Harmonic Flow as Directional Expectancy: Teaching Harmonic Motion in Contemporary Music

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Abstract

Harmony is often taught as a system of labels rather than as an experienced form of motion. In contemporary music education, this emphasis on symbolic identification can produce students who name chords accurately yet struggle to hear harmonic direction or momentum. This article proposes a pedagogical framework that reframes harmony as *directional expectancy*: a perceptual process shaped by voice-leading, contextual stability, and stylistic enculturation. Drawing on practice-led teaching, the framework introduces three topologies of harmonic motion—Steps, Spirals, and Fields—and a compact lexicon of momentum states. A genre-comparative analysis of the flat mediant (♭III) shows how chord quality encodes idiomatic flow across popular music, jazz, and musical theatre, foregrounding listening before analysis.

Keywords: harmonic flow; harmonic expectancy; contemporary music pedagogy; voice leading; genre-inclusive harmony

Introduction — The Problem of Harmonic Direction

In many contemporary music education contexts, students demonstrate increasing fluency in identifying chords and harmonic symbols, yet simultaneously struggle to hear or articulate harmonic direction. Harmony is frequently taught as a system of labels—Roman numerals, chord qualities, and progressions—rather than as a perceptual process through which music moves toward, away from, and between points of stability. As a result, learners may accurately name harmonic structures without developing a sense of where the music is going, why it feels unsettled, or how harmonic motion contributes to expressive and narrative flow.

This gap becomes particularly evident in contemporary genres that do not rely on classical tonal-functional teleology. Loop-based popular music, modal repertoires, extended tonal idioms, and post-functional harmonic systems often generate a strong sense of direction without conventional cadential closure. While functional harmony provides practical tools for explaining arrival and resolution, it is less well equipped to describe the intermediate states of motion that characterise much contemporary practice—states that feel neither fully resolved nor simply transitional, but directionally charged in their own right (e.g., Tymoczko, 2011).

In parallel fields such as rhythm pedagogy and modal listening, recent scholarship has increasingly framed musical understanding in terms of embodied perception, entrainment, and

directional expectancy rather than in terms of static structural description. Rhythm is no longer treated merely as metre, but as felt propulsion (Seow, 2025); pitch systems are understood not only as scalar inventories, but as gravitational fields shaped by characteristic tones and tuning practices (Seow, 2024).

Harmony, however, is often still presented as a symbolic system rather than as an experienced form of motion. This article addresses this imbalance by proposing a pedagogical framework for understanding harmonic flow as a form of perceived directional expectancy. Rather than redefining harmony as a new theoretical system, the framework reframes existing harmonic practices—functional, modal, and post-functional—as different configurations of harmonic momentum. Drawing on practice-led teaching in contemporary music contexts, the paper introduces a compact typology of harmonic motion (Steps, Spirals, and Fields), a small lexicon of harmonic momentum states, and a genre-comparative worked example demonstrating how identical harmonic positions can produce distinct flow states across idioms.

The aim is not to replace established harmonic theories, but to provide educators and students with tools for articulating how harmony moves—how it creates pull, suspension, drift, and recontextualisation—across diverse musical settings. By foregrounding listening,

articulation, and directional perception, the framework seeks to support creative music-making while remaining compatible with existing harmonic knowledge.

Framing harmony as directional expectancy addresses a persistent pedagogical gap in contemporary music education: students frequently acquire symbolic fluency without developing a reliable sense of harmonic direction. In practice-led teaching contexts, this gap manifests as accurate chord labelling alongside uncertainty regarding momentum, arrival, or expressive trajectory. By foregrounding harmonic flow as a perceptual phenomenon, the present framework supports creative decision-making in composition, reharmonisation, improvisation, and ensemble performance. Rather than asking whether a progression conforms to a prescribed grammar, learners are invited to consider how harmonic choices generate movement, tension, and affect. This shift aligns harmonic pedagogy with the creative priorities of contemporary musicians while remaining compatible with existing analytical knowledge.

What "Harmony" Means in This Paper

This article adopts a deliberately broad and perceptual definition of harmony. Harmony is understood as the interplay of multiple pitches over time, moving toward or away from destinations or midpoints. Under this definition, harmony does not require the simultaneous sounding of pitches, nor does it depend on a fully articulated chordal texture.

Sequential pitch interactions, drone-based systems, and distributed voice-leading patterns may all generate harmonic directionality, provided they imply movement relative to points of stability.

