as in Example 9.

Example 9.

A♭: I⁶ I I⁶

Since this phrase has no dominant preparation, the only chords left to account for are the relatively weak V½ and vii⁰⁶ chords that embellish the tonic harmony.

- - - - - I - - - V
 - - I⁶ - - - - I - I⁶ - V
 V½ - I⁶ - vii⁰⁶ - I - I⁶ - V

The last phrase of the chorale (Ex. 10) is an embellished I–V⁷–I progression.

Example 10. Bach, “Nun ruhen alle Wälder”

A♭: iii vi⁷ (IV⁶?) V♭⁵ I IV⁶ IV⁷ V⁷ I

The V⁷ is prepared by a IV^{M7} and by a weaker IV⁶, as diagramed below.

I - - - - - V⁷ - I
 I - - - IV^{M7} - V⁷ - I
 I - IV⁶ - IV^{M7} - V⁷ - I

The other three chords serve as an *anacrusis* (upbeat) to the first I chord and are added one at a time to the levels analysis.

- - - - - V₅⁶ - I - IV⁶ - IV^{M7} - V⁷ - I
 - - vi⁷ - V₅⁶ - I - IV⁶ - IV^{M7} - V⁷ - I
 iii - vi⁷ - V₅⁶ - I - IV⁶ - IV^{M7} - V⁷ - I

Conclusion

The concepts presented in this chapter are by no means original, but this kind of analysis of harmonic levels is not widely used. For this reason it will not be pursued systematically throughout the text. Instead, the idea of harmonic layers is introduced here to encourage the reader to understand that, although each chord may be labeled with its own roman numeral, all chords are *not* equally important. In fact, not all chords with the same label (all V's, all I's) have identical uses. Some serve as starting points, some as goals, others as connectors, and so on. These fascinating and diverse relationships are what the grammar of tonal harmony is all about.

Self-Test

Analysis.

1. Label the chords and do a levels analysis. What kind of NCT is the A4 in the soprano?

Bach, "Ich freue mich in dir"

A:

- This exercise and the next one are two different harmonizations by Handel of the same melody. Label the chords, and do a levels analysis.

Handel, “Wenn mein Stündlein vorhanden est”

B \flat :

- Label the chords, and do a levels analysis. What progression in this excerpt is relatively unusual?

Handel, “Wenn mein Stündlein vorhanden est”

B \flat :

- Label the chords, and do a levels analysis. What is the form of this excerpt? What kind of NCT is the C5 in m. 8?

p

Answers to Self-Test

(All the levels analyses are subject to other interpretations.)

1. The A4 is an anticipation.

- - I - - - - - - V - I
 - - I - - - - - ii⁶ - V - I
 V⁶ - I - - - - - ii⁶ - V - I
 V⁶ - I - IV⁶ - ii⁶ - V - I

2. Here are two interpretations, the first probably being the better one because it agrees with the meter.

I - - - - - V - - - - - I
 I - - - - - V - vi - - - V - I
 I - IV⁶ - I - V - vi - I⁶ - V - I

 I - - - - - - - - - - V - I
 I - - - - - - - - - I⁶ - V - I
 I - - - - - V - - - I⁶ - V - I
 I - IV⁶ - I - V - vi - I⁶ - V - I

3. The progression ii⁶-vi is relatively unusual. In fact, *retrogression* would be a better term here because vi usually lies further away from tonic than ii⁶ does in tonal harmony.

I - - - - - - - - - - V - I
 I - - - - - ii⁶ - - - - - V - I
 I - - - - I⁶ - ii⁶ - - - - - V - I
 I - vii⁰⁶ - I⁶ - ii⁶ - vi - - - V - I
 I - vii⁰⁶ - I⁶ - ii⁶ - vi - $\underbrace{I_4^6}_{V}$ - V - I

4. The form is a parallel period. The C5 is an escape tone.

i - - - - - - - - - - V - i - - - - - - - - - - V - i
 i - - - - - - - - - ii⁰⁶ - V - i - - - - - - - - - ii⁰⁶ - V - i
 i - - - i - - - - III - ii⁰⁶ - V - i - - - i - - - - III - ii⁰⁶ - V - i
 i - V - i - VII - III - ii⁰⁶ - V - i - V - i - VII - III - ii⁰⁶ - V - i