

On aeolian harmony in contemporary popular music

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[§1] Looking at the complex of musical styles, evolved during the last three decades, which are today brought together under the term rock music, one might ask whether it is justified to speak of a special kind of 'rock harmony'. For several reasons such a concept is problematic. In general it can be argued that harmony is a less important parameter of musical expression in rock music than, for instance, rhythm, melody and timbre. Furthermore, one of the most characteristic traits of rock music is its eclecticism: most musical styles, folk, art or popular, have served as sources of musical material for some rock style or other. Thus most authors dealing with rock music, even those with a musicological approach, tend to treat the matter of harmony rather briefly: it's not important, and there's nothing particular about it.¹ One further reason why few attempts have been made to describe the harmonic practice of rock might also be the fact that rock musicians are, to a great extent, bearers of an 'oral-electronic tradition', and thus have little need for an explicitly formulated music theory. Nevertheless, this article is an attempt to analyse one distinct type of harmonic practice which has become increasingly frequent, both in different rock styles and in other popular music genres, during the last decade. The purpose of the analysis is not only the establishment of intramusical relationships, but also the determination of, on the one hand, the affective and social *meaning* of this harmonic practice and, on the other, the musical-structural correlates of this meaning.

[§2] Generally speaking, harmony in rock music is less strictly governed by the rules of traditional functional harmony than is the case in jazz music, at least in pre-1960s jazz. Peculiarities pertaining to harmony in rock music have often been described as 'modal'; however, the somewhat contradictory juxtaposition of the terms *modal* and *harmony* needs some explanation. Many chord sequences used in rock music are modal in the sense that they derive from melodic formulae, in which each note is coloured with a (usually major) triad, resulting in 'unfunctional' progressions (examples of this will be given below).^[2] Another type of harmonic structure which may also be termed modal occurs when all chords used are based on one and the same modal scale. This is the case for instance in the 'modal jazz' of the early

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1. Except, of course, when it is described as downright deficient, more or less explicitly judged according to the standards of traditional functional tonal harmony. For examples of this position see, for instance, Hartwich-Wiechell 1974.
 2. [Björnberg's use of quotes round the 'functional' of 'functional harmony' draws attention to problems with the term. Concepts like 'tertial' and 'classical harmony' have latterly been found to act as more adequate descriptors of the same phenomenon (see www.tagg.org/articles/ptgloss.html#Tertial). For a systematisation of these and other harmonic practices relevant to this article, see *Tagg's Harmony Handout* (version 2, 2000) at www.tagg.org/teaching/harmonyhandout.pdf]

1960s, but also in many rock songs. There are, however, some crucial differences between the types of modal harmony used in jazz and rock music, respectively. While in modal jazz the repudiation of functional harmony is emphasized by the use of non-tertial chords such as combinations of fourths, the tertial triads are usually retained in rock music.^[3] Furthermore, in jazz the modal scale being the basis of the music is explicitly stated and consciously conceived of as material for melodic as well as harmonic elaboration, while this is far from always the case in modal rock where, in fact, the scale is often only implicitly stated in the chordal material. It may seem that in such cases the notion of 'modal harmony' amounts to nothing more than a theoretical construct. As a rule, however, the actual use of such a set of chords also involves a number of characteristic progressions differing from 'regular' functional harmony, bringing about an effect in many respects similar to that of the consistently applied modality in modal jazz (and also making evident the affinity between the two kinds of modal harmony outlined above).

[§3] *Aeolian harmony* is the term adopted here for a certain type of modal harmonic practice which, as has already been hinted at, has gradually become more frequent in rock music in the last ten years. This term refers to a chordal material of triads exclusively using the notes of an aeolian or 'natural minor' scale; that is, the chords i, ♭ii, iv, v, ♭VI and ♭VII (formally also the seldom used diminished chord ii^o). The music from which this concept is derived is tonal in the sense of the existence of an unambiguous keynote/tonic chord, but at the same time it includes some essential features which separates it from traditional functional harmony. The dominant major chord is not used, and thus the fundamental progression of functional tonality, V-I/i, with its onwards-directed resolution of leading-note to tonic, is refrained from and replaced with a number of other chord progressions. These fall into two main categories: those using the chords i, ♭VI and ♭VII, and those using i, iv and v. The three latter chords are of course nothing but the basic sonorities of 'functional' harmony, apart from the exchange of the dominant major chord for the minor variant. The reason for including progressions of this kind in the present discussion is, however, not mere theoretical formalism; besides the fact that chord sequences involving v instead of V have become more common, the affective meanings associated with the two main types of aeolian progressions as defined appear to be similar, and in many instances progressions combining all the above-mentioned chords are used.