This definition foregrounds tendency rather than structure. Harmony, in this sense, is not primarily a collection of vertical sonorities, but a process through which pitch relationships generate expectancy. Research in music cognition and theory has demonstrated that listeners routinely infer harmonic implications from sequential and implied pitch relations, even in the absence of simultaneity, drawing on memory and anticipation (Huron, 2016). Except for strict monotony, most musical systems therefore produce some form of implied harmonic motion.

At the same time, this article does not propose a universal definition of music, nor does it assume that all musical practices organise musical experience primarily through harmonic directionality. The framework developed here is intended for repertoires and pedagogical settings in which pitch organisation and harmonic tendency are salient dimensions of musical motion, including tonal, modal, drone-based, and post-functional traditions. In musics where other parameters such as rhythm, timbre, text, gesture, or social process bear the primary organisational weight, harmonic flow may still be present, but it

should be understood as one possible perceptual and pedagogical layer rather than as the music's exhaustive logic.

Within this framework, harmonic flow refers to the tendency logic that links destinations and midpoints. Destinations are points of relative perceptual stability—moments that feel settled, grounded, or locally resolved. Midpoints are positions that feel directionally charged without functioning as endpoints. Harmonic flow describes how music moves between these positions, including how it accelerates, suspends, redirects, or recontextualises harmonic expectation.

Voice-leading tendency is treated as the primary substrate of harmonic flow. Rather than being subordinate to chord labels or formal harmonic functions, voice-leading is understood as the mechanism through which harmonic momentum is generated and perceived. Empirical and theoretical studies have shown that efficient pitch motion and local voice-leading cues play a decisive role in shaping listeners' expectations, often independently of, or before, explicit functional categorisation (Huron, 2016; Rohrmeier, 2011; Wall et al., 2020). Importantly, these tendencies may be distributed across time and texture: pitches need not sound simultaneously for voice-leading relationships to exert directional force.

This perspective allows harmonic flow to be articulated across tonal, modal, drone-based, and post-functional environments without privileging any single harmonic grammar.

Within this model, a cadence is not defined by a fixed chord progression or formulaic pattern, but by approach behaviour—the sonic conditions that stabilise, confirm, or reframe a destination. Cadential meaning is therefore contextual rather than absolute: the same sonority may act as a point of arrival in one setting and as a midpoint or point of suspension in another, depending on its preparatory motion and perceptual framing (Meyer, 1956; Huron, 2006).

By framing harmony as directional expectancy rather than symbolic structure, this definition provides a foundation for teaching harmonic motion across diverse contemporary genres. It also enables harmonic practices commonly treated as "non-functional" to be understood not as exceptions, but as alternative configurations of harmonic flow, aligning harmony pedagogy with perceptual and practice-led understandings of musical motion (Seow, 2024).

Harmonic Topologies: Steps, Spirals, and Fields

To support the teaching and articulation of harmonic flow across contemporary repertoires, this article proposes three recurring topologies of harmonic motion: Steps, Spirals, and Fields. These categories are not intended as ontological claims about harmonic structure, nor as mutually exclusive analytical systems. Instead, they function as pedagogical heuristics—ways of organising how harmonic direction is perceived and enacted in practice.

In many musical contexts, these topologies coexist and interact. A single passage may combine stepwise bass motion within a broader spiral of harmonic centres, or maintain a harmonic field while local step-based movements occur above or within it. The value of the typology lies not in classification for its own sake, but in its capacity to give students and educators a shared language for describing different kinds of harmonic motion without immediately defaulting to Roman-numeral analysis.

Steps: Incremental Harmonic Motion

Step-based harmonic flow is characterised by root motion in small scalar units, most commonly whole- or half-step movement. In such contexts, the bass often functions as a primary perceptual anchor: listeners perceive harmonic direction through the incremental displacement of the lowest pitch, even when the upper voices remain relatively stable. Research in music cognition and theory has shown that bass motion and minimal pitch displacement play a central role in shaping perceived smoothness and inevitability in harmonic progressions (Huron, 2016; Tymoczko, 2011).

Step-based motion is particularly prevalent in contemporary popular music, ballads, and loop-based forms, in which harmonic direction is generated through gradual movement rather than through overt functional progression. Because each step may feel locally stable, directional energy often accumulates through the sequence rather than through cadential

force. Such progressions may therefore feel continuously in motion while resisting clear points of closure.

