



Research Article

Do we still need harmony? personal reflections on the crisis of contemporary studies of music harmony

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Abstract

Recent trends indicate that the research-based study of music is receiving decreasing support at universities with music programs. More specifically, we are increasingly hearing reports of the closure of such academic departments. When we narrow our focus to the field of music theory, the picture becomes even more discouraging. Globally, relatively few specialized university departments and institutes are dedicated to this area. At the same time, while the humanities more broadly are facing a certain degree of disregard, studies on music harmony are experiencing their own crisis of meaning, which is not of recent origin. The transformation of its referential language, already about a century ago, caused harmony to lose its status as a "necessary craft foundation" for composers. Today, it is primarily used as a tool for analyzing classical music, and, though to a lesser extent, popular genres. Particularly concerning is the fact that such responsibilities are increasingly being assigned to inadequately trained personnel whose competence in harmony is, at the very least, questionable. However, with the emergence of more recent methodologies – such as Schenkerian analysis, neo-Riemannian theory, and others—the question arises: Do we still need harmony? Are we approaching a time when it will be entirely sufficient to feed any composition into a computer system, which, using artificial intelligence, will provide all the necessary answers about a given piece? Has that time, perhaps, already arrived, rendering any form of human analysis obsolete? This paper aims to offer several possible answers to this question, ranging from a nihilistic stance ("harmony is definitely no longer needed") to a call for a return to the roots (i.e., the renewed practice of methods conventionally regarded as outdated), to the possibility that the truth lies somewhere in between.

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Introduction

This study examines the changing position of harmony in contemporary music theory and the methodological issues arising from this transformation. Therefore, it is first necessary to consider the current state of the discipline and its main areas of debate.

State of affairs and methodological questions

The following text presents a brief musicological study on the current state of affairs concerning the status of musical harmony (within the humanities) as a discipline. The aim is to address the pressing question of whether, in the context of the disciplinary transformations of the third decade of the twenty-first century, we still require a "traditional" discipline that has existed in its current form since the early modern era and traces its roots back to antiquity. Therefore, I explore

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the historical development of harmony as a discipline and examine how it ultimately culminated in a crisis, marked by the emergence of new methods intended to replace it.

Some of the key questions I intend to address are:

- How relevant is harmony in the contemporary context?
- Do the new methodologies offer satisfactory alternatives to the traditional discipline?
- If harmony is to continue to exist in the future, what might its role entail?

To address these issues, I will draw on some of the most notable historical and contemporary sources, including Heinrich Schenker's *Der freie Satz*, Nicholas Cook's *A Guide to Musical Analysis*, and Allen Forte's *The Structure of Atonal Music*, etc., as well as my own insights and interviews with practitioners and observers of the current state of affairs.

The age of crisis

It is no longer news that the humanities are in a state of crisis. With the rise of highly practical disciplines, foremost among them information technology, which offer greater commercial applicability than ever before, interest in the humanities and the arts (to some extent included within them) has reached a historical low. At the same time, governments and endowments across the Western world increasingly view these fields as unprofitable losses rather than as investments in the enduring legacy of civilizational heritage. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the humanities are in a much better position today in countries that have not succumbed to the philosophy of expecting a quick return on every penny invested.

The situation in musicology is no better in the term's broadest sense. On the contrary, it is arguably even more challenging than in other branches of the humanities. Scholars are confronted with the choice of pursuing "applied musicology" (whatever that may entail) or venturing into various forms of multidisciplinary, for which they are often inadequately trained. Both paths offer limited opportunities, typically favoring candidates with social suitability over personal merit; otherwise, scholars are often forced to consider a career change.

Music harmony has, somewhat paradoxically, been in a state of crisis for so long that its current condition is not as bleak as that of other branches. With this statement, I am not suggesting that the general crisis of the humanities does not affect harmony – it certainly does and will – but rather that nearly a century of ontological questioning within the discipline has made it somewhat resilient.

On the other hand, the crisis of harmony has its own distinct history, which I will address in the following sections of this paper.

Challenges: Losing the ground underfoot

In its traditional role, harmony as a discipline serves three primary purposes:

- It originally emerged as a craft primarily intended to help composers master foundational skills during the common-practice period. It was used both to learn specific rules and to analyze the works of other composers.
- Over time, it also became important for performers, who increasingly sought to grasp the deeper essence of the works they interpret.
- Finally, harmonic analysis found its most favored stronghold among theorists and musicologists, who, through the insights it provided, have made numerous scholarly contributions to the world.

