

Counterpoint in Rock Music: Unpacking the “Melodic-Harmonic Divorce”

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This article offers a contrapuntal explanation of the “melodic-harmonic divorce,” a feature of pop and rock music discussed most recently by David Temperley (2007). I outline three types of melodic-harmonic divorce: “hierarchy divorce,” “loop divorce,” and “syntax divorce.” Each type gives rise to its own voice-leading interpretation. After discussing the contrapuntal frameworks of these three types, I investigate the rhetorical effect of “loosening” and “tightening” the melodic-harmonic relationship over the course of a rock song, showing that the divorce is not just a structural feature but can have expressive effects as well.

Keywords: rock music, popular music, counterpoint, harmony, melodic-harmonic divorce, Schenkerian analysis.

It is no secret that popular music does not always exhibit strict counterpoint. Often, melody and harmony are at such odds with one another that the two seem to operate entirely independently. Allan Moore first referred to this phenomenon as a “divorce” nearly two decades ago, noting its association with blues songs.¹ Several other authors have since discussed the divorce, including Ken Stephenson, who shows that $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{5}$ often act as stable tones even if they are dissonant with the underlying chords, and Peter van der Merwe, who offers a more historical approach that traces the origins of the melodic-harmonic divorce to nineteenth-century Viennese music.² In the most extensive study of the topic to date, David Temperley (2007) attempts to enumerate the specific conditions under which this divorce usually occurs. Temperley claims that the divorce is most common “in pentatonically based melodies, and in verses rather than choruses.”³

In this article, I investigate how we might interpret the melodic-harmonic divorce from the perspective of voice leading. Since the traditional rules of counterpoint do not apply in these situations, what processes, if any, govern melodic and harmonic structure? To answer this question, I will outline three types of melodic-harmonic divorce, each of which gives rise to its own voice-leading interpretation. Type 1, which I term a “hierarchy divorce,” is the most common and occurs when the melody exists at a deeper level of structure than the harmony. In other words, the foreground *chords* participate in embellishments while the melody continues to outline a

prolonged harmony.⁴ Type 2, a “loop divorce,” arises when the harmony contains a “chord loop,” a progression of two to four chords that leads back to its own beginning. The lack of goal-oriented harmonic motion in these songs places the onus on the melody to create formal structure and delineate phrases independently of the underlying chords. And Type 3, a “syntax divorce,” arises when both melody and harmony participate in a cadence or other structural motion but in incompatible ways—for example, when a IV–I cadence supports $\hat{2}$ – $\hat{1}$ in the upper voice.

All three types have one thing in common: when the melodic-harmonic divorce exists, the melody generally revolves around the tonic triad. This reflects both Stephenson’s claim that $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{5}$ are the most common melodic “pedals” above a changing harmonic backdrop and Temperley’s claim that melodies that are divorced from harmony are generally pentatonic in nature; I would add the possibility of a melodic pedal on $\hat{3}$ to Stephenson’s $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{5}$, and I interpret Temperley’s pentatonic melodies as the tonic triad with embellishing tones. Essentially this means that the notes of the tonic triad, which are always stable at the deepest structural level, can under certain circumstances act as stable tones even if they are dissonant with the foreground harmonies.

The melodic-harmonic divorce can be a structurally significant feature of a rock song, and often a song’s progression between “loose” and “tight” melodic-harmonic relationships (i.e., more divorced or more in sync) has formal and expressive significance. The terms “loose” and “tight” in reference to the melodic-harmonic divorce are Temperley’s, used specifically in his claim that songs often contain loose verses and tight choruses.⁵ As I will discuss, I have found several examples that do not follow the loose verse/tight chorus paradigm, and so

¹ Moore (1995, 188–89).

² Stephenson (2002, 74–82); van der Merwe (1989, 225–32). See also Stoa (2008, 34–40) for a general discussion of dissonance treatment in blues songs. Straus (2014) discusses a similar stratification of melodic and harmonic layers in the music of Stravinsky.

³ Temperley (2007, 323).

⁴ Such phenomena in jazz and ragtime are discussed in Winkler (1978, 16–18).

⁵ Temperley (2007, 335–40).

I question Temperley's claim that this paradigm is "a particularly favored strategy for the construction of rock songs."⁶ However, it is often the case that the moment at which the melodic-harmonic relationship "tightens" coincides with an important formal event, such as a cadence or section boundary. Such coincidence of form and melodic-harmonic tightness suggests that the divorce is not just a contrapuntal feature but can have expressive effects as well; for instance, when the loose verse/tight chorus paradigm applies, Temperley posits that it reflects "a contrast between unity and individual freedom," a contrast that is often reflected in the song's lyrics.⁷ The final section of this article will discuss some other possible expressive interpretations of the melodic-harmonic divorce and its relation to form.

Before taking a look at the three types of divorce, I would like to clarify the meaning of the term "melodic-harmonic divorce." This term is potentially problematic. First, it assumes that melody and harmony are separable layers of a piece of music. In Temperley's article, it is clear that by "harmony" he means the chord progression implied by the instrumental accompaniment without taking into account the vocal melody, which is how I will use the term as well. A divorce occurs when the melody does not follow this chord progression (e.g., by not resolving non-chord tones by step). The word "divorce" is itself problematic, as it implies both that the melody and accompaniment are not related at all (which is rarely the case) and that they were at some prior point "married." The latter assumes a historical lineage from common-practice tonality to rock music—a lineage that is dubious at best.⁸ To avoid multiple terms for the same concept, I will retain the term "melodic-harmonic divorce" with the understanding that I am using it to mean a stratification of the melodic and accompanimental layers.