A common pedagogical difficulty associated with step-based harmony arises when students treat each chord as an isolated object rather than as part of a continuous trajectory. This is frequently audible when learners transpose entire chord shapes in parallel motion without attending to voice-leading efficiency, resulting in progressions that move harmonically but lack perceptual smoothness. Studies of voice-leading perception indicate that inefficient motion—particularly large or unnecessary pitch displacements—can disrupt listeners' sense of continuity even when harmonic labels remain correct (Huron, 2016; Wall et al., 2020).

Signature step-based diagnostic: constant-root reharmonisation. A particularly effective diagnostic for step-based flow involves holding the bass constant while systematically varying upper-structure harmonisation. Students may be asked to sustain a single bass pitch (e.g., C) while cycling through multiple chord qualities or functions above it (e.g., Cmaj7, C6, Cadd9, Csus, Cm7, C7, Cø7). The task foregrounds how harmonic direction can change without root motion, thereby prompting learners to attend to voice-leading tendencies, colour, and expectancy rather than to positional function.

This exercise reveals a common misconception: students often assume that harmonic motion is driven primarily by changes in the root. By removing root motion entirely, the diagnostic demonstrates that step-based flow and harmonic momentum can arise from upper-voice displacement alone, preparing students to hear stepwise bass motion later as cumulative motion rather than as isolated chord changes. Such activities foreground the role of minimal displacement and cumulative motion in shaping harmonic expectancy, reinforcing the idea that harmonic flow may emerge from incremental change rather than dramatic functional shifts.

Spirals: Cyclic Harmonic Motion

Spiral-based harmonic flow involves root motion organised around fixed interval cycles rather than scalar adjacency. The most familiar example is the circle of fifths, though spiral motion may also occur through other equal-interval systems, such as cycles of major or minor thirds. In these contexts, harmonic direction is experienced as rotational rather than linear: the music appears to move continuously while maintaining a sense of structural coherence.

Unlike step-based motion, spiral flow often generates strong expectancy even when individual chord-to-chord relationships are non-diatonic. Directionality arises not from proximity within a scale, but from the recognisability of the cycle itself. In practice-led

contexts, cyclic root motion is frequently perceived as coherent and directional, even when key-centred analysis becomes strained. Rather than relying on abstract functional naming, listeners often orient to the consistency of the interval cycle itself, experiencing harmonic motion as rotational continuity rather than linear progression.

A recurring student difficulty in spiral contexts is the inability to hear non-diatonic root motion as directional rather than disruptive. When harmonic instruction prioritises diatonic function as the primary criterion of correctness, cyclic motion outside a single key may be misheard as arbitrary or incorrect, despite its strong sense of flow. Empirical studies on stylistic enculturation confirm that harmonic expectancy is shaped by exposure to genre, allowing listeners to perceive coherence in progressions that violate classical diatonic norms (Temperley & de Clercq, 2013).

Pedagogically, spiral flow can be approached through constrained exercises that emphasise intervallic consistency rather than functional naming. In this framework, spiral coherence is treated not as a universal perceptual law but as a cultivated listening skill, developed through repeated exposure to constrained interval cycles and reinforced through guided articulation rather than fixed-tonic analysis. In practice-led settings, one practical approach is a circle-of-n drill: students cycle through a fixed root interval across all 12 pitch-classes (e.g., fifths, minor thirds, major thirds), while systematically varying chord quality

(e.g., all major triads, all minor triads, all diminished, all dominant-sevenths), and articulating how the momentum state changes as quality changes, even when the interval-cycle remains constant. This aligns with a pedagogical emphasis on hearing cyclic motion as continuity rather than as a diatonic 'error,' and it also accommodates multi-tonic or axis-like systems by treating the cycle itself as the organising logic.

Such tasks shift attention from symbolic correctness to perceptual continuity, reinforcing the experience of harmonic motion as a sustained directional process.

Fields: Sustained Harmonic Environments

Field-based harmonic flow refers to contexts in which harmonic direction is generated within a sustained-pitch environment rather than through explicit root motion. Common examples include pedal points, drones, modal centres, and riff-based harmonic frameworks. In these settings, harmonic momentum is often shaped by changes in colour, register, density, or characteristic pitch emphasis rather than by chord succession.

Within a harmonic field, a single pitch or collection of pitches functions as a stabilising reference point. Directional energy emerges through departures from, returns to, or recontextualisations of that reference. Research across music theory, ethnomusicology, and cognition has demonstrated that sustained reference tones firmly anchor perception, allowing

listeners to experience tension and release as relational phenomena even in the absence of functional progression (Meyer, 1956; Clarke, 2017; Vujović, 2017).

