

DISSONANCE AND TONALITY: THE ROLE OF TIMBRE IN MELODIC RELATIONS

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Background:

In investigations of the origin of tonal hierarchies of musical cultures the phenomenon of dissonance has been considered of central importance. However, it seems that the use of this phenomenon in such investigations has proved unsuccessful and as yet no direct link has been made between the perceptual phenomenon of dissonance and the development of the tonal hierarchy of a musical culture. The many models of sensory dissonance that have attempted to account for the preferences of a musical tradition have only proved valid to a certain extent before breaking down in the face of actual musical practice and real listening conditions. So the question beckons; how useful a concept is dissonance in an investigation of the evolution of a musical culture's tonal hierarchy?

Aims

This paper proposes that dissonance is only one of several aspects of timbre that emphasises harmonic relationships. It will present a number of examples of scales and pieces from non-western music that show how particular instrument timbres contribute to musical structures.

Main Contribution:

It is argued that the relationship between the expressive possibilities of an instrument reflected in measures of timbre and scales are fundamental to the nature of melody in musical practices worldwide.

Implications

The above proposal does not totally discount the contribution of dissonance but instead proposes that its contribution is significant as an intrinsic property of an instrument's timbre. The suggestion is made that the tonal hierarchy of a musical culture develops through the exploitation of the timbre space of those instruments central to the music of a particular tradition.