Music Theory 000.1 – Part 2: What to Throw Out

Description

This is part of my series on Understanding How Music Works. If you haven't yet, you may wish to start at the beginning. Here, I discuss some concepts that you may have been taught that I think we need to forget about for a little while so we can take a fresh look at humans' perception and understanding of music.

Did you know that the note that you think of as "A" was not always tuned to 440 vibrations per second? It used to be quite a bit lower. At some point, our culture decided to standardize the note that we label "A." People made it up. It's just a convention. Chuck it out (for now).

Did you know that "the same" intervals on a piano used to sound quite different? The open fifth between C and G used to be a little different than the open fifth between A and E, so that the major third between C and E could be tuned a particular way.

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You see, the math doesn't work out. If we tried to make a system that contained every frequency that is perfectly "sonorous" or "in tune" with every other frequency in the system, we'd very quickly have to include hundreds of different notes that are tiny microtones different from one another. The number of human-audible frequencies is literally infinite; the number of "notes" (or "pitch-classes") would depend on the human capacity to detect differences between different frequencies.

Eventually, our culture made up a system that contained 12 pitch-classes, each spaced exactly equidistant from one another, because the math of that system works out less badly than other systems we've tried. But it's still not Reality, it's just a convenient coincidence—one with flaws, and one that imposes certain (perhaps esoteric) limitations. Chuck it out (for now).

Did you know that there used to be the notes A, B, C, D, E, F G, and H? Convention at the time thought that there were 8 different pitches that deserved to be labelled with a letter from the alphabet. As our labeling system of sharps and flats developed, our culture decided that A thru G modified by sharps and flats was more than adequate to describe the notes in use, and H became B-flat. Using letters to label pitches is a convention, made up by people. Chuck 'em out (for now); there's no idealized "middle C" floating out there in the universe.

Did you know that music notation—sheet music, with symbols to represent frequencies and durations—was developed over time, evolving into its present form from 850 C.E. to some time in the 1500s? At first, there was only one line on the "staff"; by 1000, it was convention to use 4 horizontal lines. The 5-line staff you see most commonly today wasn't universal until the 1500s. Music, then, obviously, was invented millennia before Sheet Music. Music doesn't exist on paper; a printed piece of paper can only represent, using symbols, what the music should sound like. (Much like the letter-combinations—the words—of this post are symbolic representations of the concepts I'm trying to convey.) Chuck it out.

Perhaps you've had some exposure to what we call Music Theory. Perhaps you've been told things

like: some chords are the I (roman-numeral one) chord, and others the V (roman-numeral five) chord, and that V chords have to somehow, ultimately, be followed by a I chord. Perhaps you've learned your circle of fifths and you know how many sharps or flats are in each key. Well, if you've dutifully chucked out A440, 12 semitones to the octave, ABCDEFG, and music notation, you know you're going to have to do without these further abstractions. For a little while. Don't worry, you can build them back—perhaps better—after we take a look as a few things that ***may be*** more fundamental to the human perception and understanding of music.Note the extra emphasis I put on "***may be***." It's an acknowledgement that I'll just propose some ideas as a different way of understanding how music works. I think they make sense. I think they cover some concepts that music instructors gloss over and take as given or understood by their music students. I think they fit observable—and, perhaps, universal (although that will be a controversial assertion)—phenomena about how humans interact with music. But any claims I will make about something being "fundamental" should be taken as parts of a hypothesis that I'm working with. It needs testing, to see if it's practical and useful. Take 'em out there, try 'em out; see if they work for you as they've been working for me.

Next post, I should be ready to start actually telling you what some of those claims *are*. Stay tuned.

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