

F.-J. Fétis' theory of harmony, and its ambivalent implication

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François-Joseph Fétis (1784-1871) is known as a highly influential 19th century music theorist in France and Belgium. One of his main concerns was to establish his own theory of harmony. For this purpose he made an extensive survey of the harmonic theories proposed by his predecessors, from the middle ages through to his own time, searching for a deeper understanding of the subject in its historical context.

Through a detailed reading of Fétis' writings on harmonic theory, it would seem that he believed that harmony had 'progressed' through history; from simultaneous intervals (between two notes) to chord formations, and in the modern age from the harmonic theory of J.-Ph. Rameau through Fétis' own contribution, i.e., his "metaphysical" tonal systems. In the light of this 'progressive' history Fétis examined and criticised the use of consecutive intervals (parallel fifths, octaves etc.), the classifications of intervals, and the chord generating systems stipulated by other theorists.

His idea of 'progress through history' is also shown in his concept of 'four systems of tonality': '*ordre unitonique*', '*ordre transitonique*', '*ordre pluritonique*', and '*ordre omnitonique*'. These systems are in fact the stages of the gradual historical 'progress' of harmonic (or tonal) structure.

On the other hand, Fétis suggested that he did not want any historical progression further than the stage of '*ordre omnitonique*', which was the current 'advanced' practice of his age. He claimed that any expansion of the '*ordre omnitonique*' would invite annihilation of tonality, and Fétis was harshly critical of such works. Further to this, it is well known that he also said, "*l'art ne progresse pas, il se transforme*", a statement which would seem to contradict his idea of 'progressive history'. It is interesting to learn that his theories written in such a very convincing tone should conceal this ambivalent implication.