In modal systems, characteristic pitches may act as internal anchors within the field, producing tension when emphasised and release when resolved back toward the modal centre. Studies of Indian classical music, for example, show that the drone (Sa) provides a continuous tonal frame against which melodic motion generates expectancy and resolution without modulation or chordal function (Clarke, 2017; Deva, 1950).

A frequent pedagogical challenge in field-based harmony is students' difficulty identifying the field's stabilising element. Without internalising the characteristic tones of a mode or the function of a pedal point, learners may experience harmonic change as static or confusing, even when substantial directional movement is present. Research on pedal points and drones indicates that once listeners recognise a sustained anchor, they reorganise their listening expectations around it, hearing motion as orbit rather than progression (Vujović, 2017).

Teaching strategies for field-based flow often prioritise embodied and aural anchoring over symbolic analysis. One practical approach involves sustaining or vocalising the field anchor (such as a tonic or characteristic pitch) while harmonic colours shift above it. This

allows students to experience harmonic tension as a relational phenomenon within a stable environment, reinforcing the idea that harmonic motion can occur without overt progression.

Interaction and Coexistence

While presented separately for pedagogical clarity, Steps, Spirals, and Fields frequently operate simultaneously. A progression may unfold stepwise within a larger spiral of tonal centres, or a harmonic field may be momentarily disrupted by step-based motion before re-establishing stability. Recognising these interactions enables learners to articulate harmonic flow with greater nuance, moving beyond binary distinctions between "functional" and "non-functional" harmony.

By treating these topologies as perceptual tools rather than analytical absolutes, educators can help students hear how harmonic motion is shaped across diverse contemporary practices. This framework prepares the ground for examining how specific harmonic choices encode stylistic and expressive tendencies—an issue explored in detail through the genre-comparative example in the following section.

Harmonic Momentum States

While the topologies outlined above describe how harmonic motion is organised, educators and students often require language for describing how that motion feels. Traditional harmonic instruction frequently relies on categorical labels—tonic, subdominant,

dominant—which, while analytically useful, can obscure the experiential qualities of harmonic direction, particularly in contemporary or post-functional contexts. To address this gap, this framework introduces a compact lexicon of harmonic momentum states intended for pedagogical articulation rather than formal analysis.

These states are descriptive, not prescriptive. They do not correspond rigidly to specific chord functions, nor are they mutually exclusive. Instead, they provide a way of naming recurrent perceptual experiences that arise as harmonic flow unfolds. In practice, these states often blend or shift gradually, reflecting the continuous nature of harmonic momentum. Research in music cognition supports the use of such experiential descriptors, showing that listeners track expectancy, tension, and release as dynamic perceptual processes rather than discrete symbolic categories (Meyer, 1956; Huron, 2006).

Resting

A resting state denotes moments of relative perceptual stability, in which harmonic motion appears temporarily grounded. Resting does not imply finality or closure; rather, it denotes a point at which directional energy is momentarily low. Such states are commonly associated with tonic-related sonorities, but may also occur on other harmonies depending on context, register, texture, and preceding motion.

Pedagogically, resting states are often the easiest for students to identify, as they align closely with conventional notions of resolution. However, emphasising rest as a state rather than a function allows learners to recognise stability in non-tonic environments, including modal centres, pedals, and loop-based forms. Studies of tonal stability indicate that perceived rest arises from expectancy fulfilment rather than from any single harmonic label (Krumhansl, 1990; Huron, 2006).

Asking

An asking state is characterised by heightened directional expectancy. Harmonies in this state feel incomplete or outward-facing, generating a strong sense that further motion is required. While dominant-function chords frequently produce this effect, asking states are not limited to classical dominant structures. Chromatic approach chords, altered dominants, and certain modal inflections may also generate pronounced expectancy depending on context.

In teaching contexts, framing such harmonies as “asking” rather than “dominant” allows students to hear their directional force without immediately invoking a specific theoretical grammar. Empirical research on harmonic tension supports this framing, demonstrating that expectancy is driven by probabilistic anticipation and voice-leading cues rather than by functional labels alone (Huron, 2006).

Floating / Ambiguous

A floating or ambiguous state occupies an intermediate position between rest and strong directional pull. Harmonies in this state often feel suspended, open-ended, or laterally mobile. Subdominant-related sonorities, modal mixtures, and certain extended or altered chords frequently produce this effect, though context remains decisive.

