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Some Challenges in Teaching American-Based Harmony in French

Roxane Prevost

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Some Challenges in Teaching American-Based Harmony in French

Roxane Prevost

I—INTRODUCTION

Music theory pedagogy at the undergraduate level imposes many challenges, such as the sequence of material, example selection, and drawing connections to performance, but the pedagogue of music theory in French at a North-American bilingual post-secondary institution faces more severe challenges. Since the University of Ottawa offers courses in both English and French, an attempt to coordinate the material between the different sections is ideal. Two main areas are problematic, however, for the French music theory class: the accessibility of recent resources in the pedagogy of music theory written or translated into French, and the discrepancy in the interpretation of certain concepts between English- and French-language texts. In recent years, French scholars have begun to translate and compile materials for a North American-rooted music theory, but few useful resources on music theory pedagogy exist.¹ In this essay, I first survey texts available for music theory pedagogy in French. I then explore some of the different interpretations for diminished, half-diminished, and augmented-sixth chords in English- and French-language sources. I conclude with a call for more resources for the French pedagogue and student of harmony.

¹Nicolas Meeus in particular has contributed to the availability of Schenker's texts in French. For example, his translation of *Der Freie Satz (L'écriture libre: Heinrich Schenker; seconde édition revue et adaptée par Oswald Jonas* (Liège: Mardaga, 1993)) and his *Heinrich Schenker: une introduction* (Liège: Mardaga, 1993) have become important materials in the study of Schenker's theories in the French-speaking world.

II—SURVEY OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY RESOURCES

Since the 1990s, interest in the pedagogy of music theory has grown dramatically in North America, as attested by the increase in the publication of new and revised editions of music theory textbooks.² The majority of these texts are written in English. Unfortunately, few resources exist in French; these currently available French texts are mostly outdated and primarily teach rudiments, such as intervals and scales, or offer an encyclopedic rather than a didactic approach. French music theory pedagogues interested in following a North-American approach are thus required to create their own instructional materials or translate materials from English-language sources. I shall survey five music theory sources currently available in French, four of which are texts and one a website, to show the need for a French music theory text designed to teach undergraduate tonal harmony in the North-American model.

(a) *Music Theory Texts: Dalmas-Noël and Passani, Rozay, Petit, and Beaudoin*

Valentine Dalmas-Noël and Emile Passani divide their *Traité d'analyse harmonique: 1er livre* (1972) into five parts.³ The first part is restricted mainly to the subject of triads and their inversions (see Figure 1). The most troubling aspect of this first part is that Dalmas-Noël and Passani discuss modulations in a mere two pages. They outline general rules on how to recognize modulations, but offer no explanation of the process, such as the use of pivot chords, nor do they supply the student with examples. As well, introducing modulations before cadences is problematic for a student with little background in harmony, and students will surely have difficulty in understanding cadences before an exposition of tonic and dominant functions.

²A few examples of new or revised popular music theory texts include: Miguel A. Roig-Francolí, *Harmony in Context* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003); Edward Aldwell and Carl Schachter, *Harmony and Voice Leading*, 3d ed. (Belmont, CA: Thomson-Schirmer, 2003); Robert Gauldin, *Harmonic Practice in Tonal Music*, 2d ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004); and Stefan Kostka and Dorothy Payne, *Tonal Harmony With an Introduction to Twentieth-Century Music*, 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004).

³Valentine Dalmas-Noël and Emile Passani, *Traité d'analyse harmonique: 1er livre* (Paris: Éditions Musicales Transatlantique, 1972).

