New Cognitive Theories of Harmony Applied to Direct Manipulation Tools for Novices

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NEW COGNITIVE THEORIES OF HARMONY
APPLIED TO DIRECT MANIPULATION TOOLS FOR
NOVICES
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Abstract
Two recent cognitive theories of harmony can be
exploited to design powerful direct manipulation tools
to help novices sketch, analyze and experiment with
harmony. Longuet-Higgins' (1962) and Balzano's (1980)
theories are the focus of much current investigation by
cognitive psychologists of music but they also offer
considerable potential, so far virtually unexploited, in
music education and music-computer interface design.

Longuet-Higgins and Balzano start from quite different
bases, (one from the overtone series and the other from
mathematical group theory respectively), but the two theories lead
to closely related two-dimensional representations of
harmonic structures and relationships. The paper describes
the design of direct manipulation tools based on a version
of Longuet-Higgins' theory to allow novices to modify,
sketch and analyse harmonic sequences simply and clearly
by moving two-dimensional patterns representing
chords and keys on a computer screen, linked to a
synthesizer. Such interfaces should enable novices to
experiment intelligently with harmony in ways that
might normally be barred to them because of lack of
theoretical knowledge or instrumental skill.

1 Introduction
This research is part of a wider project to find ways of
using artificial intelligence to encourage and facilitate
beginners to compose music for enjoyment. The wider
project is aimed at novices who may not have a formal
music education and at users outside as well as inside
the formal education system. (For this reason we will use
popular music and jazz illustrations, although the tools
work with Harvard harmony in any genre.) The research
explores two recent cognitive theories of harmony
(Longuet-Higgins, 1962) and (Balzano, 1980) which give
ris to principled and elegant representations for basic
harmonic relationships and harmonic movement. Because
of space limitations we will concentrate exclusively on
interfacing based on a modified version of Longuet-
Higgins' theory although closely related interfaces can be
designed using adaptations of Balzano's theory.

2 Longuet-Higgins theory
Longuet-Higgins' theory of the perception of harmony
involves the investigation of an array of notes arranged in
ascending perfect fifths on one axis and major thirds on
the other axis (Fig 1). (Readers not interested in the
reasons for this could skip the rest of this section.)

Longuet-Higgins' (62) theory asserts that the set of
intervals that occur in Western tonal music are those
between notes whose frequencies are in a ratio expressible
as the product of the three prime factors 2, 3, and 5 and no
others (Thomson 72). Given this premises, it follows that
the set of three intervals consisting of the octave, the
perfect fifth and the major third is the only non-redundant
co-ordinate space for all intervals in musical use. We can
represent this graphically by laying out notes in a three
dimensional grid with notes ascending in octaves, perfect
thirds and major fifths along the three axes. The octaves
dimensions are discussed in most discussions on grounds of
harmonic equivalence and of practical convenience for
focusing on the other two dimensions (Fig 1). The theory is of
great interest to cognitive psychologists of music (Sloboda 87),
Howell, Cross and West (85).

1 In Longuet-Higgins' presentations of the theory, and in
all discussions of it in the psychological literature,
the convention is that ascending perfect fifths appear on the
x-axis and the ascending major thirds on the y-axis. In
my discussions of educational applications I reverse this
convention. The reversal originally happened accidentally, but
I now maintain it in educational contexts on three
grounds; firstly it allows students to switch more easily
between the Balzano representation & the 12-tone version
of the Longuet-Higgins representation (which could both
be available on a single interface for different tasks) - the
x-axes coincide and the y-axes are related as if by a shear
operation. Secondly it makes the dominant &
subdominant area coincide with Schenker's 54th
dominant & subdominant regions (though of course the
x-axes and the overall meaning of the respective diagrams
differ). Thirdly the V-I move remains that dominant Western
tonal harmony at so many different levels become aligned
with gravity in a metaphor useful to novices. To any
readers who find this convention confusing, I apologize.
182 1987 ICMI Proceedings
3.4 Representing the 'Static' of harmony
3.4.1 Representing key areas and modulation