[§4] The aeolian progressions are often used as short *harmonic ostinati*, perpetually repeated to the effect of creating an 'aeolian harmonic field'. This can be clearly heard in songs like Dylan's *All Along the Watchtower* (1968) and Eric Clapton's *Layla* (1970), using the chord sequences i-♭VII-♭VI-♭VII and i-♭VII-i, respectively. Other early examples of the same kind include David Bowie's *1984* (1974), 10 c.c.'s *Wall Street Shuffle* (1974) and *Phoenix* by Wishbone Ash (1970). A further example of the use of aeolian ostinati occurs in the final from the Swedish left-wing music movement's musical theatre play *Vi äro tusenden* ('We Are Thousands'; 1977), where a melodic ostinato is accompanied by four different alternating harmonic ostinati using

3. ['Triadic' and 'traditional' (Björnberg's text) have been replaced here with 'tertial' according to the reasons and definitions presented in *Tagg's Harmony Handout* (version 2, 2000), p.8. ff. (www.tagg.org/teaching/harmonyhandout.pdf)]

aeolian harmony. Since the middle of the 1970s rock songs entirely or mainly based on aeolian ostinati, built on the chords i , bVI and $bVII$, have appeared with increasing frequency: Dire Straits' *Sultans of Swing* (1978), *Message in a Bottle* (1979) by The Police, Phil Collins' *In the Air Tonight* (1981), *I Know There's Something Going On* (1982) by former Abba member Frida, ABC's *The Look of Love* (1982) and Kim Wilde's *The Second Time* (1984), to mention only a few. A perhaps even larger number of songs are to a larger or smaller extent characterized by the use of aeolian harmony, without this taking the form of harmonic ostinati; some examples are Kim Carnes' *Voyeur* (1982), Irene Cara's *Flashdance* (1983) and *Let's Dance* (1983) by David Bowie. The progression bVI - $bVII$ - i also often assumes the function of a *cadence*, more or less replacing the iv - V - i cadence of 'regular' tonal minor. This can be heard for instance in the above-mentioned *Sultans of Swing*: while the dominant major chord actually does appear in the song, all full cadences are of the (bVI) - $bVII$ type.

[§5] The descending fifth cadence is still maintained where sequences involving the v chord are used, but the tension-resolution effect of the cadence is weakened by the absence of the leading note in the v chord. Examples of i - iv - v harmony can be found prior to the age of rock, for instance in many blues songs, like Willie Dixon's *All Your Love*; all-minor blues choruses are also used in rock numbers like Pink Floyd's *Money* (1970). In many rock songs of the last decade, however, the v chord is used also in other contexts, generally replacing the V chord or entering into harmonic ostinati like i - v or i - $bVII$ - v . Examples of this can be heard for instance in Fun Boy Three's *We're Having All the Fun* (1982) and *Der Kommissar* (1982) by the Viennese rapper Falco.

[§6] What has been said thus far might give the impression that the harmonic models described are seen as radically new and peculiar to music in certain genres of recent origin. Of course this is not the case; however, the question of the relationship of aeolian harmony to previously occurring harmonic patterns within rock and other musical styles is a complex one. The following discussion will be focussed upon similarities and differences in aeolian harmony as compared to some other harmonic practices typical of 1960s and 1970s rock music.

[§7] As was hinted at above, harmonic progressions modal in the sense of deriving from melodic formulae coloured with major triads, are not unusual in rock music from the mid-1960s onwards. The most important melodic substrata for such progressions are those derived from the so-called blues-pentatonic or pentatonic minor scale. Without entering here into the discussions concerning the origin and exact nature of blue notes, and the most valid representation of the blues scale, it can be asserted that in jazz, and particularly in rock, the ambiguous pitch patterns of the blues are often stylized into this pentatonic scale. In this process the blue notes are identified with the flat third and seventh degrees, respectively, of the well-tempered scale; here the typically 'white/rock' (as opposed to 'black/blues') interpretation of blues pieces as being in the *minor* mode is involved. As can be expected, this stylization, being the result of an adaptation to the well-tempered system, is more pronounced in instrumental than in vocal lines. Pentatonic riffs using this scale are familiar both in jazz and rock music, but the formation of chord progressions based on such melodic formulae (that