But what is the state of the art now? Perhaps nothing better captures the contemporary state of music harmony as a discipline than an interview with the composer Rajko Maksimović (1935–2024), who, as a professor of composition in Belgrade, witnessed an instructive moment with his students in 1995. He remarked:

Just recently, during the winter break, I worked on basic harmony with two students. They have that subject at the Academy, but I could see that something wasn't working. And harmony must be known! Let them disregard it later, let them not use a single thing from it—but they still have to know it! First of all, they're going to teach it, and they'll make a living from it. As composers, they have the right to

teach harmony, and they will teach it. No one will make a living from composing. And form, polyphony, and orchestration – the craft they must master. (Вуксановић, 1995, p. 14)

To provide some additional context: In earlier times, all the "craft" subjects were integrated into the main composition curriculum and taught by a trained composer.² Meanwhile, students from other departments – such as musicology, pedagogy, conducting, and, more recently, music theory – have taken all those subjects separately and, ironically, often become more proficient in them than their colleagues in the composition department. Despite this, until recently, legal regulations (as indicated in the previous quote) broadly favored composers in hiring staff to teach theoretical subjects in public music schools. That system had its advantages and limitations, as does the current arrangement. By the time of Maksimović's interview, composition students had long been studying harmony as a separate subject, just as their colleagues in other departments. Even after the craft disciplines were introduced, they were often met with mutual disinterest from both composition students and lecturers.³

From what I have mentioned, it should be clear that, at least in some academic circles, there is an awareness that harmony remains an important foundation – even for those who may choose not to employ its core principles, whether in their creative language or in the repertoire they analyze. When I refer to core principles, I think primarily of two fundamental components of common-practice harmony: (1) tonality and (2) chord. As we know, both of these have been increasingly relativized – or even entirely deconstructed throughout the 20th century.

It is difficult to deny that, during the common-practice era, and even into the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the traditional study of harmony provided a necessary and solid foundation for the study of composition. Along with certain other disciplines, it was a useful – and sometimes even essential – tool for performers. However, that situation was about to change with the rise of modernist aesthetics.

A greatly simplified history of modern music claims that everything began to shift with the "unusual" experiments of the late Romanticists. This trend continued with Debussy's even bolder innovations in musical language, culminating in the definitive blow to common practice delivered by the Second Viennese school, led by Arnold Schönberg.

As with any joke, there is a part of truth in it – but to play with words, such a history is only a partial truth.

The Romanticists did not begin deconstructing tonality out of deliberate intent, but rather because their musical language – already heavily chromatic – left little room for further creative expansion.

Anyone familiar with the development of French compositional techniques and practices knows Debussy was less revolutionary than an evolutionary figure. This is especially true given that the understanding of harmony in that cultural sphere differed significantly from that which developed in, for example, the Germanic countries. (cf. Groth, 1983)

Finally, regarding the Second Viennese school, we must not forget that Schönberg was a master of harmony, so much so that he authored one of the most influential textbooks on the subject. (Schönberg, 1922) It was precisely his deep understanding of the state of the art that led him to develop a systematic anti-language – the twelve-tone system – to demonstrate that music could exist outside the confines of the familiar tonal framework.

After World War I, as modernist aesthetics gained ground – not only through the twelve-tone technique but also through free atonality and neoclassical "tonicity" – harmony continued to be regarded as a necessary part of the music curriculum. It was regarded as a foundation for many aspects that could still inform the development of one's musical

² In the immediate post-World War II period, due to a lack of qualified staff, theoretical training was incorporated into the main composition course. Somewhat later, it was separated into standalone subjects, but they were still taught by composers rather than theorists (who, truth be told, didn't yet exist at the Belgrade Academy) or musicologists.

One of the most notable teachers of theoretical subjects for composition students was the renowned Serbian woman composer, Ljubica Marić (1909–2003). In the following decades, theoretical instruction for composition students became more aligned with that provided to music educators, theorists, musicologists, ethnomusicologists, and even organists.

Composers themselves made up the majority of the theory faculty until relatively recently.

With the establishment of an independent theory department, this practice gradually began to fade; however, the current arrangement (as of 2026) is such that composition students are once again being taught theoretical subjects by composers.

