Music 11, 7/24/06

Fundamental of harmony

Melodies are often built around the triad. This means that by looking at a melody, we can easily understand the harmony that it expresses. A harmony will often emerge in melody as an "outline" that fills in the space of the triad. For example, a melody C-D-E-F-G might imply a C-major triad by the way it visits all its members. Some notes, though, do not fit into the triad this example highlights. These are "non-chord tones," but so long as they are not accentuated, they do not obscure the underlying harmony. They can be considered "passing" between chord tones, or connecting the *real* chord members.

Today we focus on the ways triads interact with each other, and how their interaction expresses *tonality*, or the overall key of a piece of music.

Functional harmony

Harmony is *functional* when the chords that constitute a certain key (or tonality) interact in specific ways. The specific ways triads interact with each other recalls the unique dynamic relationships between pitches in the scale that represents a key. ^7—^1, for example, emphasizes the keynote because of the leading-tone-ness of scale degree 7 ("^7"). It *wants* to *resolve* to the tonic, ^1.

Other "tendency tones," or scale degrees that "tend" to move to other specific scale degrees, for one reason or another, are: ^4—^3, ^2—^1 and ^5—^1 (when in the bass).

Like scale degree, harmonies have dynamic relations. Notice that the dominant 7^{th} chord contains all of the above dynamic pitches: ^5, ^7, ^2 and ^4. When *all* of these tones, though sounding simultaneously, move to their respective resolutions, we have the outlines of a V—I progression. Thus we can say that the dominant 7^{th} chord is relatively tense, and requires resolution to the tonic, which is much more reposeful.

To put it another way, the V harmony moves *purposefully* to tonic, I. Some triads, built on other scale degrees actually move more purposefully to V than to I. For example, the ii chord (the triad built on scale degree 2, ^2), tends to move towards V as a way of strengthening the dominant harmony's energy (which in turn is released in the I chord). The way chords proceed from one to the next is what we call in music theory, a *progression*.

A progression is the purposeful movement toward the tonic harmony, and conversely, the tonic harmony is the "goal" of a progression. V—I, as outlined above, is the model for a chord progression because it illustrates most clearly a *purposeful* movement from one chord to another.

More on this Tuesday.