

Mark Richards

Florida State University, USA
mcrichards@fsu.edu

Multimodality and Tonal Ambiguity in Rock's Aeolian Progression

ABSTRACT

Background

While rock's Aeolian progression has been described by Biamonte (2010), Everett (2009), and Moore (1992), among others, as residing in the Aeolian mode as bVI-bVII-i, its conflation with a major-mode interpretation of IV-V-vi and the tonal ambiguity that results have not been discussed in any great detail. This ambiguity can arise in two ways: 1) when the progression or the phrase in which it occurs lacks an initial tonic harmony of either the major or Aeolian mode, and 2) when the surrounding passages waver between different tonal centers, usually major and Aeolian. When the progression entails such multimodal possibilities, the tonality is generally clarified through the melodic structure of the progression. More specifically, a particular mode is favored when notes of its tonic triad are emphasized by any of several means to be described shortly. In such situations, the progression encompasses aspects of more than one mode even when a single mode is heard to dominate. Thus, rather than view these ambiguous progressions entirely in one mode or another, such an approach aims to characterize their tonal fluidity in a way not easily captured by Roman numerals.

In music of the common practice, one of the most prominent ways a minor mode is distinguished from its relative major is by raising the minor mode's leading tone in dominant harmonies. In rock, however, this note almost always remains unraised, creating the natural minor or Aeolian mode. Hence, in rock, hearing a certain diatonic collection may not per se suggest a particular tonic since it could be the basis of a major, Aeolian, or even Mixolydian or Dorian mode, all of which are common in the repertoire. It is this multimodality of rock music that allows progressions like the Aeolian to exude tonal ambiguity whereas the same progression in common-practice music would generally be tonally clear in the major-mode. Consequently, a tonal center in rock is usually established by assertion, that is, through such techniques as placing the tonic chord first and/or last in a progression or on metric and hypermetric downbeats, and through the melodic structure.

Aims and repertoire studied

As has been widely noted, the Aeolian progression was a staple of the classic rock era, and indeed it continues to be so in post-1990 rock as well. In most instances, its tonal orientation is clearly understood as bVI-bVII-i in the Aeolian mode, the final chord being either a major or minor tonic triad. But the Aeolian progression is also susceptible to tonal ambiguity through the means stated earlier. Under these circumstances, at least two different tonics are raised as possibilities for a governing mode, usually the major and Aeolian modes that share the same dia-

tonic collection. But in general, one mode does take precedence over the other without eliminating its presence, leaving the sense of tonality highly delicate. And since Roman numerals always indicate a single tonic with each of its symbols, it becomes inappropriate to apply them to the analysis of such progressions. As mentioned earlier, the primary means by which one mode supercedes the other is through the melodic emphases on notes of a mode's tonic triad.

Methods

There are several means of emphasizing tonic-triad notes in popular music. In his dissertation, Christopher Doll provided twelve factors that contribute to hearing a tonal center and harmonic function in popular music (2007, 63). I interpret these factors as encompassing a host of components that I group into five larger categories of emphasis: harmonic, temporal, rhetorical, contextual, and poetic. Harmonic emphasis describes situations in which tonic-triad notes attain a higher hierarchical status than the surrounding melodic notes due to any of several devices: arpeggiation, resolution of dissonance through contrapuntal figures, pedal point, or a melodic-harmonic divorce. Temporal emphasis involves the chronological placement of notes, that is, at beginnings or endings of vocal phrases, sections, or even entire songs, and on stresses in the meter, hypermeter, and lyrics. Rhetorical emphasis includes those parameters that Leonard Meyer called "secondary" or "statistical" parameters since, in Meyer's words, they "are statistical in the sense that the relationships to which they give rise are typically ones of degree that can be measured and counted" (Meyer 1989, 209). These encompass such devices as note repetition, relatively long durations, melodic high and low points, changes in texture, timbre, or melodic style, and stresses due to loudness. Contextual emphasis accounts for the tonal influence of external passages on that being heard, in other words, other sections of the same song, parallels between sections or between different songs, and expectations or biases derived from the norms of popular music or particular subgenres. Finally, poetic emphasis involves meanings interpreted from the lyrics or perhaps from any external analysis, even by the songwriters or performing artists themselves.