TYPE I: HIERARCHY DIVORCE

In classical harmony, we recognize that chords can serve an embellishing function akin to melodic passing and neighboring tones. There is an important difference, though, between embellishing chords and melodic embellishments: the latter can occur without harmonic support, while the former must support a locally stable melodic tone. Consider Example 1. In Example 1(a), we have a typical embellishing progression, with the melodic passing tone D (2̂) harmonized by V₅^o, embellishing the tonic. In this case, both melody and harmony participate in the embellishment. In Example 1(b), the melody participates in the embellishment with its passing tone, but the harmony does not—a typical occurrence as well. Example 1(c) shows the opposite: the harmony participates in the embellishment, but the melody does not. This is considered incorrect in common-practice theory because of the unresolved nonharmonic tone over the second chord. In pop and rock music, however, this process is common and is responsible for the first type of melodic-harmonic divorce.

- (a) Neighboring chord harmonizes passing tone. (b) Unharmonized passing tone. (c) Neighboring chord with no passing tone: incorrect in common-practice theory.

The image shows three musical examples labeled (a), (b), and (c). Each example consists of a treble clef staff with a melody and a bass clef staff with chords. Example (a) shows a melody with a passing tone (PT) D over a tonic triad (I), a dominant fifth chord (V₅^o), and another tonic triad (I). Example (b) shows the same melody but with only the tonic triad (I) in the bass. Example (c) shows the melody with a passing tone (PT) D over a tonic triad (I), a dominant fifth chord (V₅^o), and another tonic triad (I). An asterisk (*) is placed under the V₅^o chord in (c), indicating it is considered incorrect in common-practice theory.

EXAMPLE 1. *Melodic and harmonic embellishments can occur together (a), or the melody alone can embellish (b), but in common-practice theory the harmony cannot embellish while the melody does not (c).*

Let me illustrate this point with two examples, both of which are mentioned in Temperley's article: "Jumpin' Jack Flash" by the Rolling Stones (1968) and "Rock'n Me" by the Steve Miller Band (1976). The first verse of "Jumpin' Jack Flash" is transcribed in Example 2(a). The verses of this song alternate between a tonic triad and a bVII chord with no third over a tonic pedal.⁹ The latter chords are clearly embellishing chords, functioning as neighboring harmonies to the tonic on weak beats in the hypermeter. The melody does not participate in this neighboring motion, remaining on b[♭]3 throughout, thus producing an instance of the melodic-harmonic divorce. Example 2(b) gives a voice-leading reduction of the verse, which shows the A5 chord to be a product of inner-voice neighboring tones. The b[♭]3 in the melody is therefore consonant with the prolonged harmony, and the apparent subtonic chord contains the embellishing tones. Because the harmonic embellishment in this song is at a very surface level—it is over a tonic pedal and returns to the chord that preceded it—it is not difficult to hear the melody as consonant with the middleground harmonic progression despite its foreground dissonance.

"Rock'n Me" contains an example of a more prominent embellishing harmony that connects two different chords (see Example 3). Temperley characterizes the melody of this song's verse as "freely traversing the pentatonic scale without much regard for the underlying chord changes."¹⁰ However, as the transcription in Example 3(a) shows, the melody is consonant with the underlying harmonies with the exception of the A5 chord in the third and fourth measures. In these measures, the melody seems to outline the tonic triad (embellished with pentatonic neighbor and passing tones) while the harmony has proceeded to the subtonic. This melodic-harmonic divorce suggests that the A5 chord is an embellishing harmony and that the basic progression of the verse is I for four measures, IV for two measures, and back to I for the final two measures. The A5 chord might thus be interpreted as a harmonized passing

6 Ibid. (336).

7 Ibid. (337).

8 This assumption surfaces in van der Merwe (1989).

9 The notation "A5" stands for the "power chord" whose root is A, containing only root and fifth with no third.

10 Temperley (2007, 331).

(a) Transcription of verse 1.

(b) Reduction of verse 1.

EXAMPLE 2. *The Rolling Stones, "Jumpin' Jack Flash" (1968).*

(a) Transcription of verse 1.

(b) Reduction of verse 1, showing the A5 chord as a harmonized passing seventh in the bass prolonging the tonic harmony.

EXAMPLE 3. *The Steve Miller Band, "Rock'n Me" (1976).*

seventh prolonging (and destabilizing) the tonic harmony by turning it into V_2^4/IV , as shown in Example 3(b).

The divorce continues into the chorus, which contains the same chord progression as the verse with three-part vocal harmonies over the main melodic line (see Example 4). Interestingly, the vocal harmonies are different in the first and second choruses

over the A5 chord, and in neither chorus do they match the harmony. In the second chorus, the vocal parts reflect the analysis given in Example 3(b), with the A5 chord representing the flattened seventh of the tonic chord. In fact, the impression of a third-inversion B7 chord is even stronger here than in the verse given that the tetrachord A–B–D#–F# appears as a simultaneity.

CHORUS 1

starts at 0:58

So keep on rock-in' me ba - by Keep on a - rock-in' me ba - by Keep on a -

rock - in' me ba - by Keep on a - rock - in' me ba - by

CHORUS 2

starts at 1:29

Keep on a - rock-in' me ba - by Keep on a - rock-in' me ba - by Keep on a -

rock-in' me ba - by Keep on a - rock-in' me ba - by ba - by ba - by ba - by keep on rock-in'

EXAMPLE 4. *The Steve Miller Band, "Rock'n Me," chorus 1 and chorus 2, with different vocal harmonies indicated, neither of which is consonant with the underlying harmony.*

In the first chorus, though, the vocal parts outline an E-major triad over the A5 chord. This perhaps suggests that a subdominant prolongation actually begins in the third measure, with the A5 harmony acting as an appoggiatura chord (i.e., IV⁴⁻³ in mm. 3–7).¹¹ Indeed, even in the verse (Example 3), the melody hints at the E-major harmony in m. 3 with its G \sharp –B motion before returning to outline the tonic triad. Whichever interpretation one prefers, it is clear that mm. 3–4 represent a transition between the B and E chords in both harmony and melody. Thus in each eight-measure unit, we have two measures of stable tonic, two measures of unstable between-I-and-IV material, two measures of subdominant as middleground neighbor, and two measures of return to stable tonic.