is, progressions involving the \flat III and \flat VII chords, like I- \flat III-IV and IV- \flat VII-I) is specific to post-1960 rock; chord sequences of this kind are common enough in 1960s and 1970s rock for examples to be unnecessary. Besides these, other 'mediantic' progressions are also often used; two frequently occurring types are I-II-IV (e.g. in The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) and \flat VI- \flat VII-I (e.g. in Stevie Wonder's *I Was Made To Love Her* (1967) and Jimi Hendrix' *Voodoo Chile* (1967)). It is conceivable that these latter variants can also be traced back to the [minor] blues-pentatonic scale.⁴ As can be seen, obvious resemblances exist between aeolian harmony and these 'blues-pentatonic' progressions. The aeolian chord material, as presented above, could theoretically be derived by adding the flat submediant \flat VI to the chord-set I- \flat III-IV-V- \flat VII and changing the I, IV and V chords from major to minor (whether this reconstruction is the most valid explanation of the origin of aeolian harmony in rock is a question left open at this point; certainly other influencing factors, like modality in different folk styles, in classical art music and in film/TV background music, must be taken into consideration). In this process two things are accomplished: the main ethos of the harmonic system used changes from the major prevalent in most previous rock music to minor, and a higher degree of unity in the chord material is attained, making the harmonic progressions more 'static' and 'tension-less'.⁵

[§8] Here the problem of the *meaning* of aeolian harmony is approached; i.e. the question of what, if any, specific affective and social meaning is associated with aeolian harmony as it has been used in popular music of the last decade. As is always the case in analysing the meaning of musical messages, the justification of singling out *one* parameter (in this case, the harmonic) can be called in question; as a matter of fact, the increased use of aeolian harmony in modern rock is accompanied by various other important changes affecting melody, instrumental technique, mixing etc., of which nothing has been said here. Nevertheless, some suggestions as to the possible ways of interpreting this harmonic practice will be made.

[§9] Although the harmonic parameter is not the one usually connected with direct subjectively expressive messages in music, harmonic formulae and the general harmonic language may play a certain role in determining the affective meaning of a piece of music. Harmonic processes constitute a part of a mood-creating and -defining background to the overtly subjective-expressive statements of melody, partly through their relationship to melodic processes (as for instance in appoggiaturas), but also in their own right. Aeolian harmony as defined above forms a unitary closed system with few components, generally pervading an entire piece of music; therefore, it can

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4. That is, the chord sequences stated can be seen as parts of transpositions of the 'blues-pentatonic' chord material to the fifth and fourth degrees, respectively, yielding the sequences V- \flat VII-I-II-IV and IV- \flat VI- \flat VII-I- \flat III. Even if this argument amounts to nothing more than a theoretical construct it may serve the purpose of illustrating the musical principles underlying this harmonic practice. [For more details, see *Tagg's Harmony Handout* (version 2, 2000) at www.tagg.org/teaching/harmonyhandout.pdf under 'Non-classical harmony' (pp.15-19).]
 5. The relationship of aeolian harmony to blues-based harmonic practices might perhaps be illustrated by Dave Marsh's comment on Clapton's *Layla*: "... with *Layla* Clapton composed his own perfect blues without resorting to the traditional blues form. It's an epiphany few white men have experienced..." (Marsh 1976).

be argued, aeolian harmony may be treated as *one* generalized unit of musical expression, or *museme* in the sense that this term is used by Tagg (1982). A conceivable way to find out the affective meaning of this museme would be to examine the paramusical associations connected with pieces using aeolian harmony, in order to establish the possible common denominators (cf. Tagg's 'Interobjective Comparison' method).^[6] Since all examples quoted here are pieces of vocal music an obvious place to look for paramusical associations is in the *lyrics* of the songs; if the verbal messages associated with the use of aeolian harmony show some measure of consistency, it may be concluded that they also form a verbal representation of the affective meaning of this musical practice.

[§10] Refraining here from the space-demanding citing of lyrics excerpts, it is nevertheless maintained that a considerable degree of such consistency exists. A notably large part of the rock songs making extensive use of aeolian harmony have lyrics dealing with subject matters such as historical and mythical narratives, static states of suspense and premonition, alienation in life and in personal relationships and fear of, but also fascination by, the future and modern technology and civilization. Altogether these lyrics define a field of associations which might be characterized by keywords such as 'vast stretches of time and space', 'stasis', 'uncertainty', 'coldness', 'grief' and 'modernness'. These keywords could consequently be used to describe the affective meaning of aeolian harmony.

[§11] Provided that this interpretation is valid, a number of questions arise. Why is music expressing such affective states becoming more frequent?

[§12] In what popular music genres, besides the more or less youth-oriented rock music discussed here, is this harmonic practice occurring? Does the affective meaning of aeolian harmony change, and if so, how, when it is used in connection with a lyrical content different from the ones described, and in other functional contexts? Here only a few tentative answers to these questions can be given.

