hey, welcome to 12tone! as you might imagine, I get a lot of questions about music, and one of the most common is people asking me to explain how non-functional harmony works. it's a great question, but it's really hard to answer, because non-functional harmony isn't really a thing. ok, that's a pretty inflammatory claim for the theorist crowd, but before I get around to defending it, let's take a look at the other side of the coin: functional harmony.

we talk about this a lot, but to briefly recap, functional harmony is the idea that different chords in a key have different, predefined jobs to do. these fall into three main categories: you have tonic function chords, which provide a sense of rest, subdominant chords that introduce instability, and then dominant function chords that are even more unstable, but they're also directional, pointing back to the nice, restful tonic chords. traditional functional harmony works by just cycling through these three groups: we start with tonic, venture out with subdominant, and then we play a dominant chord to point us home and start all over. this creates the fairly predictable cycle of tension and release that defines functional harmony.

not all functional music is that simple, though: we've been using this system for hundreds of years, and the structures we've built have gotten pretty advanced. for instance, there's the plagal cadence (bang) where the IV chord, which is subdominant, resolves directly to the I without going through the dominant. and then there's things like secondary dominants, tritone substitutions, and so on, but no matter how complex it gets, all functional music is built on the same set of assumptions about how harmony is supposed to behave. functional harmony is a specific model that comes with its own rules, guidelines, and ideas.

but non-functional harmony… isn't. it's just any harmony that isn't functional. like, here's a piece I generated completely randomly: (bang) and it's pretty much impossible to analyze functionally. trust me, I've tried. so clearly non-functional harmony exists, but when I say it's not a thing, what I mean is this: it's not a model. it doesn't work in any specific way. there's no inherent rhyme or reason to it, no underlying structure that connects all non-functional pieces. if you tell me a song is non-functional, you've told me something about what it's not, but almost nothing about what it *is*.

that's not to say, though, that non-functional pieces have no structure. different composers and different movements have developed their own models for thinking about harmony in completely new, unique ways. one of the most widespread of these is what I'd call Transformational Harmony, where the relationships between chords are defined by a sort of harmonic closeness, instead of being based on something like a key center.

this sort of music is perhaps best modeled by a school called Neo-Riemannian Theory. in it, each major triad is connected to three different minor triads and vice versa, and we can move through those connections with three specific operations. the first is the Parallel Transformation, which is where we just switch chord qualities, like moving from E major to E minor. second is the Relative Transformation, where we drop down to the VI chord, like E major to C# minor. and then there's the Leading Tone Transformation, where we go up to the III chord, like E major to

G# minor. each of these minor chords is only one note different from our E major triad, so it seems like a pretty good measure of closeness. they also work in reverse: if we apply a Leading Tone Transformation to G# minor, we get back to E major.

from there, we can see how close two chords are by seeing how many transformations it takes to get from one to the other. the movement from E to B only takes two, so they're pretty smooth, whereas E to Bb takes four and feels much less connected. pieces that use this kind of harmony tend to either try to use only nearby chords to get a very smooth sound (bang) or only distant chords to create a jagged, disorienting texture. (bang) either way, though, it's built on the same principles.

this approach gives us some exciting new toys to play with. traditionally, any given major chord has two other major chord pals: its IV chord and its V chord. and Neo-Riemannian theory includes that: both those movements take only two transformations. but it also brings four more chords that are equally close: the chromatic mediants. these are chords whose roots are a third apart, but they share the same chord quality, so like E major and C# major. you'd never see them in a key together, but in a very real sense they're just as close as the IV and V chords.

another way to relate chords is what I'll call Proximate Harmony, where instead of caring about how close chords are harmonically, we care about how close they are physically. you can hear a good example of this in Phantom of the Opera: (bang) now, according to our Neo-Riemannian rules, these chords are all really far away, and playing through them so fast should sound really confusing, but it doesn't because the chords are all right next to each other. they're just dropping a half-step at a time, and it sounds really smooth. of course, it helps in this case that the first and last chords, D minor and Bb major, are also pretty close harmonically, but even without that you can get a pretty good progression out of just planing, or moving a chord shape up and down a little bit at a time.

yet another approach is what I'd call Two-Chord Harmony, where you just pick any two chords and move back and forth between them forever. chromatic mediants are a good tool for this, but really, any two chords will work because eventually, no matter how far apart they are, that repetition will create a structure in your listener's mind as they learn to predict the movement. I'm not gonna go too far into this one, though, 'cause 8-Bit Music Theory already did in their excellent video on non-functional harmony, which I've linked in the description.

with all these techniques, one thing you have to keep in mind is your harmonic rhythm, or the speed at which you change chords. the faster you move through a progression the more connected all the chords will sound, which means you'll need to be careful that none of them are too far away from any of the others. if you go slow enough, though, you can break those connections down and focus just on the individual transitions, allowing you to create much more distant movements over the same number of chords.

but not all non-functional harmony lacks a key center. the term "modal harmony" gets used for a couple different things depending on context, but here I'm talking about progressions designed to accent the unique characteristics of the scale as a whole, rather than following any specific pattern of behavior. for example, the Dorian mode is like the minor scale with a raised sixth degree, (bang) which leads to three important harmonic changes: the II chord becomes minor instead of diminished, making it smoother, the IV chord is major instead of minor, making it brighter, and the VI chord is diminished instead of major which… honestly makes it pretty hard to use, but a progression that emphasizes the other two chords (bang) creates a strong sense of Dorian without being particularly functional.

and that's just the tip of the iceberg. there's so many different theories about harmony out there, and the term "non-functional" describes all but one of them. it even applies to things like non-tertian chords, which is a completely different model for chord construction where instead of building them in stacks of thirds (bang) we use other intervals, like stacks of fourths (bangs), fifths (bang), or seconds. (bang) while this isn't usually what people mean when they say "non-functional harmony", I'd argue that it still counts, and it comes with plenty of its own theories for how it's supposed to work. plus, if we look beyond Western harmony, most musical traditions in the world don't follow the functional model at all. each of those styles has its own structures, and most of them look very different from our European ideas.

of course, none of this is to say that the concept of non-functional harmony is useless. functional harmony is such a huge part of Western music, and Western music has had such a huge *ahem* influence on many different cultures around the world, so there's definitely value in recognizing when a piece of music isn't playing by its rules. but much like darkness isn't really a color, non-functional harmony isn't any particular model, theory, system, or structure. it doesn't have rules, guidelines, or even suggestions. it just isn't functional. what you do with it beyond that is up to you.

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