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TEACHING AMERICAN-BASED HARMONY IN FRENCH

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Figure 1: Dalmas-Noël and Passani, Traité d'analyse harmonique

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Figure 1: *Dalmas-Noël and Passani, Traité d'analyse harmonique (continued)*

In the second part of their text, the authors discuss dominant-seventh, dominant-ninth, diminished-seventh, and half-diminished-seventh chords. When introducing inversions of the dominant-seventh chord, Dalmás-Noël and Passani use a fundamental C4, but in previous examples G, the dominant of C, is used. Inconsistencies of this sort would confuse a novice student, and plague an otherwise promising textbook. The diminished triad is interpreted as a dominant-seventh chord without a root (“suppression de la fondamentale dans l’accord de septième de dominante”)⁵ and labeled with V. Unfortunately, the authors also describe diminished triads in this manner; all diminished triads are interpreted as a rootless dominant chords in inversion. The problem with this interpretation is that the intervals above the bass differ from the inversions of other triads. The first inversion of the leading-tone diminished-seventh chord is called the second inversion of the dominant seventh with missing root. In addition, a special case must be made for the diminished triad on scale degree $\hat{2}$ in minor because this chord does not function as a dominant.⁶ The authors suggest that the chord root and the chromatic alterations of the figured bass be used as a guideline to differentiate between the “dominant-seventh chord without a root” and the diminished triad on $\hat{2}$. But the same situation occurs in their treatment of diminished-seventh and half-diminished seventh chords, both labeled as dominants without a root. The last chapter of the second part of the book focuses on dominant-seventh and dominant-ninth chords above the tonic (“accords de septième et de neuvième de dominante sur tonique”).⁷ The discussion of these chords seems misplaced, however, since the authors rely upon but have yet to discuss non-chord tones. This topic would be better situated with the discussion of pedal tones in chapter 24.

The third part of the text catalogs seventh chords other than dominant-seventh and diminished-seventh chords, while the fourth part of the text focuses on chromatic alterations in the figured bass, suspensions, and pedal tones. The discussion of chromatic alterations seems misplaced given the fact that Dalmás-Noël and Passani have previously described diminished triads, diminished-

⁵Dalmás-Noël and Passani, *Traité*, 27.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid., 47.

seventh chords, and half-diminished seventh chords as rootless dominants with chromatic alterations in the figures. The last part of the text focuses on non-chord tones, specifically passing tones, neighbor tones, appoggiaturas, and anticipations. Remarkably, the authors devote more text individually to each of these non-chord tones than to the subject of modulations. The discussion of non-chord tones, both harmonic and melodic, constitutes almost half of a treatise of less than one hundred pages in length. Common chord progressions and voice-leading rules are omitted, leaving the student with little understanding of these topics. Although the goal of the treatise is to introduce the analysis of tonal music, the student is not given the tools to analyze even a simple tonal work.

In his *Initiation théorique et pratique à l'écriture de la musique* (1985), René Rozay offers a more comprehensive approach to the study of harmony.⁸ He divides his text into two large sections: harmony, which is subdivided into six parts with chapters, and practical applications of the theory through composition and keyboard accompaniment. I will focus solely on the first part of his text, which is more relevant to this paper, because I am most interested in the pedagogy of tonal harmony. Rozay devotes the first subsection of the first part to chords, chord doubling, and voice leading, and discusses chord inversions, resolutions of dominant chords, cadences, non-chord tones, and modulation in the second part (see Figure 2). The third part focuses on different types of seventh chords, ninth chords, eleventh chords and thirteenth chords, while the fourth part focuses on chromatic chords, such as the augmented triad, the diminished triad, and augmented-sixth chords. In the fifth part, Rozay discusses suspensions and pedal tones, and in the last part sequential progressions and sequential imitation. In general, the explanations in Rozay's text are more logically sequenced and better explained than in Dalmas-Noël and Passani's *Traité*. The discussion of modulations, in particular, is more helpful because Rozay identifies chords that mark a tonality, notes possible pivot chords, and describes different techniques for modulation to closely-related and distant keys. Although this 122-page text provides a brief survey of common topics for the study of tonal harmony, it offers too little to the novice harmony student.

⁸René Rozay, *Initiation théorique et pratique à l'écriture de la musique: Étude de l'harmonie, harmonisation d'un chant donné, notions pratiques de composition et d'accompagnement et transposition* (France: René Rozay, 1985).

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FIGURE 2: Rozay, *Initiation théorique et pratique à l'écriture de la musique* (1985) NOTE: Some page numbers are omitted in this and following figures because the author(s) have included blank pages in the page count of their texts.