In diagrams such as Fig. 1 all of the notes of the diatonic scale are "clamped" into a compact region. For example, all of the notes of C major, and no other notes are contained in the box or window in Fig. 1. If we imagine the box or window as being free to slide around over the fixed grid of notes and delimit the set of notes is lies over at any one time we will see that moving the window vertically upwards or downwards, for example, corresponds to modulations to the dominant and subdominant keys respectively. Other keys can be found by sliding the window in other directions. Despite the repetition of note names, it is important to note that notes with the same name are different positions are not the same note, but notes with the same name in different keys (Sondheim (72) calls these "homonyms"). This is an extension, motivated by Longuet-Higgins' theory, of the standard notational distinction that C double sharp, for example, is not the same name as D. (Sondheim calls such pairs "homophones").

However, for the purposes of educating novices in the elementary facts of tonal harmony we map Longuet-Higgins space onto the twelve note vocabulary of a fixed

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fig 1

183 1987 ICMC Proceedings
Notes also that we have a clear spatial metaphor for the centrality of the tonic—the tonic triad is literally in the center—one of the three major triads of any major key. We can make similar observations for the minor triads. Minor triads correspond to minor L-shapes. Like major triads, they are maximally compact three–element objects in the space. The three secondary triads generate the natural minor (and major) scale (We could deal with harmonic and melodic minor scales by extending the key window, but we do not pursue this here). Also, the space gives a clear visual metaphor for the centrality of the relative minor triad among the secondary triads.3 Completing the full set of scale tone triads for the major scale, the diminished triad is a sloping straight line. Some musical dialects, especially in areas of popular music consistently use seventh or ninth chords in place of triads. These chords similarly have memorable and consistent shapes in the space. See Fig 4 for the representation of scale tone seventh.

3.2 Representing the ‘Dynamics’ of harmony
3.2.1 Simple two and three chord movements
So far we have used 3D harmony space to look at the representation of key areas and chords. Let us now move on to look at harmonic succession and progression. A fundamental I V I progression can be seen visually as one that begins on the central major triad of the key, and then moves to a maximally close neighbor before returning home (Fig 5). Similarly, progressions involving I, IV and V can be seen as oscillating either side of the usual centre by the smallest possible step and then returning home.

3.2.3 Chords and keys in a direct manipulation environment
Let us pause to imagine a direct manipulation environment based on the theory as described so far. We have a grid of notes on the screen and two mice (or one mouse and a set of arrow keys). One mouse controls the location of a moving dot that sounds any notes it passes over, provided the mouse button is down at the time. Equally easily we can set the mouse to control the location of the root of a diad, triad, seventh or ninth chord. As we move the root around, the quality of the chord will change appropriately for the position of the root in the scale. There will be a clear visual metaphor for this constraint, because the shape of the chord will appear to change to fit the physical constraint of the key window. The other mouse can be assigned to move the key window. Moving this mouse corresponds to changing key. If, for example we modulate by moving the window while holding a chord root constant, the chord quality may change. Once again there will be a clear visual metaphor for what is happening since the shape of the chord will appear to be ‘squeezed’ to fit the new position of the key window. Note that the proposed environment is linked to a synthesizer and that everything we have described can be heard.

