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 unexplored, in music education and musicians-machine interface design. Longuet-Higgins and Balzano start from quite different bases, one from the overtone series and the other from mathematical group theory but the two theories lead to closely related two-dimensional representations of harmonic structures and relationships. The paper discusses the design of direct manipulation tools based on a version of Longuet-Higgins’ theory to allow novices to modify, sketch and analyze 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 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 musical 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 any music in any genre.) The research exploits two recent cognitive theories of harmony (Longuet-Higgins, 1962) and (Balzano, 1980) which give rise to principled and elegant representations for basic harmonic relationships and harmonic movement. Because of space limitations we will concentrate exclusively on interfaces 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 axis1 (Fig. 1). (Readers not interested in the reasons for this could skip the rest of this section.) Longuest-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 (Meadows 72). Given this premise, 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 geometrically by laying out notes in a three dimensional grid with notes ascending in octaves, perfect thirds and major fifths along the three axes. The note dimension is discussed in most discussions on grounds of octave equivalence and of practical convenience for focusing on the other two dimensions2 (Fig 1). The theory is of great interest to cognitive psychologists of music (Shiboda 87), (Howell, Cross and West, 85)

1 In Longuet-Higgins’ presentations of the theory, and in all discussion of its 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 usage. 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 areas coincide with Schoenberg’s (54) dominant & subdominant regions though of course the x-axes and the overall meaning of the respective diagrams differ. Thirdly the V-I movement that dominates Western tonal harmony as it forms many different levels becomes aligned with gravity in a metaphor useful to novices. To any readers who find this convention confusing, I apologize.

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However, for the purposes of educating novices in the elementary facts of total harmony we map Languet-Higgins space onto the twelve note vocabulary of a fixed-instrument result in what we might call '12-note two-dimensional Languet-Higgins harmony space or 2D harmony space for short. Consequently we lose the double sharps & double flats of fig. 1, and the space now repeats exactly in all directions (fig 2). Notes with the same name really are the same note in this space. In fact a little thought will show that the space is in fact a torus, which we have unfolded and repeated like a wallpaper pattern. One result of this is that instead of a single key window we have a repeating key window (fig. 2).

3.1 Representing the 'Statics' of harmony
3.1.1 Representing key areas and modulation
In diagrams such as Fig 1 all of the notes of the diatonic scale are "chopped" 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 a being free to slide around over the fixed grid of notes and deform the note grid as we do, at any one time we will see that moving the window vertically upwards or downwards, for example, corresponds to modulation 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 names with the same name in different keys (Standard (72) calls these 'homonyms'). This is an extension, motivated by Languet-Higgins' theory, of the standard tonal distinction that C double sharp, for example, is not the same name as D. (Schoenfeld calls such pairs "homononyms").

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Notes also that we have a clear spatial metaphor for the centrality of the tonic - the tonic triad is literally the center of the three major triads of any major key. We can make similar observations for the minor triads. Minor triads correspond to minor keys. 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. 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 some 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. 6 for the representation of scale tone seventha.

![Diagram showing triads in C major](image)

- **Major triads** in C major: I, IV, and V
- **Minor triads** in C major: II, III, and VI
- **Diminished chord** in C major: VII

Fig. 5 Triads in C major

### 3.2 Representing the 'Dynamics' of harmony

#### 3.2.1 Single 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 3). 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.

![Diagram showing scale tones in C major](image)

- **Scale tone major** in C major: I and IV
- **Scale tone minor** in C major: II, III, and VI
- **Dominant seventh** in C major: V
- **Diminished chord** in C major: VII

Fig. 4 Scale tone 7ths in C major

#### 3.2.2 Manipulating and representing Cycles of Fifths

Moving onto wider chord vocabularies, progressions like II V I, V I 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 2 to remain in the
key window (Fig 5b and 5c excluding shaded points). In the
other case (tonal cycle of fifths) the root moves unerringly in a straight line down the perfect
fifth axis, seamlessly cutting across areas not in the key
window (Fig 5c 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 would 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 4). This would work even if
there were modulations (movements of the key window)
and 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 (Pest 84) for a version of this thesis in more
conventional language, focussing 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 Levitin'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 determine the default chord quality.
Different pieces and different dialects use different
solutions depending on the musical purpose involved.
7 Other selectable options could include manually
adjusting the default chord quality at any time, holding
it constant or putting it under program control.

have what might be called extended played sequences and
cadences. This kind of chord sequence is occasionally used
in popular dialects as in, for example: "Hey Joe" (popular
an. Jimi Hendrix) as discussed by Stedman (83). 2.3.3 Manipulating rhythmic and scalar sequences

Scalar 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 chord sequences I II III IV V VI VII
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, scalar
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).

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4 Analyzing real music in 2D harmony space
So far we have shown that a 12-note depiction 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

5 This kind of analysis is different from and simpler
than, for example Longuet-Higgins' analysis of Schubert.
of controlling and analyzing such sequences without knowledge of classical theory and terminology. But such an environment would be also 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 arpeggiation 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 its annotated 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.

Fig. 6 and 7: scalar and choronic progressions
The ideas described so far give rise to a number of issues

standard: "All the things you are". But since all limitations of space we will only consider the T hem 8 bases, 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 alteration is indicated by overscoring.

4.4 Example analysis
From an analytic point of view, the song breaks into a small number of recognizable harmonic plans (we only know space to deal with the first one). In the first eight bars, the sequence begins on a VI chord and makes a dominant-tonic third-seventh (the bass being presumably the major 1, though it could be the relative minor VI). But the sequence plunges on 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 diatonic. In jazz "standards" showcase a convention that we normally expect to reach a tonal goal when we hit the major/melodic boundary at 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 "mistake" of the whole piece - we have the goalpost. This is achieved by a timely transient 

9Pratt (84): phrase.

10It is common in this dialect where all chords are routinely played as sevenths to emphasize arrival at the tonic (with restless chord quality major/seventh) by repeating it as a more stable major ninth.
"All the things you are" chord sequence in 12-tone 2D Harmony space

Chord sequence derived from Merleau (1978). "All the things you are" from "Early Movements" (1978). 

Fig 8

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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 to help 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 emphasized 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 emphasize 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 not form a major seventh axis. Fortunately this problem can be addressed by using Balzano's representation in place of Longuet-Higgins' but bringing across the idea of a movable key window. Balzano's theory lends to a nice array similar to the 12-note version of Longuet-Higgins but with axes of major third and major third. 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.

New developments.

2D harmony space is perhaps best viewed not as one tool but a family of tools. Other members of the family investigated include a rubber-band "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 (Elson-Cook, 84) of providing guidance tailored to individual, 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 Xenos 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 as a harmony sketcher, since harmonic constraints and the relationships between keys are visually and physically externalized consistently to a higher degree than in the case of stringed instruments, keyboard instruments and common music notation.


An early partial prototype of harmony space was implemented in Common Lisp using the interface design tool Dialog© on an Apollo Domain workstation controlling a Yamaha TX816 synthesizer via a Hinton MIDIC R322 to MIDI converter in Jan 87.

Conclusion.

Longuet-Higgins (1982) and Balzano's (1980) theories do focus of 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 notions 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 86) 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 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 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, o - 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’s semitones up or down.

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