

Some Reharmonization Techniques for Popular Music: Melodic Skeletons, the Melodic-Harmonic Divorce, and Meta-Schemas

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INTRODUCTION

[NEXT] If we subscribe to Bloom's revised Taxonomy, our peak educational objective is to have students create. [NEXT] If we want our students to understand harmony, that means getting students to write their own chord progressions. [NEXT] Melody harmonization has become a common way to facilitate this, as exemplified by modern theory workbooks. But as these workbooks are geared primarily towards classical music, melody harmonization is usually presented in a chorale style, where each melodic note receives its own chord and chords change every beat. This is much different than popular music, where chords typically change only once per measure and support multiple melodic notes. [NEXT] In addition, recent monographs have shown how the harmonic language of popular music differs in many ways from that of classical music and even jazz. Melody harmonization in popular music thus presumably involves its own distinctive approach.

[NEXT] Surveying existing textbooks on popular music, though, it is difficult to find much advice on how to approach melody harmonization. Sometimes, a book primarily covers how to label chords, with little to no discussion of how these chords relate. Other times, a book focuses more on the analysis of popular music than compositional tasks. And other times, a book just drops the student into the deep end too quickly, asking them to "rewrite the hits" without much guidance on how to do so.

As a remedy, I present in this paper a few strategies for melody harmonization in popular music. [NEXT] Specifically, I discuss three techniques, each of which addresses a notable characteristic of popular music: 1) the use of a “melodic skeleton” to avoid the rhythmic complexity of a typical pop melody; 2) the application of the melodic-harmonic divorce to address the lack of traditional coordination between melody and harmony, and 3) the use of meta-schemas to give long-range directionality in the absence of traditional chord progression norms. [NEXT] I should clarify that I will be discussing RE-harmonization, since I typically ask students to add new chords to melodies from well-known, commercially-released songs. In particular, I use recordings of isolated vocal tracks (which are fairly easy to find on the internet) so as to have students focus on the reharmonization task itself and allow those with weaker singing skills to fully participate.

MELODIC SKELETONS

[NEXT] Let us begin with “Hey Jude” by the Beatles. In order to reharmonize this song, we might feel the need to transcribe the melody in full detail. But there is a more efficient approach, which is to create only a simplified version of the melody—what I call a “melodic skeleton.” [NEXT] Here is a melodic skeleton for the first eight bars of “Hey Jude,” which reduces the melody to one or two scale degrees per measure. (One cell equals one bar.)

Creating a melodic skeleton is similar to Schenkerian analysis—where non-essential tones are removed to reveal the underlying structure—as typically taught to graduate music students. But it doesn’t take a graduate degree in

music to make a melodic reduction. The melodic skeleton simply identifies—in a somewhat subjective way—the most important melodic notes for each bar. Typically, the most important notes are those that are held for longer or that occur on strong beats or that are chord tones in the original harmonization. [NEXT] In “Hey Jude,” for example, all the notes of my melodic skeleton are chord tones. (The dominant-seventh-sus4 chord in the third bar is a common sonority in popular music, by the way.) Listening to the original song, I hope you find my melodic skeleton fairly intuitive. [NEXT]

Because the melodic skeleton has only one or two notes per bar, the reharmonization task becomes greatly simplified. [NEXT] Here is one possible reharmonization. When creating this reharmonization, I noticed that the first four bars of the melody can be conceptualized as a double-neighbor figure around scale-degree 3, so I mirrored this pattern with similar motion in the bass. In the last four bars, I introduced some minor chords for variety, and I reintroduced the dominant-seventh-sus4 chord before the final tonic. Here is what this reharmonization sounds like. [NEXT]

In practice, of course, reharmonization is inherently trial-and-error. As such, it can be a very interactive and engaging use of class time to have students suggest different options based on the melodic skeleton and then immediately try them out, discussing afterwards what did and did not work and why. Some proposed chords might clash with the notes that were not included in our melodic skeleton. But it can be surprising how often a new chord will sound fine, even when notes of the melody do not technically belong to this new chord. This brings us to our next topic.

THE MELODIC-HARMONIC DIVORCE

[NEXT] In recent years, research on popular music has shown that the melody and harmony often seem to operate independently of one other, which some authors have dubbed the “melodic-harmonic divorce.” This is a feature of harmony and melody in popular music that we can employ in our reharmonizations. [NEXT] Consider, for example, the verse from “Someone like You” by Adele. At the beginning of this song, the chords change every four beats, but the melody is rather static. In fact, the first few vocal phrases are almost identical, with Adele singing down the major pentatonic scale over and over. Even when Adele’s vocal melody moves away from this ostinato later in the verse, the melodic pitch content remains pentatonic, still seeming to ignore the underlying chords. This “loose verse” arrangement, according to David Temperley, is the most typical situation in which melodic-harmonic divorce occurs. Here is what the first portion of the verse sounds like. [NEXT]