Examples like “Jumpin’ Jack Flash” and “Rock’n Me” demonstrate situations in which the melody exists at a deeper level of structure than the harmony. The phenomenon sheds light on the harmonic organization of the passage as a whole by helping to identify which harmonies are structural and which are embellishments. In both examples, a subtonic chord was shown to be an embellishment of tonic, either as a neighboring chord (“Jumpin’ Jack Flash”) or a passing chord (“Rock’n Me”). The subtonic is a common embellishing harmony, especially in one of these two progressions, and frequently participates in a melodic-harmonic divorce. Some other examples of its use as a

neighboring harmony include the chorus of 311’s 1995 single “All Mixed Up” (Example 5) and the verses of Sublime’s “Wrong Way” from the following year.¹² Examples of its use as a passing harmony between I and IV include the coda to the Beatles’ “Hey Jude” (1968) and the J. Geils Band’s “Centerfold” (1981); in the latter, $bVII$ is used as a passing harmony both from I to IV and from IV back to I (Example 6).

Besides $bVII$, the most common embellishing chord is IV acting as a neighboring chord to the tonic.¹³ This chord usually occurs in a weak hypermetric position and the melody often remains on the tonic, effecting a hierarchy divorce. An early example is the opening of the Beatles’ “A Hard Day’s Night” (1964), in which the melody remains on $\hat{5}$ over the progression I–IV–I (Example 7). Although this is a simple example of the divorce, it raises an issue that will return in the discussion of the syntax divorce below: is the melody’s D really a nonchord tone, or do melody and accompaniment combine to make a C^{add9} chord? One might ask if there is a difference between these two interpretations. Both identify a structure in which a D has been added to a C-major triad. But calling the second chord C^{add9} conflates two structural levels: the melody’s D does not belong to the C chord, but to the overarching G-major sonority. Recall Example 1(b) above; in that example, there is no C^{add9} chord

11 This interpretation is at odds with the hypermeter, though; appoggiaturas generally fall on stronger hyperbeats than their resolutions, but m. 3 is weaker than m. 5, the latter being the downbeat of a four-measure hypermeasure.

12 In both of these songs, the I– $bVII$ progression acts as a chord loop or oscillation; see Maloney (2010) and the section on the “loop divorce” below.

13 Following Caplin (1998, 25), I use the term “neighboring chord” to signify a prolongational chord that separates two instances of the same chord, whether or not there is a literal neighboring motion in any particular voice (though there usually is).

starts at 1:04

All mixed up, you don't know what to do, next thing you turn a-round and find the per-son is you

EXAMPLE 5. 311, “All Mixed Up” (1995), first two measures of chorus: the melody remains on the tonic during the neighboring subtonic harmony.

harmonic reduction:

I ————— IV —————

EXAMPLE 6. J. Geils Band, “Centerfold” (1981), transcription of guitar riff (top staff). The harmonic reduction on the lower staff shows the subtonic chords as passing harmonies.

It's been a hard day's night

EXAMPLE 7. The Beatles, “A Hard Day’s Night” (1964), opening of verse 1: $\hat{5}$ remains in the melody over the progression I–IV–I.

on the second quarter note because the melodic passing tone D does not exist on the same structural level as the C-major chord. Though in both Example 1(b) and “A Hard Day’s Night” we hear the simultaneity C–E–G–D, the D is set apart from C–E–G. In “A Hard Day’s Night,” D is the stable fifth of the prolonged G chord and the C triad is a less-stable neighboring chord.¹⁴

Ben Folds’s “Still Fighting It,” from his 2001 album *Rockin’ the Suburbs*, exhibits several consecutive I–IV–I progressions over which the melody remains on the tonic triad. The first verse is transcribed in Example 8. In the first seven measures, the piano accompaniment alternates tonic and subdominant chords in various inversions (the second-inversion tonic in m. 5 is a consonant I_2^4). The melody all the while outlines the sixth between G and E. We can therefore interpret the subdominant chords, all of which are hypermetrically weak, as neighboring chords prolonging tonic. We probably do not need the melodic-harmonic divorce to come to this conclusion. However, the hierarchy divorce sets up the moment when the structural pre-dominant arrives (m. 10), which is also the moment that the divorce ends and the melody moves for the first time to an unstable tone ($\hat{4}$). The effect of this remarriage of melody and harmony is a

strengthening of the pre-dominant function of the IV chord. Measures 9–12 contain what William Caplin would call an “expanded cadential progression,” beginning with a first-inversion tonic chord and proceeding through IV to the dominant, which is here represented by a cadential six-four that only half resolves.¹⁵ The achievement of the melodic peak in m. 9 sets up the end of the divorce in m. 10, when IV supports $\hat{4}$. Although we have already heard the IV chord numerous times in this verse, this time it brings the melody along with it, causing this IV chord to be heard as more than a simple neighboring harmony and instead as a pre-dominant, driving the music toward the cadence. Example 9 gives a reduction of the verse, showing a tonic prolongation through the climactic achievement of $\hat{5}$ in m. 9, setting up the cadential progression.

In the above examples, the melodic-harmonic divorce comes about when the two domains exist on different levels of structure. Specifically, the melody projects a deeper level than the harmony. In this interpretation, the two are not “divorced” per se; they seem conflicted on the foreground, but at a deeper level they work together. The chords that participate in the divorce are analogous to melodic non-chord tones and are either prepared by or resolve into structural harmonies. As mentioned above, in a melodic-harmonic divorce the melody most often outlines the tonic triad. When the melody and harmony exist at different structural levels it is therefore usually within an overall tonic prolongation; during pre-dominant and dominant prolongations, the melody is much more likely to be consonant with the foreground chords. (A significant exception is when IV supports $\hat{2}$ in a cadence, which is common in a syntax divorce, discussed below.)

