

How to Analyze Harmonic Progression in Polyphonic Music

When a musical texture doesn't divide itself naturally into melody and accompaniment, it can often be hard to determine what the true harmonic progression is. Here are some ways of finding the true harmonic progression in a polyphonic texture.

1. Longer notes are often chord tones, and can often define the sense of harmonic rhythm (i.e. how fast the chords are actually changing).
2. Arpeggios are extremely useful in defining harmonic progression, but be careful to consider how the arpeggio relates to the other parts. First, triadic arpeggios in a single voice are sometimes part of a seventh chord, and the fourth note of that chord is found in another voice. Second, when arpeggiated chords seem to be in inversion, they might actually be bridging a change of harmonies (e.g. D-F-G-B in a single voice could fit either G7 or the two-chord motion Dm-G).
3. Harmonic rhythm usually helps to define the meter, and though it can change at any place in a composition, it usually doesn't change that often. This means that one should expect to find harmonic changes happening at the same places that they happened in the previous measure, even while allowing for the possibility that the harmonic rhythm might change. One should also expect the harmonic changes to divide up the bars in a regular kind of way: one chord per bar, two chords per bar, three chords per bar, etc.
4. Shorter notes in scalar runs are combinations of chord tones and passing tones. To determine which is which, look to other parts first and use those to interpret the relationships in the scalar run.
5. Changes in the contour of a running line are telling. If a line changes direction on the beat, the point of change is more often a chord tone. If it changes direction on an offbeat it is more likely an upper or lower neighbor to the note that came before it (marking that note as a chord tone).