Floating states are pedagogically significant because they resist binary classification. Students accustomed to categorising chords as either “stable” or “unstable” may initially find such states difficult to articulate. Research on harmonic ambiguity suggests that listeners tolerate, and even expect, such indeterminate states, particularly in styles in which lateral motion and colouristic harmony are normative (Temperley, 2007; Vuvan & Hughes, 2019).

Alien / Recontextualised

An alien or recontextualised state arises when a harmony disrupts the prevailing harmonic grammar, producing a sense of displacement or reframing. This may occur through chromatic mediant relationships, abrupt modal shifts, or the introduction of sonorities whose implications cannot be readily absorbed into the existing flow.

Rather than being treated as errors or anomalies, such moments can be understood as strategic recontextualisations that redirect harmonic momentum. Studies of expectancy violation in music perception show that unexpected harmonic events can heighten attention

and reshape listeners' predictive models, provided they are subsequently integrated into a coherent context (Huron, 2006).

Suspension

In some contexts, it is helpful to distinguish suspension as a specific momentum state, particularly in relation to sustained tones, pedal points, and suspended-chord structures. Suspension differs from floating in that it often involves a held tension whose resolution is clearly implied but temporarily deferred. Whether treated as a distinct category or as a subset of ambiguity depends on pedagogical need.

Using Momentum States Pedagogically

The primary function of this lexicon is pedagogical. By encouraging students to articulate harmonic motion in terms of resting, asking, floating, or recontextualised states, educators can shift attention from symbolic correctness toward perceptual awareness. This language supports discussion, reflection, and creative experimentation without requiring immediate agreement on analytical interpretation.

Importantly, these states are not intended to replace existing harmonic terminology. Instead, they operate alongside formal analysis, offering an experiential layer that can guide listening and decision-making before, during, or after symbolic description. Such articulation-first approaches align with contemporary pedagogy in aural skills and jazz harmony, which

emphasise hearing function and direction prior to theoretical naming (Berkman, 2013; Rochinski, 2022; Chenette, 2021).

Harmonic Flow Encoded Through Chord Quality: The ♭III Slot Across Idioms

The preceding sections have outlined a framework for understanding harmonic flow as directional expectancy shaped by voice-leading tendencies, contextual stability, and perceptual momentum. This section demonstrates how that framework operates in practice through a focused genre-comparative example. The example centres on a single harmonic position—here referred to as the ♭III slot—and shows how different idiomatic realisations of that position produce distinct harmonic momentum states despite near-identical structural conditions.

The purpose of this comparison is not to propose a new harmonic taxonomy, but to illustrate how chord quality choices encode stylistic momentum grammars. The example reveals why harmonic flow cannot be fully explained by Roman-numeral function alone: although the formal position and root motion remain constant, the music's felt directionality changes substantially according to idiomatic expectations embedded in chord quality and voice-leading design.

The Shared Harmonic Scaffold

Across many contemporary repertoires, harmonic motion frequently unfolds through familiar formal patterns that establish clear destinations while allowing substantial variation in intermediate positions. The present example abstracts such a pattern to highlight a recurring mid-progression position commonly occupied by a chromatic mediant relationship to the prevailing tonic.

For analytical clarity, the scaffold may be represented schematically as:

I – IV – iii – ♭III – ii – V(sus) – I

This representation is intentionally reductive. The precise harmonic labels are less important than the structural observation that the ♭III position functions as a midpoint, not as a destination. It is approached and departed quickly, yet it exerts a disproportionate influence on the perceived flow of the progression. Notably, the surrounding harmonic motion remains broadly comparable across stylistic contexts, allowing differences in felt momentum to be attributed primarily to the treatment of the ♭III slot itself.

Smooth Flow: ♭IIIm7 in Mandopop and R&B-Influenced Pop

In R&B-influenced pop ballad practice (including many Mandopop ballad idioms), the ♭III slot is often realised with minor-coloured sonorities such as ♭IIIm7. In this practice-led usage, ♭IIIm7 functions less as a structural destination than as a colouristic midpoint: it adds

“soft chromatic warmth,” broadens the diatonic surface, and sustains forward motion without activating the stronger expectancy profile typical of dominant-coloured substitutes. When placed inside stepwise bass motion (e.g., IV–♭IIIm7–IIm7), the chord’s perceived contribution is often continuity—smoothness and affect—more than centrifugal pull.

Perceptually, this realisation tends to generate a smooth momentum state. The ♭IIIm7 neither demands resolution nor sharply recontextualises the harmonic field. Instead, it functions as a gentle chromatic inflection that sustains forward motion without interrupting the prevailing affect. From a pedagogical perspective, students often report that this version of the ♭III slot sounds “natural” or “comfortable,” even when its theoretical basis has not yet been articulated.