TYPE 2: LOOP DIVORCE

Rock songs are often based on repeated sequences of two to four chords that lead back to their own beginning rather than to any sort of structural goal. I will use the term *chord loop* for such

15 See Caplin (1998 and 2004). The verses of “Still Fighting It” use the *Dominantparallel*—a V chord with a sixth substituting for its fifth; see Riemann (1896 [1893])—twice, as $\hat{3}$ seems unwilling to descend to $\hat{2}$. The melody in the chorus then centers on $\hat{2}$ (even over tonic and subdominant harmonies) and finally descends to $\hat{1}$ at the end, though over a IV chord. In this way, the verse’s half-cadence extends into the chorus, which prolongs the dominant, creating a sense of continuity from the beginning of the verse through the end of the chorus.

14 See Doll (2013) for a deeper discussion of issues in chord labeling.

EXAMPLE 8. Ben Folds, “Still Fighting It” (2001), first verse.

EXAMPLE 9. Reduction of the verse of “Still Fighting It.”

progressions.¹⁶ Chord loops go against the usual model of goal-directed harmonic progression in that they do not really “end,” instead simply circling repeatedly. These loops are more metrical than tonal in their structure: a four-chord loop acts similarly to a four-beat measure or hypermeasure in that both move away from and back toward their initiating points; they are not progressions from point A to point B, but instead from point A back to point A.¹⁷ The relationship between chord loops and meter is often explicit, as the loops generally begin on a hyper-downbeat with each chord occupying the same duration (usually a measure or a half-measure). The lack of teleological harmonic structure has led many scholars to interpret chord loops as projecting an overall impression of stasis. William Echard, speaking about two-chord oscillations in particular, writes, “the effect of *oscillating root movement* is . . . very close to

stasis. It is perhaps the simplest way to create a changing harmonic profile without producing any net movement.”¹⁸ According to Victoria Malawey, an oscillation between chords with no hierarchical relationship creates “a continual, open-ended ebb and flow.”¹⁹

The presence of harmonic stasis does not necessarily mean the entire song is static, however. When harmony lacks a teleological structure, other musical elements come to the fore as primary agents of form. These elements are not necessarily pitch-based, of course; Malawey shows that vocal texture is the primary element of interest in certain songs by Björk, for example.²⁰ But when a song involves a chord loop, it is often the melody that independently creates a goal-directed formal layout. This is the process that underlies Type 2 of the melodic-harmonic divorce, which I call a “loop divorce.” Chord loops became more and more common in rock music throughout the 1970s and 80s so that by the 90s it was not uncommon for an entire song to consist of a single repeated loop. In such songs, the melody delineates phrases and sections through voice-leading and motivic means while the harmony is static. A striking example is Jane’s Addiction’s “Jane Says” from their 1988 album *Nothing’s Shocking*.²¹ This song contains the chord

¹⁸ Echard (2000, 121).

¹⁹ Malawey (2010, §11). See also Moore (1992) for a classification of harmonic patterns in popular music and Echard (1999) for a discussion of oscillation in Neil Young’s “Powderfinger.”

²⁰ Malawey (2010).

²¹ A live version of the song was released on the band’s self-titled debut album the previous year, but the studio recording is better known.

¹⁶ Other terms include “vamp,” “oscillation,” or “shuttle” (in the case of just two chords); see Tagg (2009, 173ff. and 199ff.) and Malawey (2010).

¹⁷ See Rothstein (1989, 28).

(a) Transcription of verse 1.

Jane says, "I'm done with Ser-gi-o. He treats me like a rag-doll." She hides the te-le-vi-sion. Says, "I don't owe him no-thing. But if he comes back a-gain, tell him to wait right here for me, or try a-gain to-mor-row. I'm gon-na kick to-mor-row, I'm gon-na kick to-mor-row."

(b) The structure of the melody projects a descent from $\hat{3}$ to $\hat{1}$ over a cover tone $\hat{5}$ in the verse.

EXAMPLE 10. *Jane's Addiction*, "Jane Says" (1988), first verse.

progression G–A for the entire song (a half-measure per chord), and so the harmony does little to clarify the phrase structure. Nevertheless, the vocal line in the verse projects an overall **srdc** phrase structure, as shown in Example 10(a). **Srdc** is Walter Everett's term for rock's version of the Classical sentence, dividing into "statement," "restatement" (or "response"), "departure," and "conclusion" phrases.²² By outlining an **srdc** structure, the melody creates a cohesive goal-directed formal structure on its own while the harmony simply repeats its chord loop. The **srdc** phrase structure of "Jane Says" is most clearly seen in the motivic content, as **s** and **r** both begin with the head motive A–F \sharp , **d** fragments the motivic units to a length of one measure each, and **c** is the refrain.²³ The melody is distinctly in D major, despite the absence of a D-major chord throughout the song, as it revolves around the D-major triad and uses the D-major scale exclusively.²⁴ The melody's voice leading further projects its **srdc** structure: the **s** and **r** phrases outline the tonic triad, focusing on the third between A and F \sharp ; the **d** phrase

moves to unstable melodic tones, now outlining the third between G and E before returning to the A–F \sharp motive in m. 12; and the **c** phrase outlines the dyad A to E, with B acting as an upper-neighbor to A. The gesture in the verse's final measure, which moves to the leading tone C \sharp , to my ear implies a resolution to D on the ensuing downbeat, making an authentic cadence despite the fact that this tonic note does not literally appear. From this melody alone, then, we can interpret an overall linear descent from $\hat{3}$ to $\hat{1}$ over a persistent cover tone $\hat{5}$, as shown in Example 10(b). One can easily imagine a reharmonization of this melody in which the chords follow the melody's voice-leading structure, prolonging I in the **s** and **r** phrases, ii in the **d** phrase, and V–I in the **c** phrase. Yet the fact that the harmony does not follow the melody but simply shuttles back and forth between IV and V does not remove the impression of the upper voice's goal-directed descent. In this song, the melody simply runs the show on its own, creating form with no help from the harmony.