3.2.4 Manipulating and representing ‘Cycles of Fifths’
Moving onto wider chord vocations, progressions like II V I, VI VII I, III VI II V I etc. correspond to straight
lines vertically downward in 2D harmony space with the tonal centre as their target (Fig. 5). We refer to straight line motions in 2D harmony space to tonal goals as harmonic trajectories. In particular, if we begin a trajectory vertically downwards in a cycle of fifths from I or IV, it turns out there are two classes of trajectory that we could make. In one case (tonal cycle of fifths) we use only notes in the key—physically this is a straight line that bends or jumps where necessary —to remain in the key window (Fig 5b and 5c excluding shaded points). In the other case (non-key cycle of fifths) the root moves unrestrictively in a straight line down the perfect fifth axis, necessarily cutting across areas not in the key window (Fig 5a shaded points). In the proposed direct manipulation environment we could sketch a tonal cycle of fifths by selecting an option that constrained the root to remain within the key window together with a second option causing the chord quality to be dynamically adjusted according to the position of the root relative to the window. Having done this, if we made a vertical straight line gesture with the mouse to play the cycle of fifths, the size of the root step could be seen and heard adjusting at one point to stay in key as the root came to the bottom edge of the key window (Fig 5b or c), and the chord quality could be seen and heard flexing to fit within the key window (Fig 5 and 6). This would work even if there were modulations (movements of the key window) mid-chord sequence. To play a real cycle of fifths, we would simply switch off the options that constrained root position and chord quality. The harmony of wide areas of Western tonal music is dominated by harmonic trajectories of chords and keys moving down the dominant axis. (See Piant (84) for a version of this thesis in more conventional language focusing on Bach, Schubert and Mozart). If we reverse the direction of the arrow and consider chord sequences moving vertically upwards, we

4 In deliberate imitation of Levin's (1985) use of the term trajectory to refer to the distinct but related phenomenon of melodic trajectory.

5 e.g. if we are in the key of C, the root moves in a diminished fifth from F to B.

6 For chords outside the key window, simple harmonic considerations cannot derive the default chord quality. Different pieces and different dialects use different solutions depending on the musical purpose involved.

7 Other selection options could include manually overriding the default chord quality at any time, holding it constant or putting it under program control.

have what might be called extended modal chord sequences and cadences. This kind of chord sequence is occasionally used in popular dialects as in, for example: "Hey Joe" (popular arr. Jim Hendrix) as discussed by Szendier (83).

3.3.3 Manipulating chromatic and scalar sequences

Scallic sequences (i.e. movement up and down the diatonic scale) can be represented as diagonal trajectories constrained to remain within the key windows (Fig 6). So for example, for the chord sequences I II III IV, I VII II I etc. can be represented as diagonal trajectories or diagonal oscillations. Scalar root movement occurs frequently in tonal music in short sequences and is often used in longer sequences in modal music. If the constraint is removed, that the root must stay within the key window, scallic sequences become chromatic sequences (Fig 7). Chromatic chord succession are widely used in some dialects of modal music, particularly in jazz dialects. (Footnote 6 applies here too).

Fig 5 Cycles of fifths

4 Analyzing real music in 2D harmony space

So far we have shown that a 2-D note description of Longuet-Higgins space can provide economical descriptions of aspects of the statics and dynamics of harmony. Let us now turn to the harmonic successions of a real piece of music. Fig 8 gives the chord sequence of the jazz

This kind of analysis is different from and simpler than, for example Longuet-Higgins' analysis of Schubert's

1987 ICMC Proceedings
standard: "All the things you are," the rest of limitations
of space we will only consider the first eight bars, but fig 8
gives a harmonic space trace of the whole chord sequence,
and the analysis could easily be continued. For clarity,
only the root of each chord is indicated, and chord
alternation is indicated by omission.

4.4 Example analysis

From an analytic point of view, the song breaks into a
small number of recognizable harmonic plans (we only
have space to deal with the first one). In the first eight
bars, the sequence begins on a VI chord and makes a
dominant-powered \(^5\) trajectory towards the tonal centre
(from what we know at this stage the goal being presumably the major I, through it could be the relative
minor VI). But the sequence plunges off past I at the
fourth bar onto IV at the fifth bar, the song at this point
is in danger of breaking a standard convention for the
dialect. In jazz 'standard' chases are a convention that we
normally expect to reach a tonal goal when we hit the
major metric boundary of the end of each line (normally
eight bars). It is as though we were shooting for a tonal
goal but overshoot it. The solution used becomes in effect
the harmonic motif of the whole piece - we have the
goalpost. This is achieved by a timely transient\(^6\),\(^7\) allowing the progression to reach the tonal
goal in the nick of time.\(^8\) In the direct manipulation
environment, the 'moving goalpost' metaphor is
demonstrated literally. The environment would physically
show (fig 8) the 'goalpost' in the shape of the key window
being moved sideways so that the tonal cycle of fifths
drops into the goal or tonal centre at the audible metric
boundary. The broad outlines of this analysis should be
immediately comprehensible to a novice with access to
the direct manipulation tools being discussed.

