

Harmonic Function in the Music of the Beatles

Beth Hiser

Baldwin-Wallace College, Conservatory of Music, Department of Music Theory

275 Eastland Road, Berea, OH 44017

bhiser@bw.edu

ABSTRACT

The Beatles have long been revered as one of pop music's greatest sensations. They had a glamorous story, limitless charisma, and impeccable timing; but what about their music? In my paper, I show that much of the Beatles' music contains chromatic cross relationships. For example, a C-natural and a C-sharp might be played simultaneously or immediately juxtaposed. Of the cross relationships in their songs, I have found that the unexpected resolution of chromatic tones provides a characteristically Beatles-esque sound, from early efforts, like "It Won't Be Long," to later examples, such as "Dig a Pony." (To clarify, an expected resolution of a chromatic tone would be a raised note that resolves upward or a lowered note that resolves downward. Thus, an unexpected resolution would be a raised note resolving downward, or vice versa. In other words, if an F-sharp is encountered in the key of C major, one would expect it to resolve up by half-step to G, not down by half-step to F-natural.) In my presentation, I will touch briefly on the way chords typically function in tonal music (as posited by Stefan Kostka and Dorothy Payne in their seminal harmony textbook, *Tonal Harmony*), followed by a quick look at Walter Everett's analysis of typical chord functions in the music of the Beatles from his book, *The Beatles as Musicians*. I will then lead participants through multiple instances of unexpected resolutions of chromatic tones in this repertoire, providing excerpts from both sheet music and recordings. I have found that all listeners, regardless of their knowledge of music theory, can appreciate these clear and distinctive examples.