

Harmony: Musical Depth

“We have learned to express the more delicate nuances of feeling by penetrating more deeply into the mysteries of harmony.”

—Robert Schumann

To the linear movement of the melody, harmony adds another dimension: depth. **Harmony** is the simultaneous combination of sounds. It can be compared to the concept of perspective in artworks (see p. 15). Not all musics of the world rely on harmony, but it is central to most Western styles.

KEY POINTS

- **Harmony** describes the vertical aspects of music: how notes (pitches) sound together.
- A **chord** is the simultaneous sounding of three or more pitches; chords are built from a particular **scale**, or sequence of pitches.
- The most common chord in Western music is a **triad**, three alternate pitches of a scale.
- Most Western music is based on **major** or **minor scales**, from which melody and harmony are derived.
- The **tonic** is the central pitch around which a melody and its harmonies are built; this principle of organization is called **tonality**.
- **Dissonance** is created by an unstable, or discordant, combination of pitches. **Consonance** occurs with a resolution of dissonance, producing a stable or restful sound.

Harmony determines the relationships of intervals and chords. Intervals, the distance between any two notes, can occur successively or simultaneously. When three or more notes are sounded together, a **chord** is produced. Harmony describes a piece's chords and the progression from one chord to the next. It is the progression of harmony in a musical work that creates a feeling of order and unity.

The intervals from which chords and melodies are built are chosen from a particular collection of pitches arranged in ascending or descending order known as a **scale**. To the notes of the scale we assign syllables, *do-re-mi-fa-sol-la-ti-do*, or numbers, 1-2-3-4-5-6-7-8. An interval spanning eight notes is called an **octave**.

<i>do</i>	<i>re</i>	<i>mi</i>	<i>fa</i>	<i>sol</i>	<i>la</i>	<i>ti</i>	<i>do</i>
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
┌───┐							
octave							

The most common chord in Western music, a particular combination of three pitches, is known as a **triad**. Such a chord may be built on any note of the scale by combining every other note. For example, a triad built on the first pitch of a scale consists of the first, third, and fifth pitches of that scale (*do-mi-sol*); on the second pitch, steps 2-4-6 (*re-fa-la*); and so on. The triad is a basic formation in most music we know. In the example opposite, the melody of *Camptown Races* is harmonized with triads. You can see at a glance how melody is the horizontal aspect of music, while harmony, comprising blocks of notes (the chords), constitutes the vertical. Melody and harmony do not function independently of one another. On the contrary, the melody suggests the harmony that goes with it, and each constantly influences the other.

THE ORGANIZATION OF HARMONY

In all music, regardless of the style, certain notes assume greater importance than others. In most Western music, the first note of the scale, *do*, is considered the **tonic** and serves as a home base around which the others revolve and to which they ultimately gravitate. We observed this principle at work earlier with *Amazing Grace* (p. 10): the tune does not reach a final cadence, or stopping point, on the tonic note until its last phrase. It is this sense of a home base that helps us recognize when a piece of music ends.

The principle of organization around a central note, the tonic, is called **tonality**. The scale chosen as the basis of a piece determines the identity of the tonic and the key of the piece. Two different types of scales predominate in Western music written between about 1650 and 1900: major and minor. Each scale has a distinct sound because of its unique combination of intervals, as we will see in [Chapter 4](#).





Harmony lends a sense of depth to music, as perspective does in this photograph, by **Fernand Ivaldi**, of a view down a tree-lined canal in France.

CONSONANCE AND DISSONANCE

The movement of harmony toward resolution is the dynamic force in Western music. As music moves in time, we feel moments of tension and release. The tension results from **dissonance**, a combination of notes that sounds unstable, sometimes harsh, and in need of resolution. Dissonance introduces conflict into music in the same way that suspense creates tension in drama. Dissonance resolves in **consonance**, an agreeable-sounding combination of notes that provides a sense of relaxation and fulfillment. Each complements the other, and each is a necessary part of the artistic whole.

Example of Harmony

 *Camptown Races* (Stephen Foster)

 *Camptown Races* (Stephen Foster)

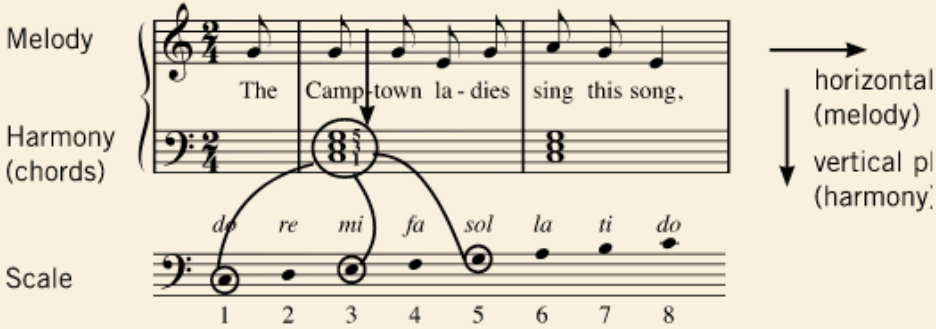
Melody

Harmony (chords)

Scale

horizontal (melody)

vertical pl (harmony)



The image displays a musical score for 'Camptown Races' in 2/4 time. It consists of three staves: Melody (treble clef), Harmony (bass clef), and Scale (bass clef). The melody is 'The Camp-town la-dies sing this song,' with notes corresponding to the scale. The harmony shows a chord progression, with a specific chord circled and labeled '8 5 1'. The scale is labeled with solfège syllables: do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, ti, do. A legend on the right indicates that horizontal arrows represent melody and vertical arrows represent harmony. A progress bar is located at the bottom of the example.



Just as dissonance provides tension in music, this image of global researchers sunbathing on the edge of a frozen fjord in the Arctic to emphasize the dramatic rate of global warming is discordant to the eye.

Harmony appeared much later historically (around 900) than melody, and its development took place largely in Western music. In many Asian cultures, harmony is relatively simple, consisting of a single sustained pitch, called a **drone**, against which melodic and rhythmic complexities unfold. This harmonic principle also occurs in some European folk music, where, for example, a bagpipe might play one or more accompanying drones to a lively dance tune.

Our system of harmony has advanced steadily over the past millennium, continually responding to new needs. Composers have tested the rules, changing our notion of what sounds consonant, as they have experimented with innovative sounds and procedures. Yet their goal remains the same: to impose order on sound, organizing the pitches so that we perceive a unified idea.