[§13] It is not difficult to establish the fact that today the use of aeolian harmony is frequent not only in youth-oriented rock music, but also in different genres of the popular music mainstream. To take one example, among the songs entered in the Swedish Eurovision Song Contest qualifying rounds, which in many respects can be considered an epitome of Swedish mainstream music, since the end of the 1970s many songs to a greater or lesser extent based on aeolian harmony have appeared. This is not very remarkable, bearing in mind the fact that during the twenty-five years these contests have been arranged, the musical changes occurring have mainly consisted in the absorbing of rock elements with a time lag of a couple of years. In this process, elements of an allegedly structural rather than expressive nature (like those pertaining to harmony) are absorbed more easily and quickly. The lyrics used with aeolian based music in this context are in some cases consistent with the associational field depicted above, like for instance in the 1980 songs *Låt solen värma dig* ('Let the Sun Warm You')⁷ and *För dina bru-*

6. ['Extramusical', used in Björnberg's text, has been replaced here by 'paramusical' in accordance with the subsequent refinement of terminology used in musematic analysis (see 'Glossary of special terms, abbreviations, neologisms, etc. used in writings by P Tagg', online at www.tagg.org/articles/ptgloss.html).]

na ögons skull ('Because Of Your Brown Eyes'); in other cases lyrics are based on traditional love song or novelty formulae. It may seem that the appearance of songs of the latter kind implies that in this context the affective meaning of aeolian harmony is not the specific one proposed above, and that this harmonic language merely carries with it a general aura of musical novelty, having been taken over from the 'more contemporary' youth-oriented rock music. However, there is yet another less manifest level on which aeolian harmony can be argued to carry meaning and significance, regardless of the lyrical content associated with it.

[§14] If it is true that, as John Shepherd has argued, 'different forms of popular music articulate *from within their very structure* the socially mediated subjective experiences of differently situated groups, subcultures and counter-cultures' (Shepherd 1982, my italics), a further interpretation of the meaning of aeolian harmony in contemporary popular music, clearly related to the associational field described above, may be suggested. First, however, the particular characteristics of this harmonic practice regarding on the one hand its musical-structural attributes, and, on the other, its 'subcultural status', will be recapitulated. Although not transcending the framework of functional tonal harmony, the aeolian ostinati lack the strongly forward-directed, teleological character typical of the tension-resolution progressions of 'regular' functional harmony. Further, the increased use of aeolian harmony also implies an increased presence of a minor ethos in popular music; however, this is not the subjective-emotional ethos of functional tonal minor.⁸ Concerning the relation of aeolian harmony to specific social groups, it has been indicated above that today no strong such relation exists, this harmonic practice having spread from youth-oriented rock to different genres of mainstream popular music.

[§15] Thus, it may be suggested that the use of aeolian harmony signifies a change in the way life in contemporary Western industrialized societies is experienced, a change affecting large and heterogeneous social groups. The ideology of industrial capitalism dominant in these societies has, as has been argued in several contexts, a musically encoded representation in functional tonal music, which in its structure reflects the assumptions, inherent in the ideology, of the naturalness of an orderly, progressive societal development. The alternative to the unidirectional, goal-oriented progressions of functional harmony which aeolian harmony constitutes, may in its turn be seen as the musical coding of a conflict between important traits of the dominant ideology and the way in which reality is actually experienced. Faced with the growing threats affecting Western industrialized societies today: atomic war, environmental pollution, increasing unemployment, the rapid dissolution of traditional social values and institutions, people in widely differing social situations, it can be argued, experience a more or less conscious distrust in the optimism for the future contained in the dominant ideology. Due to

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7. The lyrics of this song in an obvious fashion link in with the fact that the qualification contest was held two weeks before the plebiscite on the future use of nuclear power in Sweden. The song expresses vague worries about the future in general, and the suggested solution to the (not clearly stated) problem is to rely on the warmth of the sun, with both literal and figurative interpretations lying close at hand.
 8. See Adorno's comment on the minor mode being used as a sparsely applied sentimental spicing of the prevalent major in entertainment music (Adorno 1976). Obviously the music dealt with here has a function quite different from the one described by Adorno.

the relatively marginal status of young people in these societies, the awareness of crisis is first expressed in youth-oriented music, where it is also often verbally formulated in the lyrics (see above). However, since these symptoms of crisis affect much larger social groups, they now appear in musically encoded form also in mainstream popular music. Although such topics are rarely directly addressed in the *lyrics* of mainstream pop, their presence is manifest on a musical-structural, non-verbal level.

[§16] Thus, with the use of aeolian harmony, the carefree letting out of youthful energy in 'three-chord rock' and the confirmation of a secure and cosy existence in mainstream pop have both assumed a problematic dimension, reflecting currently manifest contradictions and conflicts in Western industrialized societies. In the music dealt with here, tendencies both of critique and formulation of alternatives to the dominant ideology, and of resignation and the romanticizing of destruction can be detected. Which of these tendencies will prevail remains to be seen.

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