Rich Flow: ♭III7(#11) in Jazz and the American Songbook

In jazz and American Songbook traditions, the same ♭III position is commonly realised as ♭III7(#11). Here, the addition of dominant-seventh quality and altered colour transforms the harmonic role of the slot. Rather than acting as a smooth intermediary, the chord becomes a source of directional pressure, often functioning as a substitute or secondary dominant to redirect harmonic momentum.

Jazz theory and practice document the ♭III7 as a recurring chromatic dominant device for expanding tonal space while maintaining coherence, including substitute-dominant motion

toward ii and dominant-type motion toward ♭VI. The characteristic #11 colouring supports efficient voice-leading and reinforces the chord's centrifugal pull (Levine, 1995; Berkman, 2013).

This realisation produces a rich momentum state. The harmonic surface becomes charged with expectancy, and the ♭III7(#11) momentarily reorients tonal gravity before the progression regains balance. Importantly, this effect arises without altering the formal position of the chord: the change in perceived flow is driven by chord quality and idiomatic expectancy rather than by structural function alone.

Complex Flow: ♭III°7 in Musical Theatre and Seasonal Repertoires

In musical theatre and seasonal "standard" repertories, diminished-seventh sonorities are often heard as compact chromatic intensifiers within stepwise bass contexts (e.g., I–♭III°7–IIm7). In this idiom, the fully diminished quality tends to read less as a modulatory event and more as a tightly voiced passing device: it heightens local instability, increases surface momentum, and then releases that energy into the following pre-cadential area. Heard as flow, the effect is a brief surge—an intensification that preserves narrative direction while sharpening the sense of approach.

The resulting momentum state may be described as complex. Unlike the smooth lateral motion of ♭IIIm7 or the outward pull of ♭III7(#11), the diminished realisation

heightens local motion while preserving narrative direction. Pedagogically, this version of the ♭III slot provides a clear illustration of how harmonic complexity can serve expressive goals without destabilising tonal orientation.

Pedagogically, this variant is useful precisely because it is strongly recognisable by ear while remaining structurally brief. In teaching contexts, this idiomatic treatment is best approached through guided listening and constrained reharmonisation rather than abstract explanation. Students are first asked to describe the felt momentum of the ♭III slot within the progression—without naming the chord—before experimenting with alternative qualities in the same position. By holding the formal location constant, learners can hear how chord quality alone reshapes expectancy and flow. Analysis is introduced only after these distinctions are perceptually secure, reinforcing the principle that harmonic meaning emerges through listening and stylistic enculturation rather than through positional labelling.

Implications for Harmonic Flow

Across these three idiomatic realisations, the formal scaffold and root motion remain substantially unchanged. Nevertheless, the perceived harmonic flow differs markedly. The ♭III slot functions as a smooth midpoint, a rich directional pivot, or a complex transitional intensifier depending on chord quality and stylistic context.

This comparison demonstrates that harmonic flow is not determined solely by position within a progression or by abstract functional labels. Instead, chord quality encodes momentum grammar, shaping how listeners experience direction, tension, and continuity. Roman-numeral analysis alone cannot account for these differences, as it collapses distinct momentum states into a single symbolic category.

For educators, this insight offers a powerful teaching tool. By isolating a single harmonic slot and exploring its idiomatic variants, students can learn to hear harmonic flow as a culturally situated phenomenon rather than as a fixed system. This approach supports creative reharmonisation, stylistic awareness, and more nuanced listening across contemporary genres.

Pedagogical Diagnostics: Teaching Harmonic Flow

To translate the foregoing conceptual framework into teachable practice, this section outlines a set of diagnostic activities designed to elicit students' perceptions of harmonic direction before symbolic analysis. The framework proposed in this article is intended to support pedagogical diagnosis rather than prescriptive instruction. This diagnostic orientation also aligns with recent practice-led work on aural fluency assessment in contemporary music education, in which listening, articulation, and evidentiary judgement are treated as central to musicianship rather than as secondary outcomes of symbolic correctness (Seow, in press).

The diagnostics below foreground harmonic flow *before* symbolic explanation, enabling learners to engage with harmony as experienced motion rather than as an abstract labelling task.

Contextual Reframing: Hearing the Same Chord as Different Numerals

A core diagnostic for harmonic flow is contextual reframing. Students hear the *same terminal sonority* under multiple tonal frames and describe how its perceived momentum state changes.