In addition, three areas are problematic: the inconsistent labeling of chords, the description of chromatic chords such as the augmented-sixth, and the absence of both musical examples drawn from the tonal repertoire and practical application exercises.

When discussing root-position triads and seventh chords, Rozay labels the chords with roman numerals and figures but does not apply the labels conventionally. As shown in Example 1, Rozay identifies root-position chords with a "5" placed above a roman numeral used presumably to show chord quality; in the example, the last chord is a tonic C-major triad in root position. When identifying chord inversions, Rozay identifies the inversion with a "6," but in the example this inversion symbol is placed above an upper-case roman numeral III that describes on the one hand the bass, not the root, and the other hand the quality of the I chord. Rozay identifies the third chord of the example as "iv⁶" because the bass is F3, $\hat{4}$ of C major, and the triad is minor in quality; most theorists would identify this chord as "ii⁶." Rozay's figured-bass approach to chord labeling is completely out of touch with common practice that assigns arabic numerals to represent inversions and roman numerals to represent the root of the chord, not the bass. A student seeking other theory resources would struggle with the differences between the two labeling systems.

The image shows a musical staff with five measures. Each measure contains a chord. The chords are labeled with a figure above a roman numeral: 6 III, 6 III, iv 6, 5 v, and 5 I. The figures are placed above the notes, and the roman numerals are placed below the staff.

EXAMPLE 1: Chord Identification in Rozay's *Initiation théorique...* (34)

I shall return to the second problematic area, the description of augmented-sixth chords, later in this paper. Although Rozay supplements his text with examples of the concepts being discussed, he offers no musical examples drawn from the repertoire, nor does he suggest any as references or provide exercises for the student to practice the concepts he introduces. Rozay's text provides a summary of different tonal theoretical concepts, but the inconsistencies in the chord labels and the lack of practical application for the student make this resource almost useless for the pedagogue and student.

Since Jacques Petit's *Manuel d'harmonie: Livre théorique* (1995) is aimed at music pedagogues and performers, the majority of the four volumes focus on keyboard skills, rather than theoretical or analytical issues; only the second volume is devoted to theoretical issues.⁹ Petit divides this volume into eight parts: (1) harmony and chords; (2) voice-leading connections between chords; (3) chord functions, inversions, cadences, and harmonic rhythm; (4) chords with four or five different notes; (5) modulations; (6) chromatic notes; (7) non-chord tones; and (8) formal constructions, such as phrases and forms. These topics are all approached with the keyboard player in mind, and all are devised as keyboard exercises. These are notable features in Petit's text. In his discussion of functions, Petit categorizes pre-dominants into three groups: SD1 (IV), SD2 (ii⁶), and SD3 (ii⁶)¹⁰ This classification works well as a means of identifying pre-dominants over $\hat{4}$. His discussion of second-inversion triads is also convincing because he assigns functions, such as appoggiatura, neighbor, and passing, to these otherwise non-functional chords.¹¹ This text is excellent for the keyboard player with a strong theoretical background in harmony. Unfortunately, the typical undergraduate student will find Petit's discussion of some theoretical topics and lack of written exercises problematic. His text is an acceptable supplement for a course designed to increase proficiency in keyboard accompaniment.

⁹Jacques Petit, *Manuel d'harmonie: Livre théorique* (Paris: Institut de pédagogie musicale et chorégraphique), 1995. Petit focuses on keyboard skills for the first volume, focuses on theoretical issues for the second volume, provides examples of themes to be harmonized through keyboard skills in the third volume, and devotes the fourth volume to keyboard accompaniment issues.

¹⁰Ibid., 34.

¹¹Ibid., 38.