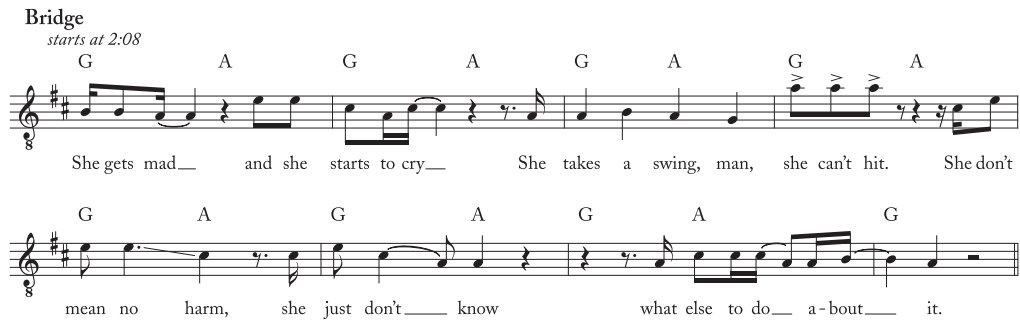
"Jane Says" shows a true divorce between melody and harmony. The chord loop does not participate in the phrase structure and essentially acts as a groove, like a drumbeat, that does not generate form. Even at moments when the melody arrives on a note that is consonant with the underlying chord, we do not perceive the two as working together. Further

²² Everett (1999, 16, and 2009, 140–41).

²³ See Summach (2011) and Nobile (2011) for discussions of the motivic qualities of **srdc** structures.

²⁴ Mark Spicer (2009) has discussed this song as an example of an "absent tonic."

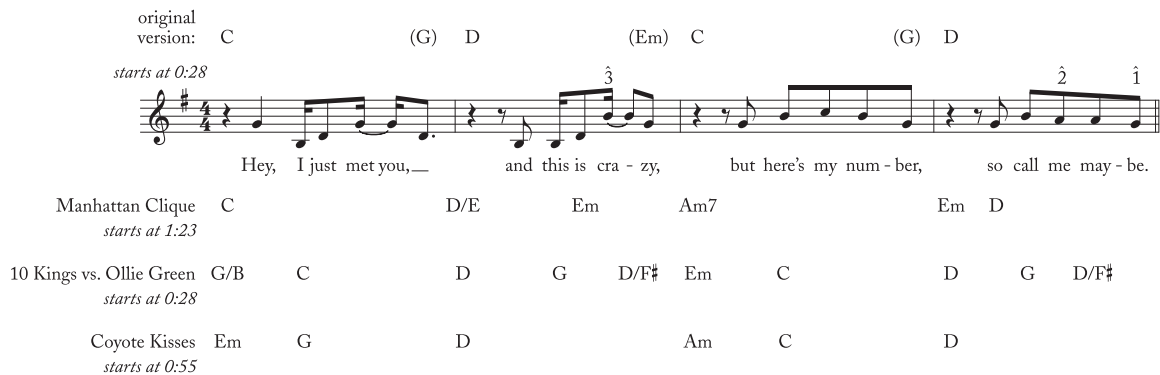
Bridge
starts at 2:08



She gets mad— and she starts to cry— She takes a swing, man, she can't hit. She don't mean no harm, she just don't— know what else to do— a-bout— it.

EXAMPLE 11. *Jane's Addiction, "Jane Says," bridge: the melody outlines the dominant triad.*

original version: C (G) D (Em) C (G) D
starts at 0:28



Hey, I just met you,— and this is cra - zy, but here's my num - ber, so call me may - be.

Manhattan Clique C D/E Em Am7 Em D
starts at 1:23

10 Kings vs. Ollie Green G/B C D G D/F# Em C D G D/F#
starts at 0:28

Coyote Kisses Em G D Am C D
starts at 0:55

EXAMPLE 12. *Carly Rae Jepsen, "Call Me Maybe" (2012), first phrase of chorus: the original version and three official remixes contain different chord progressions. This is possible because of the loop divorce in this section.*

evidence of this relationship occurs in the bridge section, transcribed in Example 11. As this example shows, the melody in the bridge outlines the dominant harmony, A major, while the accompaniment remains stuck in the same two-chord loop as before. Although one of the two chords in the loop is indeed an A-major chord, the bridge section does not constitute a remarriage of melody and harmony, as it is clear that the melody is following its own path, ignoring the chords. Outlining the dominant in the bridge is furthermore consistent with conventional voice-leading patterns, as bridge sections generally end with a "dominant retransition" and frequently prolong a V chord throughout.²⁵ "Jane Says" thus creates a full AABA form, in which the verses contain **srdc** phrase structures, with absolutely no harmonic differentiation, all by virtue of its melodic-harmonic divorce.

Chord loops are especially common in pop music of the last fifteen years, and as a result this repertoire provides copious examples of loop divorces. In these songs, the specific chords that make up the loop are generally of secondary importance, and one can often substitute a different loop without significantly affecting the song's structure. To demonstrate, let us consider the song that became the pop anthem of 2012: Carly

Rae Jepsen's "Call Me Maybe." The first phrase of the chorus is transcribed in Example 12. The melody outlines the tonic triad with $\hat{3}$ in the highest voice, ending with a $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ descent. In the original release of this song, the chord progression is similar to the progression in "Jane Says": essentially a shuttle between IV and V chords, here with a few connecting chords inserted in between, as shown above the transcription. This chord progression repeats throughout the entire song and thus acts as a chord loop. But the identity of "Call Me Maybe" is contained in the melody; the chord progression is not as integral a part of the song. Evidence for this claim comes from remixes. Jepsen's record label, 604 Records, released an EP in May 2012 containing four official remixes of the song by various DJ groups. Of the four, only one (the Almighty Club remix) retains the basic harmonic structure of the chord loop in the chorus, though all retain the original melodic track unadulterated. The chord progressions of the other three remixes are shown below the staff in Example 12. All three have similarities to the original loop—most notably some sort of subdominant-to-dominant progression in mm. 3–4—but there are some significant differences. The Manhattan Clique remix is the only one to begin on IV like the original; the others begin on some sort of tonic. The 10 Kings vs. Ollie Green progression resolves the V chord to I in mm. 2 and 4, ostensibly securing strong

²⁵ See Everett (2009) and Nobile (2011).

