



Psychoacoustic Foundations of Major-Minor Tonality

Richard Parncutt

A fascinating interdisciplinary approach to how everyday Western music works, and why the tones, melodies, and chords combine as they do.

Despite the cultural diversity of our globalized world, most Western music is still structured around major and minor scales and chords. Countless thinkers and scientists of the past have struggled to explain the nature and origin of musical structures. In *Psychoacoustic Foundations of Major-Minor Tonality*, music psychologist Richard Parncutt offers a fresh take, combining music theory—Rameau’s fundamental bass, Riemann’s harmonic function, Schenker’s hierarchic analysis, Forte’s pitch-class set theory—with psychology—Bregman’s auditory scene, Terhardt’s virtual pitch, Krumhansl’s tonal hierarchy. Drawing on statistical analyses of notated music corpora, Parncutt charts a middle path between cultural relativism and scientific positivism to bring music theory into meaningful discourse with empirical research.

Our musical subjectivity, Parncutt explains, depends on our past musical experience and hence on music history and its social contexts. It also depends on physical sound properties, as investigated in psychoacoustics with auditory experiments and mathematical models. Parncutt’s evidence-based theory of major-minor tonality draws on his interdisciplinary background to present a theory that is comprehensive, creative, and critical. Examining concepts of interval, consonance, chord root, leading tone, harmonic progression, and modulation, he asks:

- Why are some scale tones and chord progressions more common than others?
- What aspects of major-minor tonality are based on human biology or general perceptual principles? What aspects are culturally arbitrary? And what about colonial history?

Original and provocative, *Psychoacoustic Foundations of Major-Minor Tonality* promises to become a foundational text in both music theory and music cognition.

Richard Parncutt is Professor of Systematic Musicology at the University of Graz, Austria.

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“This is a significant work that is an important piece of an enduring puzzle in understanding music. It is unique in the broad philosophical and historical net that it casts and seeks to unify these varied approaches with a fundamental psychoacoustic phenomenon.” — Jamshed J. Bharucha, Distinguished Fellow, Dartmouth College

“Parncutt’s book offers a fascinating set of insights into the origins, acoustic distinctions, philosophical underpinnings, and psychological impact of this most puzzling dimension of Western tonal music.” — William Forde Thompson, Professor, Bond University, Australia