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FIGURE 3: *Petit, Manuel d'harmonie: Livre théorique (vol. 2) (1995)*

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FIGURE 3: *Petit, Manuel d'harmonie: Livre théorique (vol. 2) (1995) (continued)*

In the preface to his *Éléments d'analyse et d'écriture musicales* (2002), Gilles Beaudoin asserts that his text is rooted in the American approach, most notably Wallace Berry for his discussion of forms and Heinrich Schenker for analytical concepts.¹² Beaudoin assumes that the reader will have already acquired basic theoretical skills. His book is divided into thirteen chapters followed by a glossary and three appendices, as shown in Figure 4. Beaudoin begins with instructions on notation and then proceeds to intervals. Triads, chord labeling, short functional progressions, and cadences follow. Before requiring the student to write progressions, Beaudoin turns to the analysis of melodies, motives, phrases, and periods. A discussion of modulation and secondary dominants follows. Once more, the student is expected to recognize and apply new concepts, but not write exercises on these concepts. Chords and modes in popular music and musical forms are discussed, followed by four-part harmonization. Beaudoin describes the Neapolitan chord and secondary dominants in the chapter on four-part harmonization, in addition to assigning written exercises for the student. The final chapter gives useful guidelines on writing an analytical paper. The appendices that follow show the different symbology between the American and French systems, and the book concludes with a diagram of the circle of fifths.

In comparison to the three previously discussed texts, Beaudoin's is the most accessible to the student. Not only is it well written, but the author also provides some useful examples and written exercises. Excerpts from Bach chorales illustrate the chapter on the analysis of triads, and numerous examples from the repertoire are chosen in the discussion of formal analysis. The only drawback of this text is the scope of the material. Beaudoin's text would be ideal for a first-year harmony course, but it lacks sufficient material and scope for a second-year course. And in the first year, it would require supplemental exercises and examples.

¹²Gilles Beaudoin, *Éléments d'analyse et d'écriture musicales*, 2d ed. (Saint-Nicolas, Quebec: Presses de l'Université Laval, 2002), preface to first edition.

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FIGURE 4: *Beaudoin, Éléments d'analyse et d'écriture musicales (1998)*

(b) Website: *Baron*

The website most useful for the French pedagogue is Michel Baron's *Cours d'harmonie*.¹³ Although encyclopedic in nature, it provides the pedagogue with useful resources on different topics. The website was last updated in 1998, but it is, in fact, a revised version of Baron's *Précis pratique d'harmonie* (1973). It consists of twenty webpages, as shown in Figure 5. The first five pages focus on general voice-leading rules, triads in the context of cadences and other harmonic progressions, and triadic inversions. The Neapolitan-sixth chord is discussed with chords in first inversion. As in Petit's text, second-inversion triads are described as *appoggiatura*, passing, or neighbor chords. The discussion of modulations on webpage 6 is superficial; it only defines modulations and focuses primarily on false relations. Baron discusses seventh and ninth chords with

¹³Michel Baron, *Cours d'harmonie*, last updated in July 1998. <<http://membres.lycos.fr/mbaron/harmonie.htm>>

Webpage 1	Introduction
Webpage 2	General Rules
Webpage 3	Root-Position Triads
Webpage 4	First-Inversion Triads
Webpage 5	Second-Inversion Triads
Webpage 6	Modulations
Webpage 7	Dominant-Seventh Chords
Webpage 8	Other Seventh Chords
Webpage 9	Ninth Chords
Webpage 10	Alterations
Webpage 11	Suspensions
Webpage 12	Other Non-Chord Tones
Webpage 13	Pedal Tones
Webpage 14	Unfigured Bass
Webpage 15	Chorale and Other Styles
Webpage 16	Table for Figured Bass
Webpage 17	Bibliography, Biographies
Webpage 18	Useful Links, Research
Webpage 19	Excerpts from a Treatise (Koechlin)
Webpage 20	Author–e-mail

FIGURE 5: *Baron, Cours d'harmonie (1998)*

inversions and resolutions in the next three webpages. On the webpage addressing chord alterations, Baron describes augmented-sixth chords using the customary labels “Italian,” “French,” and “German.” The next three webpages focus on suspensions, and other non-chord tones such as appoggiaturas, neighbor notes, escape tones, and passing notes, and on pedal tones.