It is important to note that a visual formalism is not
being proposed as a substitute for listening. It is being
suggested that an animated implementation of the
formalism linked to a sounding instrument may allow
novices without instrumental skills to gain experience
\(^9\) of controlling and analyzing such sequences without
knowledge of standard theory and terminology. But such
an environment might be also be a good place to learn
music theory if the novice desired.

5 Educational use

The direct manipulation design considerations so far
discussed could be the basis of a family of environments
for analysis, modification, playback and sketching of
harmonic sequences as well as an aid to learning theory.
As a sketching device, multiple mice could control, for
example, independent melody, bass and accompaniment
voices. The system could permit dynamic association of
varied rhythmic figures, Alberti patterns and figuration
with given voices. Analysis could be carried out at low or
high level. Tonal centres and roots could have been
already identified and the interface used to help illuminate
the higher level harmonic structure of a piece as in fig 8.
Alternatively the student could use a version of the
interface as an aid to help identify tonal centres, roots,
modulations and perform the graphic equivalent of
traditional harmonic analysis. Modification involves
taking an existing piece and manually altering the
animated graphic trace to discover where small changes
make big changes to the musical sense and vice versa. 2D
harmony space tools could be used as valuable aids for
studying practically any theoretical aspect of tonal
harmony (e.g. the relationship between modal harmony
and tonal harmony, aspects of the evolution of major/minor
tonal centres etc.). The environment could automatically convert 2D harmony space displays into
Common Music Notation and vice versa to assist this.

6 Problems and partial solutions

The ideas described above give rise to a number of issues

\(^{6}\) Pratt (84): phrase.

\(^{7}\) \(^{5}\) Pratt (84): phrase.

\(^{8}\) It is common in this dialect where all chords are
routinely played as sevenths to emphasise arrival at the
tonic (with restless chord quality major seventh) by
repeating it as a more stable major \(\text{II}\).

Fig 6 and 7: scalar and chromatic progressions

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186

1987 ICMI Proceedings
"All the things you are" chord sequence in 12-tone 2D Harmony space

hry 3-5
Starting key I

V

hry 9-13
Modulates up a minor third in bar 9

VII

hry 16-13
Modulates up major third in bar 14

hry 16-20

hry 21-24
Modulates down a minor third in bar 21

hry 24-28
Modulates up a major 9th in bar 24

hry 28-36

(Chord sequence quoted from Meliges (1956), "All the things you are," arr. for Kauai Players,
Orch. Arr. by R. MyronHiatt, arr. for solo piano by R. Hiatt, Harmonia Co.

(1) VI / II / V / I / II / V
(2) V7 / II / V / I / II / V
(3) V7 / II / V / I / II / V
(4) V7 / II / V / I / II / V
(5) V7 / II / V / I / II / V

See appendix for explanation of chord symbol notation

Fig 8

1987 ICMC Proceedings 187
which we can only outline here. These issues are all addressed in the research in progress of which this work forms part. The first problem is to understand a chord sequence you usually need to know about its metrical context (as in the analysis above). A graphic notation has been devised in order to address this problem.

The second problem is that in a practical system, some means of controlling and displaying inversions and pitch register is needed. Some partial solutions have been devised. Thirdly, we have so far emphasised vertical aspects (in the traditional sense) at the expense of linear aspects of harmony. To a large extent this is an inherent limitation of 2D harmony space, but contrasting display strategies have been devised with partial success in special cases to selectively emphasise linear or chordal aspects of harmonic movement.