(a) Transcription of verse 1 (main vocal line only).

Verse

(b) Reduction of verse 1.

EXAMPLE 13. *The Beatles, "Nowhere Man" (1965): the melodic descent does not match the harmony at the cadence.*

harmonic support for both the attainment of the primary tone $\hat{3}$ and the descent to $\hat{1}$.²⁶ Yet, as in "Jane Says," the melody's structure does not seem to interact with the harmony. The chord progression is more of an afterthought, inserted to provide a backdrop for the melody rather than as a structural feature of the song. It is literally an afterthought in the remixes—added to the preexisting vocal line—but even in the original version it is clear that the melody's structure is conceptually prior to the chords. The fact that artists remixing or covering "Call Me Maybe" do not find it necessary to retain the original chord progression suggests that the melody alone contains the core aspects of the song. The harmony is thus not only divorced from the melody but also hierarchically subordinate.

TYPE 3: SYNTAX DIVORCE

Sometimes when both melody and harmony exhibit structural motion—such as a descent to $\hat{1}$ in the melody with a cadential harmonic progression—the two do not work together. Consider the Beatles' "Nowhere Man" from their 1965 album *Rubber Soul*. A transcription and graph of this song's verse is given in Example 13. The melody descends by step from $\hat{8}$ to $\hat{1}$ throughout the verse, while the harmony expresses the overall progression I–ii–iv–I. For most of the verse, the melodic descent has consonant harmonic support: $\hat{8}$ – $\hat{7}$ – $\hat{6}$ – $\hat{5}$ is supported by I–V–IV–I on the surface. At a deeper level, this progression prolongs the tonic while the melody composes out the fourth $\hat{8}$ – $\hat{5}$. As

²⁶ The D/F# chords at the end of mm. 2 and 4 are best considered passing or neighboring chords prolonging the G chords that precede them.

the verse melody moves toward the cadence, however, the melody and harmony are not so synchronized. The pre-dominant ii chord supports $\hat{4}$, which is consonant, but the minor-iv chord occurs under $\hat{3}$ – $\hat{2}$, neither of which is consonant. This iv chord acts as a "cadential IV," functioning syntactically as the dominant in the cadence.²⁷ Despite the melodic-harmonic divorce, both melody and harmony achieve the same structural motion: the melody completes its linear descent to $\hat{1}$ and the harmony completes its cadential progression. In this way, although melody and harmony are contrapuntally divorced, they are syntactically consonant; they are participating in the same syntactical process, namely a cadence.

A more recent example comes from the chorus of Alanis Morissette's "You Learn," from her 1995 breakout album *Jagged Little Pill*. Ken Stephenson discusses the $\hat{1}$ – $\hat{5}$ pedal tones in the coda of this song, occurring over the progression I–vi–V–IV, as an example of the melodic-harmonic divorce.²⁸ The chorus proper, however, contains a more subtle divorce, similar to the one in "Nowhere Man." Example 14(a) transcribes the first phrase of the chorus of "You Learn," the vocal parts of which contain a melody and a descant above it. The $\hat{1}$ – $\hat{5}$ motive that Stephenson mentions repeats in each of the first two measures. Then the melody begins to climb, first to $\hat{2}$ over V in m. 3 and then to its peak, $\hat{3}$ over IV in m. 4. Following the arrival on $\hat{3}$,

²⁷ See Nobile (2011, §4, and 2014, Chapter 2) and Temperley (2011).

²⁸ Stephenson (2002, 80). Stephenson's text claims that the divorce occurs in the chorus, but the lyrics he quotes are from the coda, which takes the $\hat{1}$ – $\hat{5}$ motive from the chorus and repeats it over the entire progression. Stephenson does not use the term "melodic-harmonic divorce," but he is discussing the same phenomenon.

(a) Transcription of the first verse of the chorus.

starts at 0:51 $A\flat$ Fm $E\flat$ $D\flat$ $A\flat$

You live, you learn, you love, you learn, you cry, you learn, you lose, you learn.

(b) Reduction of (a).

EXAMPLE 14. Alanis Morissette, “You Learn” (1995).

the melody reverses course and quickly descends stepwise to $\hat{1}$ over the title lyric “you learn.” This $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ descent is the main structural motion of the phrase, as shown in the reduction in Example 14(b). Nevertheless, neither of the descent’s first two tones is consonant with the harmony; as in “Nowhere Man,” $\hat{3}$ and $\hat{2}$ occur over a IV chord. This IV chord is furthermore a structural harmony, participating in the overall progression I–IV–I. Although at this moment the melody and harmony are divorced, both are participating in the same structure, namely directed motion toward the tonic. Once again, as in “Nowhere Man,” the two are contrapuntally divorced but syntactically consonant.

In both of the previous examples, one might be inclined to analyze $\hat{2}$ as a true chord tone, making the harmony not IV but $ii_6^{\hat{2}}$. Alternatively, one could consider it to be an added-sixth chord, IV^{add6} , making what Rameau calls an “irregular” or “imperfect” cadence leading back to the tonic.²⁹ The argument for the separation of melody and harmony made above in reference to Example 7—that they exist on different structural levels—does not apply here. Perhaps $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ supported by IV^{add6} –I is simply a conventional cadential formula in rock music that is rare in common-practice tonality. Is there even a divorce here, then? Well, I would argue that the stepwise melodic descent and the IV–I cadential progression are conceptually prior to the apparent IV^{add6} chord. This “chord” is simply a by-product of two coincident but separately unfolding processes. It ultimately does not matter whether we call $\hat{2}$ a chord tone of IV^{add6} or a nonchord tone of IV; the melodic-harmonic divorce is still active.