The exercise begins with the most familiar frame: a short progression that establishes C major as I and stops on C, producing a clear resting state. The same terminal sonority is then recontextualised through a cadence in G major that stops on C, where C functions as IV. In this frame, the chord is typically perceived as stable yet non-terminal: grounded, but inviting continuation toward I.

Only after these hearings is C presented as displaced. Students hear a progression in B that cadences onto C major and stops. Although the arrival sonority is consonant in itself, it is now heard as markedly non-final, because C functions as ♭II relative to B, producing a recontextualised or strongly "asking" momentum state. A further hearing in A minor, where C functions as ♭III, is often experienced as warm or floating rather than settled.

The pedagogical objective is not analytic critique but perceptual discrimination. Students learn that *identical sonorities encode different harmonic-momentum states depending on the contextual framing*. Roman numerals are introduced only after these distinctions are heard, positioning analysis as a description of perceived flow rather than its cause.

Note on Roman-numeral conventions. Throughout this article, Roman-numeral labels are used descriptively rather than prescriptively, reflecting *perceived functions within a given listening context* rather than a single notational orthodoxy. For example, C major may be heard as I, IV, ♭II, or ♭III depending on the established frame. In A minor, C is treated here as ♭III following a common jazz and contemporary convention that references scale degrees to the parallel major; in classical minor-key analysis, the same chord is often labelled III. The distinction is not a theoretical error but an analytic emphasis: the framework prioritises the *heard harmonic role and momentum state* over lineage-specific labelling systems. Where such conventions diverge, the listener's perceptual framing takes precedence.

Field Anchor Identification: Pedals, Inner Pedals, and Characteristic Pitches

A second diagnostic targets field-based harmonic flow. Students identify and sustain the stabilising element of a harmonic field, which may appear in any register. The anchor may

be a bass pedal, a soprano pedal, or an inner-voice pedal; the defining feature is perceptual stability rather than registral placement.

In a tonal example, students sustain a fixed pitch. At the same time, harmonies shift around it, first identifying the anchor and then describing how changes above or below it create tension, colour, or release. This demonstrates that harmonic motion can occur *within* a stable environment, not only through root succession.

In modal contexts, students identify a characteristic pitch as an internal anchor within the field. For example, in D Dorian, emphasis on B natural (the raised sixth) often produces a charged colour-tone whose prolonged use increases tension and whose de-emphasis restores modal balance. A parallel non-Western example is Raga Yaman, in which the sharpened fourth (tīvrā Ma) functions as a characteristic pitch against the drone (Sa). Students sustain the drone reference while observing how emphasis on tīvrā Ma generates tension and how resolution is perceived relationally rather than cadentially.

This diagnostic reveals a common perceptual gap: learners may recognise surface harmonic change without internalising the reference point that gives that change meaning. Once the field anchor is correctly identified and sustained, harmonic flow within the field becomes audible as motion rather than stasis.

Spiral Cycle Drills: Hearing Coherence Beyond Fixed-Tonic Labelling

To diagnose spiral-based harmonic flow, students listen for root motion organised by a fixed-interval cycle, most commonly descending fifths (or ascending fourths), but also by cycles of minor or major thirds.

The exercise begins with short, familiar segments (e.g., diatonic circle-of-fifths motion) before deliberately extending beyond a single-key environment. As the cycle continues, Roman-numeral labelling relative to a fixed tonic becomes increasingly strained, yet the progression remains perceptually coherent because the governing interval cycle is still audible.

Students are encouraged to describe what they hear *before* attempting analysis: inevitability, rotation, widening, or spiral-like motion. In a second stage, learners generate their own circle-of-n progressions across all twelve pitch classes while holding the interval constant and varying chord quality (e.g., all major, all minor, all diminished). The learning outcome is the ability to hear cyclical coherence as a source of harmonic flow, independent of key-centric correctness.

Slot-Based Comparison and Idiomatic Reharmonisation

A final, confirmatory diagnostic revisits the ♭III slot discussed earlier. Students hear the same harmonic scaffold realised with different idiomatic treatments of the ♭III position

(♭IIIm7, ♭III7(#11), ♭III°7) and articulate how each alters the momentum state of the progression.

Because formal position and surrounding motion are held constant, differences in perceived flow can be attributed directly to chord quality and stylistic expectancy. This diagnostic reinforces the principle that harmonic momentum is encoded through idiomatic choice rather than through abstract function alone.

