

# Presumptions, Limitations, and Misrepresentations in Roman Numeral Analyses of Popular Music Harmony

Graduate Student Workshop, Music Theory Southeast  
Trevor de Clercq

## Abstract

Roman numerals and figured bass are the standard system for analyzing harmony in common-practice-era music, which serves as the paradigm of tonality. Because much popular music is triadic and centered in a key—i.e., tonal, broadly speaking—Roman numerals have become the customary notation for harmonic analysis in popular music as well. But since Roman numerals and figured bass are the byproducts of centuries-old musical practice, they carry presumptions about the organization of harmony that do not necessarily hold for more modern tonal styles such as rock, R&B, country, and pop. As Nobile (2016) argues, for example, syntactic function (e.g., “dominant”) in rock may not always correspond to categorical function (e.g., “V”). Similarly, de Clercq (2019) shows that upper-voice harmonic structures in rock often act independently from the bass. Roman numerals thus appear in many cases to have a limited ability to describe the harmony of a popular song; in some situations, Roman numerals may even misrepresent a song’s harmonic organization. In this workshop, we will engage with recent discussions of these issues. The primary goal will be to heighten awareness of potential analytical problems, especially so as to guard against unwanted skew or distortion in our understanding of a musical work. We will also discuss one alternative notational practice, the Nashville number system, which although not a panacea may offer a more flexible approach to representing functional harmonic syntax in popular music.

## Preliminary Reading List

- Biamonte, Nicole. 2010. “Triadic Modal and Pentatonic Patterns in Rock Music.” *Music Theory Spectrum* 32 (2): 95–110.
- Nobile, Drew. 2016. “Harmonic Function in Rock Music: A Syntactical Approach.” *Journal of Music Theory* 60 (2): 149–180.
- de Clercq, Trevor. 2019. “The Harmonic-Bass Divorce in Rock.” *Music Theory Spectrum* 41 (2): 271–284.
- Nobile, Drew. (Forthcoming 2020). “Double-Tonic Complexes in Rock Music.” *Music Theory Spectrum* 42 (2).
- de Clercq, Trevor. (Forthcoming 2020). “The Nashville Number System: A Framework for Teaching Harmony in Popular Music.” *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* 33.