As we think about possible reharmonizations for this song, we don’t really even need to create a melodic skeleton. If we accept the melodic-harmonic divorce, any chord might work. [NEXT] For example, I like the sound of a bVII chord, so I can use bVII as, say, the third chord; [NEXT] or I could use bVII as the second chord; [NEXT] or bVII would work as the last chord; [NEXT] or maybe I don’t use bVII at all, and the harmonies simply ascend I – ii – iii – IV. Moreover, I don’t need to limit myself to only harmonizations that begin on tonic. The original chord progression, for example, can be seen as a variation on the I – V – vi – IV progression that pervades modern popular music. Since rotations of the I – V – vi – IV chord progression are also prevalent in modern popular music, [NEXT] I might harmonize the verse with

a rotation of that progression beginning on the IV chord; [NEXT] or I might start the rotation of that progression on the vi chord; [NEXT] or I might start the rotation on the dominant. [NEXT]

Ultimately, these seven reharmonizations are all viable and all sound reasonably good. To my ear, the progressions that begin on tonic are somewhat better suited for a verse because they establish the tonality at the beginning of the song more clearly. But there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these versions. Notice that in the second, third, and fourth chord slots, I have used every possible diatonic harmony from I to vi plus bVII. In other words, any of these common chords will work in any of these positions. This shows the great flexibility of harmony in its coordination (or lack thereof) with melody in popular music, and students can make use of this flexibility in a reharmonization activity.

META-SCHEMAS

[NEXT] Given that harmony in popular music does not need to coordinate tightly with the melody, and given that chords often do not follow classical syntax (such as when V moves to IV in a pop song), students have many reharmonization options. This is a good thing for creativity, but the downside is that students may end up writing aimless or directionless chord progressions. As a solution, I introduce students to the idea of “meta-schemas,” as discussed by Christopher Doll in his 2017 book. In essence, a meta-schema is a scale-degree pattern, most often chromatic, that better explains the organization of a harmonic progression than a functional approach based on root motions. When teaching reharmonization, I often put

these meta-schemas in the bass so that the chromatic motion can clearly be heard.

[NEXT] In this regard, let us consider some reharmonizations for the song “Let It Be” by the Beatles. It is fairly easy to create a melodic skeleton for the first eight bars of vocal material, and the original chords are all diatonic. Let’s listen to the original recording [NEXT]. Now let’s take a look at some reharmonizations [NEXT]. In my first reharmonization, I focused on using a descending chromatic bass line, in this case from b7 down to 4. Here is what this sounds like. [NEXT] In my second harmonization, I focused on using an ascending chromatic bass, now going from 3 up to 6. Here is what this sounds like. [NEXT] To be clear, I do not think that either of these reharmonizations are revolutionary in terms of their chord syntax. But they show a way of thinking about the reharmonization process that is based more on voice leading—specifically, chromatic voice leading in the bass—and less on the expected succession probabilities for a particular chord function.

CONCLUSION

[NEXT] Thus far, I have discussed reharmonizations of only short melodic passages. That is adequate for introductory assignments, but students should eventually grapple with an entire verse-prechorus-chorus module in order to get a sense of how harmony interacts with form. As a final example, therefore, let’s consider a complete verse-prechorus-chorus passage from the song “Photograph” by Ed Sheeran. I chose this song because it allows for many reharmonization possibilities due to the relative simplicity of the original chords. Generally speaking, I find that songs with simpler chord progressions

are easier to reharmonize than those that have more chromatic chord content. The melody is also simple enough in this song to quickly create a melodic skeleton. Here is what the original song sounds like. Note that the 8-bar verse material is played twice, with some slight variations in the melody on the second time around. [NEXT]

[NEXT] Consider now my reharmonization. Like many songs, the verse melody is rather static and mostly pentatonic. In the original song, the bassline descends 1–6–5–4, but I take advantage of the melodic-harmonic divorce to write a bassline that is a step off, descending 1–7–6–5 instead. I continue that diatonic descent into the prechorus, which now begins on a IV chord instead of a vi chord as in the original recording. From the melodic skeleton, I see in the third bar of the prechorus that I can move the bass down to b3 for a first inversion minor tonic chord, after which I use a chromatic ascent in the bass until the end of the prechorus. Utilizing the harmonic-melodic divorce, I push the chromatic ascent through the last four bars of the prechorus, essentially ignoring scale-degree 5 in the melody, which we might think clashes with the V of V chord. In the chorus, I switch to a chromatic descent in the bass. At the end of the chorus, the #IV-half-diminished-7 chord arises primarily from voice-leading, as it supports scale-degree 1 in the melody and shares common tones with the chords before and after it. Here is what my reharmonization sounds like. [NEXT]

I do not expect all students to create reharmonizations at this level of skill. But second-semester music theory students can do a lot with these strategies, presuming they have a basic command of triads and seventh chords on keyboard or guitar. Often, students will stumble onto fairly sophisticated

harmonic techniques just through thinking about chord possibilities and using their ears. I remember one student, for example, coming up with the same reharmonization as shown in the chorus here and then fluently explaining (as I have them do) his reharmonization strategy even though (as he admitted) he was not entirely sure what functional labels were most appropriate. To be frank, I am not entirely sure what functional labels are most appropriate in this passage either. I am sure, though, that having students reharmonize melodies—in particular, recordings of isolated vocal melodies—is a great way to encourage students to use their ears to better understand harmony in popular music. [NEXT]