

A Concept of Harmonic Identity

Nowhere in music theory or harmony texts is the concept of harmonic identity defined. Try looking it up under any name. In addition to its lack of definition, the concept itself is nowhere to be found. It is vital for the identification of intervals, scales, and chords in relation to their harmonic structure. The major scale, for example must have a harmonic identity *as* a major scale. It contains a major 3rd, major 6th, and the major 7th, in contrast to its minor counterpart that contains a minor 3rd, minor 6th, and minor 7th.

Both the major and minor scale are normal, i.e. in the context of their characteristic intervals. The harmonic and melodic forms of the minor scale contain alterations, therefore are altered scales. The harmonic form of the minor scale contains a minor 3rd, and a minor 6th, while the 7th is a major 7th. The melodic form of the minor scale contains only the minor 3rd while both the 6th and 7th degrees are major. These intervals describe their identity. Identities are rarely understood, let alone heard.

The following is from the Mozart sonata K545 in C major, 9th and 10th measures. The scale starts on the super-tonic, (D). One would expect, in accordance with theory texts, that the scale will be Dorian; 2-2 of 'C' major. It is a minor scale however, but not Dorian. The 'normal' minor scale is identified by the minor 3rd, 6th, and 7th. This scale is not that. Examining it, we find a minor scale made up of a minor 3rd 'F', a major 6th 'B', and a major 7th 'C#', intervals characteristic of the melodic form of the minor scale. It is 'relative' to no other scale. It is itself without reference to its function on the super-tonic.¹

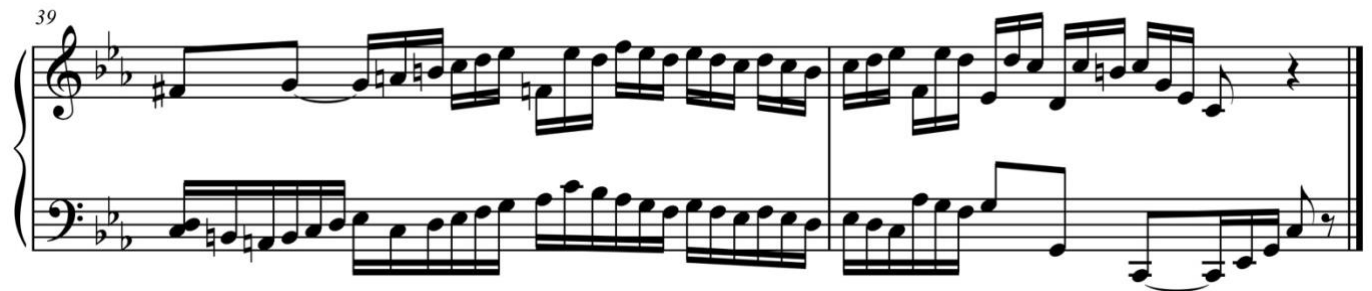


Measure 31 is in the key of 'G' minor. The scale contains a minor 3rd, major 6th, and major 7th, the characteristic intervals of the melodic minor scale, on the tonic of the key. Theory texts describe the melodic minor scale as melodic minor ascending and normal minor descending, but the descending minor scale in this measure is not a 'normal' minor scale. Did Mozart make a mistake? Did he forget to place a flat before 'E' making it a minor 6th, characteristic of the 'normal' minor scale that theorists describe? The major scale on 'A' in the following measure cannot be justified with theoretical 'principles'. Even if we characterize 'A' as being dominant of the following 'D' minor, a major scale on the dominant? Shouldn't it be 'Mixolydian' with a minor 7th? Even the following scale in the treble has no characteristic intervals of a dominant scale. It appears as a 'D' harmonic minor scale with the characteristic interval of an augmented 2nd, 'C#-Bb'.

¹ The minor scale however, 'D' minor in this case, is a function of the 'D' major 'mother' scale from which it derives its intervals, normal and altered. See, 'Minor Scales' by the author.



The following is taken from the final measures of the JS Bach Fantasy in F minor. Both the treble and bass scales contain major 6ths and major 7ths ascending and descending. These intervals are characteristic of the melodic form of the minor scale. But the melodic minor scale should be ‘normal’ descending, according to theory texts. Did Bach not understand this?



Scales have identities that are rarely ‘relative’ to another scale or key. It just doesn’t work that way. The only valid time there is ‘relativity’ is in the key signatures themselves, where a minor key is ‘relative’ to a major key since the two share the same signature. But don’t expect it with scales.

Chopin was regarded by his peers as a ‘master’ before he left his teen years. Every note has meaning. Carelessness was not part of his creative output. With this in mind, there are so many instances in his compositions that do not agree with theoretical principles. Why must the melodic minor scale contain the major 6th and major 7th ascending, but the normal minor 6th and minor 7th descending? Nobody seems to know. But that’s how those scales are practiced. The Dorian mode is 2-2 of the major scale according to theory texts. It rarely is in a musical composition.

Types of cadences are illustrated in theory texts, but one would be hard pressed to find one in a work of Bach or Beethoven, for example. In any case what is their significances? Composers do not end their phrases in the manner described in theory texts. Augmented sixths according to theory texts resolve upwards while minor sevenths resolve downward. But composers often do the opposite. So, what is the significance of these intervals? Or, does it really matter? A dominant spelled with a minor seventh is the same as a dominant spelled with an augmented sixth.

‘A rose by any other name is still a rose’.

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