

# AN ESSAY ON NEO-TONAL HARMONY

by

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## A. The neo-tonal triad

May be described on the analogy of the common triad, the only difference being that it is a triad taken from higher up the harmonic series. So there are 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> inversions, typical associated scales with their own implied chords etc.. The triad is described as possessing a Dual Root (see F). Here for comparison with the C major tonic triad is the C/G neo-tonal triad, accidentals are used rather than a key signature for convenience of comparison, though in practice key signatures are a useful aid to the performer:

### 1. The neo-tonal triad primary form with inversions (modal feel)

Musical notation showing the primary form of the neo-tonal triad in 4/4 time. The first measure contains a C/G triad in first inversion (I a), and the second measure contains a C/F triad in second inversion (I b).

#### 1.1 Associated Scale (note flat sixth)

Musical notation showing the associated scale for the primary form: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-A-G-F-E-D. Brackets indicate implied neo-tonal triads: G/C (under G-A-B), C/F (under C-D-E-F), and D/G (under D-E-F-G).  
N.B. implied neo-tonal triads

### 2. The neo-tonal triad secondary form with inversions (major feel)

Musical notation showing the secondary form of the neo-tonal triad in 4/4 time. The first measure contains a C/G triad in second inversion (I a), and the second measure contains a C/F triad in first inversion (I b).

#### 2.1 Associated Scale (no flat sixth - major feel)

Musical notation showing the associated scale for the secondary form: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-A-G-F-E-D. Brackets indicate implied neo-tonal triads: G/C (under G-A-B), C/F (under C-D-E-F), and D/G (under D-E-F-G).  
N.B. implied neo-tonal triads

### 3. The neo-tonal triad tertiary form with inversions (minor feel)

Musical notation showing the tertiary form of the neo-tonal triad in 4/4 time. The first measure contains a C/G triad in first inversion with a flat sixth (I a), and the second measure contains a C/F triad in second inversion with a flat sixth (I b).

#### 3.1 Associated Scale (whole tone feel, wider than an octave)

Musical notation showing the associated scale for the tertiary form: C-D-E-F-G-A-B-A-G-F-E-D. Brackets indicate implied neo-tonal triads: G<sup>b</sup>/C (under G-A-B) and D<sup>b</sup>/G (under D-E-F-G).  
N.B. implied neo-tonal triads

## B. The Dual-Root.

Both top and bottom notes of the neo-tonal triad can be treated as a root, depending on the effect one desires: Upper Root - bright (C) or Lower Root - darker (G). Below, the Upper Root is shown first, and the Lower Root on the staff below:

9. The properties of the dual root

N.B. These have C as their pitch centre

N.B. These have G as their pitch centre

## C. Diatonic and Chromatic.

Like the common triad, the neo-tonal triad works both diatonically and chromatically. Again I present this in C/G for comparison with the C common triad:

4. Diatonic Chords

I II III IV V VI VII I

4.1 Examples of diatonic progressions with stepwise motion

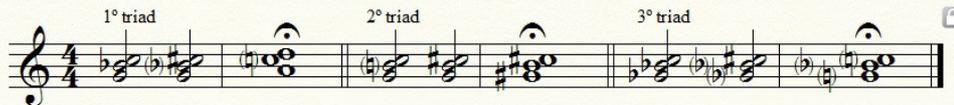
I - V I - IV I - III I - VII

N.B. passing melodic notes  
I - VII very strong compared to traditional tonality

In principle, any of the notes in the triad can be chromatically altered (e.g. raising the C to C#, thus creating a diminished chord feel), and each chromatic alteration has its particular sonic qualities; some appear to imitate common triads, but sound very different in neo-tonal contexts, especially when approached stepwise. I only include the most obvious:

5. Some chromatic alterations of the neo-tonal triads (only altering one note at a time):

5.1 Some examples of chromatic progressions:



### D. Further complexity from the harmonic series.

Adding further notes of the C harmonic series (Db, D natural) adds richness, either on their own or to build a more complex four or five note chord, sometimes useful for darker moments:

6. Adding notes from further up the harmonic series:



6.1 More complex chords using added notes:



N.B. The false relations, or differently voicing the root C/G do not destroy the neo-tonal stability

### E. Appoggiaturas.

Melodically some notes, such as A and F#, B natural, D and Db and others are dissonant with regard to the basic triad, and therefore allow for the leaning and crushing associated with traditional tonal music. This leads to a lyricism which I find very attractive, without it being 'old hat':

7. Crushing melodic notes



### F. 7<sup>th</sup> Chord Implications and popular music.

Because of the Bb in the neo-tonal triad, there is a natural affinity with the blues seventh chord, which I have sometimes used to evoke popular styles.

