

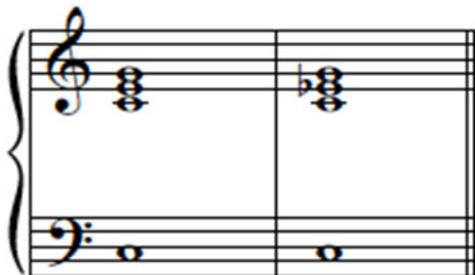
MUSIC THEORY.aargh@

Harmony - 1 (Session 20) “Major and Minor Tonics”

By Dr. Ona Pinsonneault

The Overtone Series shows us the strongest intervals in the tonal spectrum, the Perfect Octave and the Perfect Fifth, partials 1 to 2, and 2 to 3. They are strongest in defining tonality because they are most audible overtones in the overtone series. In the Perfect Octave and the Perfect Fifth the lower note of the interval is considered the “root” of the interval. The “root” of the interval is like a magnet giving stability to sound. Intervals of the Perfect Octave, Perfect Fifth and Major third (partials 4 and 5) are strong ones in defining stability in sound.

When a Major Tonic triad is given (a chord built using the 1st, 3rd and 5th scale degrees) there will be intervals of Perfect Octaves and Fifths and a Major Third. Consider the first triad in the example below. C4 to C5 is a Perfect Octave; C4 is the root. C4 to E5 is a compound (greater than an octave) major third; C4 is the root. C4 to G5 is a compound Perfect Fifth; C4 is the root. This is a very stable sound because of the strong root intervals. If the composition is in the key of C Major this is the tonic triad, a very strong triad giving stability to the sound. Any composition in a major key has this stability from its tonic triad.



The second triad is almost as strong as the first one. In this chord the third (from C to Eb) is Minor. Minor thirds do not have “strong roots”. Because of their location in the overtone series (between partials 5 and 6) they are intervals stronger than seconds, sixths and sevenths, but not as strong as octaves, fifths, fourths, and Major thirds. Partial 5 and 6, although they are part of a sound, are almost inaudible.

Because the sound of Major and Minor triads differs slightly in strength of defining tonality, they are used differently in composition. How do you perceive Major and Minor sound? When would you want stability in your sound? If you were to compose for handbells would you choose Major or Minor as your main tonality? How would you decide? In the articles this new year we will explore the sound of harmony and how composers have chosen to use it.

Until next time,

Dr. P

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