My next example will hopefully shed more light on this issue. Example 15(a) transcribes the chorus to Maroon 5’s “Sunday Morning,” from their 2002 album *Songs about Jane*.³⁰

This song contains a repeated ii–V–I progression throughout, often with various chord extensions added. In the chorus, the first three iterations of this chord progression occur under the melodic figure $\hat{5}-\hat{3}-\hat{1}$, as shown in Example 15(b). The question, then, is do $\hat{5}$ and $\hat{3}$ in the melody serve as an eleventh and a thirteenth of the ii and V chords that support them, or is this a melodic-harmonic divorce? The fact that the piano often plays jazzy ninth and thirteenth chords might support the former reading. However, the most important feature of the melody is its structure as a descending arpeggiation of the tonic triad. Both melody and harmony are best understood to participate in a three-step process directed toward the tonic. The melody does this by arpeggiating the tonic triad downward, aiming toward $\hat{1}$, and the harmony does it by expressing a typical ii–V–I progression. Considering the melodic tones to be chord extensions, and thus a part of the harmony, overlooks the melody’s structure as a tonic arpeggiation. Furthermore, the backup vocal harmonies also arpeggiate the tonic triad so that the entire triad is heard at all times, as shown in Example 15(a). The apparent ii^{10} and V^{12} chords are illusory sonorities that arise from the combination of a tonic arpeggiation and a ii–V–I progression. Thus, I believe this passage exhibits a true syntax divorce.

LOOSENESS AND TIGHTNESS

Most songs that exhibit a melodic-harmonic divorce do not do so for the entire song; songs like “Jane Says” are rare, and generally the melodic-harmonic relationship will “tighten” at some point. As mentioned earlier, the tightening point often occurs at an important structural moment; Temperley gives several examples where the relationship tightens for the chorus after a

29 Rameau (1971 [1722], 74–75). In Rameau’s theory, though, $\hat{2}$ in IV^{add6} is a dissonance that should resolve upward to $\hat{3}$, not downward to $\hat{1}$ as in these examples.

30 There are two versions of this album: its original release in 2002 and a rerelease from the following year, the latter of which is better known. The original version is currently available as the second disc of the 2012 tenth-

anniversary edition of *Songs about Jane*, with all songs labeled as “demo.” There are a few notable differences between the choruses of the two versions of “Sunday Morning”: in the original, the piano chords are simpler (often just two notes), and the lowest vocal line of Example 15(a) is an octave higher and more prominent in the mix. Example 15(a) transcribes the later release.

(a) Transcription of the chorus.

Chorus

starts at 0:59

That may be all I need. In dark-ness she is all I see.

Come and rest your bones with me. Dri-vin' slow on Sun-day morn-ing, and I nev-er want to leave.

(b) Reduction of the first measure, showing that both melody and harmony present a three-step process directed towards the tonic, but the two do not work together.

EXAMPLE 15. Maroon 5, “Sunday Morning” (2002).

loose verse, but there are several examples of the opposite situation as well, namely tight verse/loose chorus (as is the case in “You Learn” [Example 14]). A particularly common schema, which I will discuss later in this section, is a loose verse, tight prechorus, and loose chorus. But I would first like to look at a song in which the progression from looseness to tightness occurs within a single section. The verses of Coldplay’s “The Scientist,” from their 2002 album *A Rush of Blood to the Head*, begin with a divorced melody and harmony, which ultimately remarry for the final cadence. The first verse is transcribed in Example 16. (This song contains no chorus, but consists simply of two verses followed by an extended instrumental outro.) The verse exhibits **ssrrddc** form—**srdc** where **s**, **r**, and **d** each occur twice—and features a chord loop in the **s** and **r** phrases. This chord loop is based on the common **vi–IV–I–V** progression, though the last chord, which contains F, G, and C over an F bass note, is a sort of hybrid I/V chord.³¹ Because of the progression’s basis in the **vi–IV–I–V** loop, I analyze this chord as V_4^{sus4} over a tonic pedal (C^{sus4}/F) rather than I_2^5 (F^{sus2}).³² Over the chord loop in the **s** and **r** phrases, the melody continually outlines the tonic triad and does not follow the chord progression. So we have here a loop divorce. At the onset of the **d** phrase, m. 5, we move to an emphasized IV chord for the first two

measures and then recapitulate the final two chords from **s** and **r**’s loop. Although the melody includes $\hat{6}$ (D) over the IV chord, that note acts as a pentatonic passing tone from F to C, suggesting that the melody has not yet given up on the tonic triad. The **d** phrase thus contains a hierarchy divorce, as the IV chord ultimately functions as a neighboring chord to a prolonged tonic. At the onset of the **c** phrase, the harmony moves to V in root position for the first time and the melody joins, landing on $\hat{7}$ (E). This marks the first appearance of the leading tone in either melody or harmony, and also the first time the melody ventures outside the tonic pentatonic scale.³³ It is also the first time the melody articulates the downbeat of a phrase. These factors give considerable emphasis to the word “hard,” which after the vague lyrics in the **s** and **r** phrases as well as the repetition of the line “nobody said it was easy” represents the first time we get a sense of the main message of the song. From $\hat{7}$, the melody leaps up to $\hat{4}$ (Bb, the only diatonic tone yet unheard in the melody), which then descends to $\hat{3}$ (A) as the harmony cadences to I. Example 17 gives a reduction of this verse, showing a tonic prolongation through the **s** and **r** phrases (via the chord loop) and interpreting the IV chord at the beginning of the **d** phrase as a large-scale neighbor to the tonic.

31 Christopher Doll (forthcoming, Chapter 3) discusses the **vi–IV–I–V** progression, which he terms the “journey,” and its close relative, the “zombie,” which is the same progression but with the first chord interpreted as tonic (i.e., **i–bVI–bIII–bVII**).