8. Jazz melody harmonized neo-tonally:



## G. Superimposing triads.

Of course two or more of these neo-tonal triads can be superimposed according to the imagination, depending on how much simplicity or richness is desired.

10. Superimposed triads, both primary, secondary and tertiary:



- (i) by beginning the next triad at the top note of the previous,
- (ii) by the second triad sharing the same top note as the bottom note of the first triad,
- (iii) by superimposing tertiary triads so that the top and bottom notes remain a fourth apart
- (iv) by constructing huge layers of triads in fourths.

## H. Transition Chords

Whilst it is sometimes good to excite the listener with a sudden chromatic shift, a vocabulary of transition chords permit smooth passage from one neo-tonal triad to another. These are not strictly triads, since they are not derived from the harmonic series. Transition chords are aurally reminiscent of traditional triadic music as they sound like a 2/3/5 suspension. Though this gives them some interesting uses, in a neo-tonal context they are unresolved:

11. Transition or passing chords



N.B. These are created from the third of the triad being lowered a semitone or tone (i) and (ii), or by the triad losing its top note and extra passing note at the bottom (iii) and (iv). In (v) root and third are lowered, These and a rather unique passing chord (vi) with a bare suspended-like sound have various uses:

11.2 Examples of upward moving transition chords (ii), (iii), (iv) and downward moving (ii) and (iv):



N.B. Transition chords shown as crotchet in each case.

## J. Transition (vi).

This bare chord functions both as an extreme example of chromaticism moving outwards towards a new triad, and also by virtue of its fourths as the birth of a new (superimposed) neo-tonal chord:

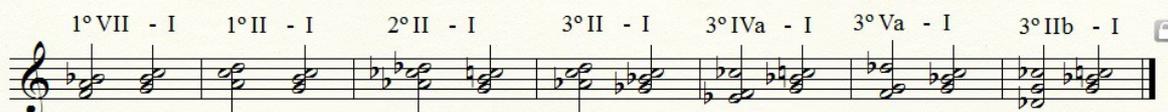
12. Transition chord vi:



## K. Cadences.

Cadences are available, if required, mainly achieved by the traditional harmony-teacher's dictum of parts moving by step:

### 13. Cadences, some examples

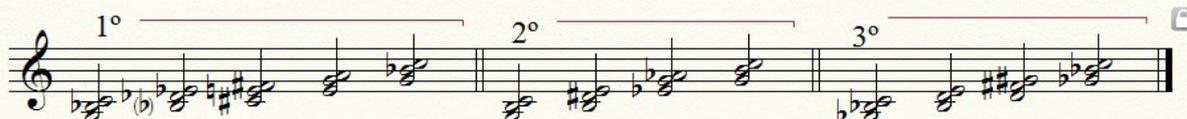


N.B. These are perfect cadences, and in reverse would be imperfect. I don't yet have names for them all, and all could finish on a primary, secondary or tertiary form of the G/C neo-tonal triad.

## L. Special effects.

Effects, which sound not unlike neo-modal progressions in traditional tonality (e.g. Em – Gm) can be created by jumping from one triad to another where there is just one note in common:

### 14. Special chord sequences:



N.B. Constructed by the second note of the triad becoming the root for the next.

As with many things in music, these are effective in inverse proportion to their use, such as the sudden transposition up a semitone.

## M. Modulation.

All the above 'rules', and many more, provide the necessary means of harmonic progression and modulation within a piece. Being a tonal system, albeit neo-tonal, the structures and methods used by tonal composers of the past are available as good models for the neo-tonal composer. There is no necessity to modulate to a *given* key (e.g. dominant), but experimentation has proved that large structures built using neo-tonal harmonies cannot be sustained without some kind of 'departure and return' from tonal or pitch centres. This is not a question of Schoenberg's procrustean bed. Rather as is so often the case in the arts, boundaries actually increase creative freedom. The possibilities of a harmonic journey in a piece of neo-tonal music is part of the freedom provided by the rules described in this guide. There is little more that needs to be said – it is up to the imagination and the creativity of each to use these as they please.

## N. Breaking the rules

Whilst it has been my constant effort to observe what works best and to formulate them here as rules, there is always a moment for breaking the rules, or times to discover new patterns. This defeats carefully set up expectations in an audience and that is effective. This outline of Neo-tonal Harmony is not a definitive document. As I go on composing, I am sure new 'rules' will be added! What works for me may not help you. Just as the tonal system gave rise to many unique characters and styles, so the hope is that this system might prove valuable to many composers who will nonetheless write in their own voice. Enjoy!