On the webpage 14, Baron focuses on unfigured basses, which he follows with a webpage on chorale-style writing and other period-style writing. A table with figures, a bibliography of pre-1980 works, and a biography of the author follow. This website is useful in that the pedagogue can move easily from one topic to the next, but the sequence of material is questionable. In addition, Baron has not devised exercises that would be useful for the undergraduate student, and few musical examples drawn from the repertoire are included in the discussion. Despite its problems, access to Baron’s text via the web makes it appealing to both the pedagogue and student.

III—DIFFICULTIES IN CHORD LABELING: DIMINISHED-SEVENTH
AND AUGMENTED-SIXTH CHORDS

(a) *Diminished-Seventh Chords*

Since most of the texts surveyed in this paper are rooted in the European rather than the North-American tradition, some conceptual differences occur in the interpretation of diminished-seventh and augmented-sixth chords. As noted, Rozay argues that the “diminished-seventh chord is a dominant-ninth chord in minor, whose root has been omitted.”¹⁴ This interpretation suggests that the root of diminished-seventh chords, although omitted, is not ambiguous. But the diminished-seventh chord is symmetrical in intervallic structure, and composers often play on the ambiguity of its root to reinterpret diminished-seventh chords. Petit argues that this chord is ambiguous and can have different functions:

Very rich in possibilities, the diminished-seventh chord can have a **dominant** or **subdominant** (altered) function in major or minor; it can also be **reinterpreted** as a dominant or as a subdominant, which means that any diminished-seventh chord has a function in any tonality. Moreover, this chord can come after any other chord! Notably after another diminished-seventh chord.¹⁵

If the diminished-seventh chord is in fact a dominant-ninth chord without a root, it is difficult to accept that it can have a pre-dominant function.

¹⁴Rozay, *Initiation théorique*, 86. “L’accord de 7^{me} diminuée est, de fait, un accord de 9^{me} mineure de dominante dont la fondamentale a été supprimée.”

¹⁵Petit, *Manuel d’harmonie*, 68. “Très riche de possibilités, l’accord de septième diminuée peut être une fonction **dominante** ou **sous-dominante** (altérée), dans un ton Majeur ou mineur; il peut aussi être l’**emprunt** à la fonction dominante ou l’emprunt à la fonction de sous-dominante, ce qui fait que n’importe quel accord de septième diminuée a une fonction dans n’importe quel ton. En outre, cet accord peut venir après n’importe quel autre accord! Notamment après un autre accord de septième diminuée.”

Many French-language authors also argue that the half-diminished seventh chord is, in fact, a dominant-ninth chord in major with an omitted root.¹⁶ It is difficult for novice students to grasp the concept that a chord rooted in dominant harmony can also be found on the supertonic degree in minor. Some authors refer to this chord as “septième de sensible,” but that label ties it to the leading-tone. The label half-diminished triad, which refers to quality rather than function, seems to better describe the chord, and perhaps “mi-diminué” ou “demi-diminué” would best define this chord in French, rather than calling it a chord rooted on the leading-tone in major. One type of diminished-seventh chord that is absent in French-language texts, but discussed in most American harmony textbooks, is the common-tone diminished-seventh chord. In my teaching, I have adopted “septième diminuée par ton commun,” abbreviated as “(7°TC),” to represent this chord so that its label parallels that of its English-language counterpart.

(b) Augmented-Sixth Chords

Little discussion of augmented-sixth chords occurs in French theory texts. Sources written in English often classify augmented-sixth chords into three types: Italian, French, and German. This practice is useful in differentiating between the different scale degrees that accompany the interval of the augmented sixth and the tonic, but only Baron discusses the three types. He concludes his discussion of these chords with a charming mnemonic description, written curiously in both French and English:

¹⁶Rozay (*Initiation théorique*, 86) writes: “The seventh chord built on the leading-tone is in fact a dominant-ninth chord in major whose root has been omitted.” [“L’accord de 7^{me} de sensible est, de fait, un accord de 9^{me} majeure de dominante dont la fondamentale a été supprimée.”]