³ Therefore, when a friend of mine, who holds an MA degree in composition, recently approached me asking how he could improve his knowledge of harmony, I was not surprised, and advised him to get the textbook *Harmony with harmonic analysis* by Professor Dejan Despić (Despić, 2002), read it cover to cover, and, in addition, practice analysis and four-part writing.

language (at least in the sense of something to reject, as Maksimović put it), as well as a tool for studying most works that remained in the repertoire.

It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that the first major blow to harmonic analysis came from a tool designed to study the purest tonal repertoire: Schenkerian analysis. The "tool" developed by Heinrich Schenker (1868–1935) initially aimed to universalize and simplify the analysis of the entire tonal repertoire – if by "entire," we primarily mean Germanic music composed between the early 1700s and the mid-1800s. (cf. Schenker, 1935) (Cook, 1987, pp. 57-58) The stratification of structural and non-structural elements soon led to the reduction of many works to the so-called *Urfinie* or *Ursatz*, rendering both traditional harmonic analysis and *Formenlehre* largely superfluous. However, before World War II, it was precisely this lack of repertoire breadth that, in a way, still protected classical harmonic analysis from being declared obsolete.

After World War II, the method continued to develop primarily through the work of Anglo-American Schenkerians and gradually gained traction across broader segments of the repertoire. (Cook, 1987, pp. 215-224)

Many performers also adopted reductionist approaches to better understand the compositions they performed.

At the same time, American theorists finally turned their attention to atonal music, with Allen Forte (1926–2014) arguably being the most successful in this regard. By employing mathematical methods (set theory) – some of which had been developed even earlier – he created a logical reasoning system for analyzing the 20th-century repertoire. (cf. Forte, 1973)

While the future of harmony appeared increasingly bleak in Western countries, it was, in a sense, fortunate that this coincided with the Cold War era, during which the Eastern Bloc – and other ideologically aligned countries – largely rejected modernist aesthetics as decadent.

Ironically, just as many Western musicologists were "declaring" harmony obsolete, their Eastern counterparts were producing some of the discipline's most significant contributions. For instance, the Soviet theorist Yuri Tyulin articulated a theory of tonality in the 1960s that continues to resonate even within the Anglo-American academic world. (cf. Tyulin, 1966; Despić, 1971, p. 9)

Between the 1970s and 1990s, new methods and approaches intended to "replace" traditional harmony emerged in rapid succession, and young scholars embraced them with the same enthusiasm as children for new toys. Let us mention neo-Riemannian theory, tonal pitch space, and Tonfeld theory, to name just a few. (cf. Cohn, 1998; Lerdahl, 1988; Haas, 2004)

Given that computers have played an increasingly prominent role in music analysis since the late 20th century (Cook, 1987, p. 183) – not to mention recent developments in AI – does this signal the final blow to harmonic analysis, or even to any form of human-developed traditional approach to musical creation? Let us attempt to offer some answers.

Three stances on the future of harmony

I recognize three different stances regarding current views on the future of harmony.

The first might be dubbed *nihilistic* or even maybe *cynical*. An ever-increasing number of scholars now question whether we even need to study counterpoint – particularly Renaissance counterpoint – since we rarely listen to Palestrina or Lassus and even more rarely attempt to perform their works. According to that logic, teaching and learning these old techniques should be reserved for specialized ensembles and enthusiasts.

While there may not be many explicit calls to abolish harmony as a discipline, the increasing insistence on applying "newer" analytical techniques to repertoire for which harmony – that legacy of 17th- and 18th-century music theory – is perfectly suitable, leads me to conclude that I wouldn't be surprised if someone has already proposed removing the discipline entirely from future curricula.

The second view may be understood as *historicist* or *anachronistic*. Many music theorists do not seek a solution to the "harmonic crisis" in pursuing new harmonic systems, but rather in the distant past.

Harmony as a discipline has never been entirely homogeneous across cultural contexts and has undergone numerous developmental stages over its 400-year history. Some scholars now see a possible way forward in reviving once-discarded branches of tradition.

Quite recently, I had the opportunity to exchange views with individuals advocating for a return to partimento theory and even for the renewed application of hexachordal principles – both of which were largely abandoned by the mid-18th century. From my perspective, I would be quite cautious about the applicability of such ideas.

