

A Cognitive Approach to Core Music Theory

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General Principles

A cognitive approach to music theory prioritizes generalizable principles that transcend style. Students begin by engaging with concepts like auditory streams, contrast effects, pattern recognition, statistical learning, and expectation, which together serve as a conceptual framework onto which a variety of styles can be grafted.

Example

Rather than teaching classical voice-leading as a golden standard, or even as a set of stylistic preferences, instructors can frame the subject as the most efficient way to achieve independence of line, as measured by auditory scene analysis. This approach does not place aesthetic value on independence of line; it merely states that traditional voice-leading practices happen to optimize linear independence from a perceptual standpoint. Under this pedagogical model, parallel fifths and octaves are not “wrong” or “bad” or “ineffective”; they simply promote auditory fusion, which sacrifices independence of line — an aesthetic priority of composers like Johann Sebastian Bach.

Resources

Belkin, Alan, and Andrew Schartmann. *Applied Harmony: An Approach for Performers and Composers*. www.appliedharmony.xyz.

[Basic Principles \(Part 1\)](#)

[Basic Principles \(Part 2\)](#)

Huron, David. *Sweet Anticipation: Music and the Psychology of Expectation*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

Huron, David. *Voice Leading: The Science Behind a Musical Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2016.

Kosslyn, S. M. and B. Nelson, eds. *Building the Intentional University: Minerva and the Future of Higher Education*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017.

Margulis, Elizabeth. *On Repeat: How Music Plays the Mind*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.