There is a potentially far more serious problem that fortunately has a satisfactory solution. The problem is that in a practical interface whose notes are not artificially constrained to fall within one octave, the diagonal (chromatic lefthand) axis will act as a major seventh axis. Fortunately this problem can be addressed by using Balzano's representation. A place of Longuet-Higgins' but bringing across the idea of a movable key window, Balzano's theory leads to a trac array similar to the 12-note version of Longuet-Higgins but with axes of major third and major tone. One diagonal axis turns out to be the cycle of fifths and the other diagonal axis a true chromatic axis. It turns out that the Balzano representation works satisfactorily both theoretically and practically for the kind of interfaces we are discussing.

Unfortunately space limitations do not permit us to discuss this class of interfaces and the interesting issues that emerge comparing the suitability of the two kinds of environment for different tasks.

7. New developments

2D harmony space is perhaps best viewed not as one tool but as a family of tools. Other members of the family investigated include a rubber-hand "MacDraw-like" version of the environment and a "Turtle Logo-like" programming language to control "harmonic turtles" in 2D harmony space. From an Artificial Intelligence and Education point of view, the 2D harmony space family of environments can be viewed as examples of what are known as discovery-learning environments or microworlds. In order to tackle the problem common to such environments (Eisen-Cook, 84) of providing guidance tailored to individuals, 2D harmony space is being linked to an intelligent knowledge-based tutor for music composition under design as discussed in Holland (87). The linked system will then become a guided discovery learning environment for aspects of music composition in a variety of idioms.

8. Two further perspectives

One useful perspective can be provided by an analogy between Turtle Logo which embodies the mathematically pervasive 20th century concept of the function and harmony space. A 2D harmony interface would embody a similarly powerful and appropriate representation for relationships in tonal harmony.

A second perspective is the Xerox Star/Macintosh human computer interface analogy. Design aims for the human-machine interfaces of these machines included consistency, simplicity, reduction of short-term memory load and exploitation of existing knowledge. A 2D harmony space tool goes some way towards meeting these aims for a harmony sketcher, since harmonic constraints and the relationships between keys are visibly and physically externalised consistently to a higher degree than in the case of stringed instruments, keyboard instruments and common music notation.

9. Implementation

An early partial prototype of harmony space was implemented in Common Lisp using the interface design tool Dialogic on an Apollo Domain workstation controlling a Yamaha TX816 synthesizer via a Hinton MIDD R3232 to MIDI converter in Jan 1987.

Conclusions

Longuet-Higgins' (1982) and Balzano's (1980) theories are the focus of much current investigation by cognitive psychologists of music, but they also offer considerable potential in music education and musician-machine interface design. We have discussed how a family of direct manipulation tools based on the theories can be designed to allow novices to modify, sketch and analyse harmonic sequences simply and clearly by moving two-dimensional patterns representing notes, chords and key areas on a computer screen linked to a synthesizer. Such interfaces should enable novices to sketch, analyse and
experiment productively with harmony in ways that might normally be barred to them because of lack of theoretical knowledge or instrumental skill. The report from which this paper stems (Holland 66) appears to be the first discussion of educational use of Longuet-Higgins' theory, and its use for controlling as well as representing music.

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References


Appendix: Chord symbol conventions

Roman numerals representing scale tone triads or sevenths I II III IV V etc. are written in capitals, irrespective of major or minor quality. Roman numerals represent triads of the quality normally associated with the degree of the tonality (or modality) prevailing. We call this quality the "default" quality. In the jazz example, Roman numerals indicate scale-tone sevenths rather than triads. The following post-fix symbols are used to annotate Roman chord symbols to override the "default" quality as follows: x - dominant, ø - diminished, # - half diminished, m - minor, M - major. The following post-fix convention is used to alter indicated degrees of the scale: "#5" means default chord quality but with sharpened 3rd, "#7" means default chord quality but with sharpened 7th etc. The following post-fix convention is used to add notes to chords e.g. "+6" means default chord quality with added scale-tone sixth 6th. The prefixes # and b move all notes of the otherwise indicated chord a semitone up or down.

1987 ICME Proceedings 189