Let's speak about the lightness of the Italian sixth. With only a third with the augmented sixth, it is light, sunny, a little bit like Italian [sic] cooking. A little fresh tomato, olive oil and basil and it is delectable. The Frenchs [sic] need to be a little different because they need to be heard when they have at times a political discordant voice. That's why the tritone is added. More personal and quite different. Of course, the Germans are so practical! They need to have a full meal, a well balanced meal and that's why the perfect fifth is added.¹⁷

Oddly, Baron's discussion of augmented-sixth chords appears to be the only concept derived from North-American based tonal theory on his website.

Augmented-sixth chords are also discussed briefly in one example and one sentence in Dalmás-Noël and Passani's text.¹⁸ The authors do not distinguish between the different types and give no resolutions of these chords (see chords 10 to 15 in Example 2). The chords are mentioned only in passing as chromatic alterations of the dominant V chord. Chords 11 and 12 are equivalent to the conventional French augmented-sixth chord, while chord 11 is an Italian augmented-sixth chord and chords 13, 14, and 15 are German augmented-sixth chords. This approach does not give the student a sense of the function of augmented-sixth chords as a pre-dominant resolving to dominant harmony.

¹⁷Baron, *Cours d'harmonie*, webpage 10.

¹⁸Dalmás-Noël and Passani, *Traité*, 57-58.

The image shows a musical score for augmented-sixth chords, organized into three systems. The first system, labeled 'Accords non altérés', contains measures 1 through 8. Above the notes are titles for each measure: 'Accord Parfait M', 'Acc. 7 sans fondamentale', '7 sans fondamentale', '9 M', '9 M sans fondamentale', '9 m sans fondamentale', '9 m sans fondamentale', and '7 M'. The second system, labeled 'Altérations ascendantes', contains measures 9 through 16. The third system, labeled 'Altérations descendantes', also contains measures 9 through 16. A bracket under measures 9-16 is labeled 'Accords de 6te augmentée'. The score uses a grand staff with treble and bass clefs, showing various chord voicings and alterations.

EXAMPLE 2: Augmented-Sixth Chords in Dalmas-Noël and Passani's *Traité* (57)

Rozay adopts a similar position in his discussion of the augmented-sixth. He derives augmented-sixth chords from the chromatic alteration of the perfect fifth in a second-inversion dominant-seventh chord and from the diminished-seventh chord in first inversion.¹⁹ In his examples, he alters a dominant chord, so as to produce an augmented-sixth between the flat supertonic and the leading tone (see Example 3). His augmented-sixth chords, as a result, resolve as altered dominants to tonic harmony: "the augmented-sixth chord often resolves naturally to a chord whose root is a fifth below the root of the augmented-sixth chord."²⁰ While

¹⁹Rozay, *Initiation théorique*, 101.

²⁰Ibid. ". . . l'accord de 6te augmentée effectue fréquemment sa résolution naturelle sur un accord dont la fondamentale se situe à distance de 5te inférieure de sa propre fondamentale."

IV–CONCLUSION: POSSIBLE SOLUTION

In this paper, I have surveyed French-language music theory resources to show that little consistent work has been done in the field of music theory pedagogy in French. Although American textbooks are readily available to assist the pedagogue and undergraduate student in music theory instruction, few comparable tools are accessible in French. The problem does not lie strictly with the lack of interest in music theory pedagogy, but rather in the number of North-American post-secondary institutions that offer music theory programs in French. Few French post-secondary institutions offer music theory, and thus a small market exists for a comprehensive North-American style music theory textbook in French. A comprehensive and pedagogically oriented source is needed to fill the void in French music theory resources. A practical solution would be a web textbook in the format of a pedagogically-oriented printed text. A translation of an English-language text would be sufficient. Students and pedagogues could easily access this type of book and the cost to the publisher would be minimal. As interest in music theory pedagogy grows in North America, pedagogues at French or bilingual post-secondary institutions will increasingly seek resources to offer instruction comparable to their English-language counterpart. At this time, no such resource exists.

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