32 Later in the song, synthesized strings sometimes play $\hat{7}$ (E) over this chord, making it sound much more V-like.

33 Naphtali Wagner (2004) has discussed such “suppressed notes” that appear for the first time in structurally significant locations in reference to the music of the Beatles. Like “The Scientist,” Wagner’s Beatles examples usually stick to the pentatonic scale at first, “suppressing” the remaining two notes of the diatonic scale and then emphasizing them in some way when they finally do appear.

SR (x2): melody outlines tonic triad, divorced from the chord progression

Come up to meet you, tell you I'm sorry, you don't know how love-ly you are.
 I had to find you, tell you I need you, tell you I set you a-part
 Tell me your secrets, and ask me your questions, oh let's go back to the start
 Run-nim' in cir-cles, com-in' up tails, heads on a sci-ence a-part

Dm7 B \flat F Csus4/F

D (x2): divorce continues: melody remains on tonic triad, with pentatonic passing tone D inserted between F and C

no-bod-y said it was eas-y it's such a shame for us to part

B \flat F Csus4/F

No-one ev-er said it would be this hard oh take me back to the start

F Csus4/F C F

C: melodic-harmonic relationship "tightens" for the cadence

first appearance of leading tone in either melody or harmony

EXAMPLE 16. Coldplay, "The Scientist" (2002), annotated transcription of first verse.

As mentioned above, a particularly common schema is for a song in verse-prechorus-chorus form to begin with a loose verse, tighten for the prechorus, and eventually loosen again for the chorus. This layout is expressed in an interesting way by Katy Perry's 2010 pop hit "Firework."³⁴ Example 18 transcribes the first verse, prechorus, and chorus of this song. This entire song is based on chord loops: I-bVII-vi-IV in the verse,

and the similar I-ii-vi-IV in the prechorus and chorus. During the verse, the melody projects an **aaba** phrase structure—similar to **srdc** where **c** recaps **s** and **r**—and revolves around the tonic triad divorced from the chords, thus exhibiting a loop divorce.³⁵ The melodic-harmonic relationship tightens in the prechorus, as the melody's long notes generally correspond with the harmony (with the possible exception of m. 15). The tightening

34 Another recent pop example is Taylor Swift's 2014 hit "Shake It Off," with a loop divorce in the verse and chorus flanking a tight prechorus. The same ii-IV-I progression loops for the entire song.

35 Matt BaileyShea (2004, 16–17) discusses similar **aaba** designs in reference to the Classical sentence. See also Callahan (2013).

at the prechorus allows the melody to rise by step from its static position in the lower vocal register, gaining tension and driving the music toward the chorus. In the final measure of the prechorus (m. 20), the melodic goal of D \flat is at first denied as the melody arpeggiates downward from C to F, but then the

melody shoots above it to E \flat in the anacrusis to the chorus. This climactic moment was set up by the dissolution of the melodic-harmonic divorce at the onset of the prechorus, which allowed the melody to climb to a higher register and achieve its climactic peak. Once this register is achieved, the divorce reappears for the chorus. The apparent parallel ninths in mm. 21–22 show the divorce: the B \flat on the downbeat of m. 21 is a long suspension that resolves to A \flat on the third beat, which then skips up to C. This C is stable because it is part of the tonic triad, despite being dissonant with the underlying ii chord. The chorus proceeds to express a parallel period structure in the melody while the chords keep looping around their four-chord module: the “antecedent” ends unstably on $\hat{2}$ in m. 27, while the “consequent” completes the descent to $\hat{1}$ in the final measure. Loosening and tightening the melodic-harmonic relationship thus creates the trajectory of this song, giving it shape with virtually no harmonic differentiation among the sections.

EXAMPLE 17. Reduction of the verse of “The Scientist.”

Verse (aaba)

Do you ev - er feel like a plas - tic bag, drift - ing through the wind, want - ing to start a - gain?
Do you ev - er feel, feel so pa - per thin, like a house of cards, one blow from cav - ing in?

5 Do you ev - er feel al - read - y bur - ied deep, six feel un - der screams but no - one seems to hear a thing?

9 Do you know that there's still a chance for you? 'Cause there's a spark in you, you just got - ta ig - nite the light.

14 and let it shine, just own the night like the fourth of Ju - ly 'Cause ba - by you're a

Chorus (parallel period)

21 fire - work, come on show 'em what you're worth Make 'em go “oh, oh, oh”
fire - work, come on let your col - ors burst Make 'em go “oh, oh, oh”

26 you're as you shoot a - cross the sky - y - y Ba - by you're a
gon - na leave them all in awe awe awe

EXAMPLE 18. Katy Perry, “Firework” (2010). A tight prechorus separates a loose verse and chorus.

CONCLUSION

The three types of melodic-harmonic divorce described above provide a first step toward understanding the divorce's structural origins.³⁶ Rather than conclude that songs exhibiting the divorce lack large-scale structural motion, we should ask ourselves what process gives rise to such a conflict. In a hierarchy divorce, it arises from a conflict of levels. While the melody lives in a deep middleground, swimming around the stable tonic triad, the harmony engages in foreground embellishments. This is a true conflict to be sure, but in such cases we are only one or two reductive steps away from resolving the conflict, showing that the two musical domains are perfectly compatible at a deeper level. In a loop divorce, we find that while the harmony is stuck in a chord loop, the melody makes up for it by creating its own independent structure. This conflict usually ends when the harmony escapes its loop and joins the melody's structural motion. A syntax divorce gives us a conflict that extends into the deepest structural levels, when structural motions in the melody and harmony do not line up contrapuntally. To resolve this conflict, we must invoke the concept of syntactical function: the melody and harmony might not be contrapuntally consonant, but when they are participating in motion toward the same goal, they are consonant in their syntax.

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³⁶ By "structural origins," I do not mean to imply any historical or chronological process, but instead a conceptual process akin to the Schenkerian process in which foreground phenomena "originate" in the background.

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