Even with these means of emphasis tipping the scale in favor of one mode, tonality in the Aeolian progression can shift subtly from one mode to the other. Hence, when ambiguity arises in the progression, hearing one tonality override another is not an all-or-nothing perception of one of the possible modes, but rather a combination of two centers that may occur in varying proportions.

To demonstrate how sensitive the progression's tonality is to different melodic structures, imagine a song beginning with the progression FM-GM-Am. Since this progression lacks an initial minor chord, the Aeolian mode cannot be established through temporal emphasis by stating its tonic chord on a hy-

permetric downbeat and in the psychologically prominent first position in the progression (and the song). But considering that the typical setting of this progression in popular music is in the Aeolian mode as bVI–bVII–I, there is a contextual emphasis that enters here. In other words, when other disambiguating cues are absent, the Aeolian mode becomes a kind of background default within which we hear the progression. This default, which I call the *Aeolian-mode bias*, remains in effect unless or until other tonal cues contradict it or otherwise refine it.

Implications

Rock's Aeolian progression is not always set entirely and unequivocally in the Aeolian mode. Because rock generally lacks raised leading tones and regularly draws on several different modes, a single diatonic collection can be the source of multiple tonalities. This multimodality of rock music lends itself to tonal ambiguity as progressions like the Aeolian that are set in a particular context can be interpreted in more than one mode. As we have seen in such situations, melody and the influence of surrounding passages usually allow us to hear one mode as primary at any given point amid the cloud of conflicting tonalities. In this way, this paper has attempted to demonstrate that, while rock's harmonies themselves are often mere triads that are strung together into simple repeated loops, hearing tonality in the progressions they form can be an engaging, complicated, and fascinating affair.

Keywords

Harmony, tonality, Aeolian progression, VI-VII-I, IV-V-vi, tonal ambiguity, major/minor ambiguity, popular music, rock music.

REFERENCES

- Biamonte, Nicole. 2010. "Triadic Modal and Pentatonic Patterns in Rock Music." *Music Theory Spectrum* 32/2: 95–110.
- de Clercq, Trevor, and David Temperley. 2011. "A Corpus Analysis of Rock Harmony." *Popular Music* 30/1: 47–70.
- . 2013. "Statistical Analysis of Harmony and Melody in Rock Music." *Journal of New Music Research* 42/3: 187–204.
- Doll, Christopher. 2007. "Listening to Rock Harmony." PhD diss., Columbia University.
- . 2011. "Rockin' Out: Expressive Modulation in Verse-Chorus Form." *Music Theory Online* 17/3.
- . 2017. *Hearing Harmony: Towards a Tonal Theory for the Rock Era*. University of Michigan Press.
- Everett, Walter. 2004. "Making Sense of Rock's Tonal Systems." *Music Theory Online* 10/4.
- . 2008. "Pitch Down the Middle." In *Expression in Pop-Rock Music: Critical and Analytical Essays*, 2nd ed., edited by Walter Everett, 111–74. New York: Routledge.
- . 2009. *The Foundations of Rock: From Blue Suede Shoes to Suite: Judy Blue Eyes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Allan. 1992. "Patterns of Harmony." *Popular Music* 11/1: 73–106.
- . 2012. *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate.
- Nobile, Drew F. 2015. "Counterpoint in Rock: Unpacking the 'Melodic-Harmonic Divorce.'" *Music Theory Spectrum* 37/2: 189–203.
- Spicer, Mark. 2017. "Fragile, Emergent, and Absent Tonics in Pop and Rock Songs." *Music Theory Online* 23/2.
- Stephenson, Ken. 2002. *What to Listen for in Rock: A Stylistic Analysis*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Tagg, Philip. 2014. *Everyday Tonality: Towards a Tonal Theory of What Most People Hear*. 2nd ed. Larchmont, NY: Mass Media Music Scholars' Press.
- Temperley, David. 2011. "The Cadential IV in Rock." *Music Theory Online* 17/1.