Across all diagnostics, a consistent pedagogical principle applies: articulation precedes analysis. Students describe harmonic motion in experiential terms before assigning symbolic labels, ensuring that theory remains grounded in listening and musical meaning. This sequence reverses a typical instructional pattern in which analysis is taught first, and listening is expected to follow.

By foregrounding harmonic flow as felt directionality, educators can support deeper engagement with harmony across genres and skill levels. Symbolic analysis remains valuable, but it is introduced as a tool for refining and communicating perceptual insight rather than as a substitute for it. This articulation-first approach aligns with contemporary research in aural-skills pedagogy and with practice-led traditions in jazz harmony education that prioritise hearing function and direction before theoretical naming (Chenette, 2021; Berkman, 2013).

Discussion: Harmonic Flow, Creativity, and Genre

The framework presented in this article positions harmonic flow as a central dimension of creative musicianship. By treating harmony as directional expectancy rather than as a static structure, this approach accommodates a wide range of contemporary practices, including loop-based composition, modal improvisation, extended tonality, and genre-specific reharmonisation strategies. This perspective aligns with broader pedagogical shifts that prioritise embodied listening, perceptual engagement, and stylistic enculturation over rule-based abstraction (Meyer, 1956; Huron, 2006; Clarke, 2017).

The genre-comparative analysis of the ♭III slot demonstrates that harmonic momentum is not solely structurally determined, but culturally encoded. Identical harmonic positions may carry distinct momentum grammars across idioms, reflecting shared listening histories and stylistic conventions rather than universal functional imperatives. In this sense, harmonic flow operates as a micro-cultural language: a set of expectations learned through participation in particular musical worlds (Temperley & de Clercq, 2013; Nobile, 2020).

This point also clarifies the scope of the present model. The framework is not advanced here as a transhistorical account of music as such, but as a pedagogical language for harmony-salient practices in which pitch relations contribute centrally to perceived motion. Its value, therefore, lies not in claiming explanatory reach over all musical worlds, but in helping

learners articulate directional expectancy where harmonic organisation is idiomatically meaningful.

Recognising these micro-grammars supports genre inclusivity without collapsing stylistic difference into a single analytic model. Rather than treating non-classical harmonic practices as deviations from an implicit norm, the framework allows them to be understood as internally coherent systems of directional logic. This approach resonates with contemporary critiques of canon-centric pedagogy in theory and with calls for pluralistic, practice-responsive models of musical understanding (Ewell, 2020; Tymoczko, 2011).

More broadly, articulating harmonic flow encourages a narrative understanding of harmony. Instead of asking whether a progression is theoretically correct, learners are invited to consider how harmonic choices shape movement, tension, affect, and expressive trajectory. Such framing aligns harmonic pedagogy with creative priorities, supporting composition, arranging, improvisation, and ensemble performance alongside analysis. In this respect, the present framework also aligns with recent practice-led work on ensemble fluency and specific listening in contemporary music pedagogy, extending that listening-first emphasis from groove and coordination to the domain of harmonic motion (Seow, 2026). Harmony becomes not only something to be named, but something to be shaped.

While the framework is presented here as a pedagogical model, its implications extend beyond teaching contexts. Understanding harmonic momentum as an emergent perceptual phenomenon opens avenues for further inquiry into how harmony interacts with rhythm, timbre, embodiment, and ensemble coordination—dimensions increasingly foregrounded in integrative, momentum-based approaches to musical cognition and practice-led research (Seow, 2024; Clarke, 2017).

Conclusion

This article has proposed a pedagogical framework for understanding harmonic flow as directional expectancy in contemporary music. It should therefore be understood as a domain-specific pedagogical model for contexts in which harmonic directionality is perceptually and stylistically consequential, rather than as a general theory of music. By defining harmony as the interplay of pitches over time, introducing a compact typology of harmonic motion, and articulating a small set of momentum states, the framework offers tools for teaching harmonic direction across diverse genres without privileging a single harmonic grammar.

The genre-comparative analysis of the ♭III slot illustrates how chord quality encodes stylistic momentum, demonstrating that harmonic flow cannot be reduced to positional function alone. Even when structural location remains constant, idiomatic choices reshape

expectancy, tension, and perceived direction. This insight supports more nuanced listening, creative reharmonisation, and stylistic awareness in educational settings.

Rather than replacing existing harmonic theories, the framework reframes them as resources within a broader conception of musical motion. By foregrounding harmonic flow as an experienced phenomenon—heard, felt, and articulated before it is labelled—educators and students can engage more fully with the ways harmony moves: toward, away from, and between points of stability in contemporary musical practice.

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