Perhaps the strongest advocacy today is for the revival of practical harmony. This branch never truly disappeared, but it is far less prominent than in the first half of the 20th century (let us recall Nadia Boulanger), to say nothing of earlier centuries. In this case, my stance is largely supportive, particularly when fostering a practical understanding of harmonic fundamentals. However, I remain cautious about how such skills can be extended into more scientifically rigorous domains.

Finally, there is a *midway view*. It is based on a fact that is a key weakness across all (post-)modern approaches to music analysis. Namely, the more methodologies there are, the fewer people can understand them.

Occam's razor teaches us that the solution requiring the fewest assumptions is usually the best. When it comes to classical harmony, an analyst quickly acquires enough tools to engage with most of the repertoire.

It is essential to identify the initial key, know a dozen chord types and their scale degrees or functions, and recognize modulations, sequences, and non-chord tones. Of course, this requires some practice, but once acquired, these tools can be readily adapted to the common-practice-period repertoire and to popular and folk genres.

If, for practical purposes, someone ventures into writing four-part harmony, they must face several "prohibitions" and limitations. However, once they do, they have mastered the craft – and then (as Professor Maksimović observed) they truly have the right to break and override the rules.

All remaining methods – such as Schenkerian analysis, neo-Riemannian theory (NRT), and others – require numerous additional assumptions. In this regard, Schenkerians may even hold a certain advantage, since nothing is easier than simply distinguishing between structural and non-structural tones – although even this often leads to disagreements among analysts (not that classical harmonic analysis is free from such disputes). Nonetheless, this principle underpins many other contemporary methods. Of course, many modern analytical approaches (for both tonal and atonal music) require a solid understanding of mathematics, which many, myself included, often struggle to meet.

By no means do I intend to discourage those who wish to analyze certain repertoires using one of the contemporary methods – on the contrary, I do so myself regularly, because new methods can indeed offer insights that classical harmonic analysis cannot.

However, for the sake of comparison, let us consider the difference between a "classical" harmonic approach and a reductionist one with a short thought experiment of, for example, a symphonic poem by Liszt.

In a reductionist analysis, we will likely uncover the *Urlinie* of the entire work rather quickly, revealing its tonal framework. Building on this, as the basis for NRT, we will identify how the transformations between structural chords function. (c.f. Cohn, 1998) If we apply Tonfeldertheorie, we will also learn which tonal fields the piece moves through. (c.f. Haas, 2004) All of these approaches are reasonable.

Yet harmonic analysis, although it may challenge us to identify specific chords and distinguish them from non-chord tones, still forms the foundation for all of these methods. Very few analysts would dare to engage in Schenkerian analysis without conducting a basic harmonic analysis.

But beyond that, it reveals something else: we often miss the forest for the trees. Isn't the beauty of Liszt's harmonic language precisely in all those chromatic passing tones that we are so eager to "trim away" or "cut out"? In traditional harmonic analysis, we put those harmonies in parentheses, and we might comment upon them; in reductionist methods, we often eliminate them on the first level.

Conclusion

In the concluding part, I would like to reflect on possible answers to the methodological questions posed at the beginning. How relevant is harmony in the contemporary context? It remains highly relevant, despite the emergence of alternative contemporary methodologies. More precisely, it is questionable whether these methodologies would exist at all without the foundational presence of harmony, as their analytical frameworks have developed from earlier harmonic

principles. Do the new methodologies offer satisfactory alternatives to the traditional discipline? To a certain extent, they do. However, they are not without limitations, and it is often necessary for the analyst to return to classical harmony in order to obtain more precise answers to questions that might otherwise remain insufficiently addressed. If harmony is to continue to exist in the future, what might its role entail? Harmony will continue to serve as a fundamental basis for both contemporary and future methodologies. To become a fully competent analyst, one must possess a solid grounding in the core theoretical disciplines, including harmony.

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Biodata of Author



Nikola Komatović concluded Ph.D. at the University of Music and Performing Arts in Vienna under the mentorship of Prof. Dr. Gesine Schröder (his thesis focused on the harmonic language of César Franck) in 2018. He previously completed his Bachelors in Music Theory (2011) and Master's (2012) studies at the Faculty of Music in Belgrade. Komatović researches historical theories (in the first line, historical theories of tonality and harmony in France), the development of methodology in Eastern Europe (the Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia) and China, popular music, and certain aspects of modern and postmodern music (heritage of Ancient Greek and Byzantine music). In 2023, the Home Board of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts granted him the title of Independent Research Associate.

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