

How Knowing Your Harmonized Scales Can Help You Transcribe Music

by Dennis Winge

I. Introduction

Many students gloss over when they hear terms like “harmonic analysis,” and many more don’t think they have the natural ability to learn a song’s chord progression just by using their ear. If you know how harmonized scales work, it makes transcribing a lot easier. (This article will assume you at least know a bit about [how to harmonize a scale](#) as well as [the magical power of transcribing](#). If you don’t, click the relevant links before reading on.)

II. Real-time example

I am literally going to transcribe a pop song in real time as I write this so you can see by way of example what I mean by the title of this article. I click on Spotify, then I chose “browse,” then “genres,” then “pop,” then “today’s hits.” What comes up is “Truth Hurts” by Lizzo. (For your convenience here is the YouTube link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P00HMxdsVZI>).

I immediately hear a I chord and then a VI chord. At this point I don’t know the key as I haven’t picked up a musical instrument yet and I don’t have perfect pitch. I know that the chords are I and VI because my ear is developed. (If that’s a mystery to you see my article on [ear training](#).)

But even if you couldn’t “hear” the chords as fast I as could and you slaved over your instrument to determine that the roots were C and A (which I just confirmed on a guitar), now what? You should then determine whether the chords are major or minor. Suppose you try every combination, i.e.:

C – A
Cm – Am
Cm – A
C – Am

Only the last combination fits a harmonized scale, and in this case it is the one in key of C. In the key of C, the C chord is roman numeral I and the Am is roman numeral VI. My point is that *by knowing the harmonized scales, it is much faster to determine which combination of chords is being used* in the song.

(By the way, in the Lizzo song there aren’t really any “chords” as a guitar would strum them. There is a piano bass line that outlines the ‘chords,’ and the melody plus all the strings and backup vocals all emphasize notes within those ‘chords.’ But for our purposes, let’s just say that if you wanted to strum or pick along with the song on guitar, uke, or piano, you could use those chords as a guide.)

If the song had chords that were “non-diatonic” (meaning outside the harmonized scale of that key), it would have sounded unusual. This does happen frequently enough, so I’m not saying that every chord will fit the harmonized scale in whatever key you’re in perfectly. If they did, every piece of music would be very harmonically bland and boring. But for our purposes, let’s just say that in pop music, where the focus is mainly on lyrics and melody, generally the chords are going to be “diatonic” to a particular key (which is why I chose the ‘pop’ category in the first place.)

At this point you’re either understanding easily, or totally confused. If you’re in the first group, try listening to the following example (which I don’t even know what it’s going to be yet) and transcribing it before you read further, and then check what you came up with against what I have written. For those who need another example to help clarify their understand, read on.

I click “next” on Spotify and it plays “I Don’t Care” with Ed Sheeran and Justin Bieber. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCSGelSCPGE>

I hear a progression that goes like this:

```
||: I | % | % | % |  
| VI | % | % | % |  
| IV | % | V | % |  
| I | % | % | % :||
```

(If you have trouble understanding the above notation it means that the tonic chord is played for 4 bars then the VI chord is played for 4 bars, then the IV chord is played for 2 bars, the V chord goes for 2 bars, and the I chord plays again for 4 bars. For our purposes, each bar has 4 beats, even though I’d really write this out in ‘cut time’ which is a topic for another day.)

The key is F#. Because I know my harmonized scales, I know, without even checking to see if I’m right, that the chords are:

```
||: F# | % | % | % |  
| D#m | % | % | % |  
| B | % | C# | % |  
| F# | % | % | % :||
```

I have saved myself so much time because, as stated before, I don’t have to slave over each chord to determine if it’s major, minor, diminished (or ‘demolished’ as 1 student called it.) Secondly, I know pretty much that the melody of the tune will be right out of the F# major scale. (We’ll have to do another article on transcribing melody; let’s just stick to chords today). Thirdly, if I don’t like this key, I can use a capo to put it in an ‘easier’ key.

For example, if the capo is on fret 4 (more on why I chose that fret some other day), now the chords are:

```
||: D | % | % | % |  
| Bm | % | % | % |  
| G | % | A | % |  
| D | % | % | % :||
```

So I hope you can see that by knowing the harmonized scales, your ability to transcribe will greatly improve. You do have to practice all these elements separately: the theory behind chord and scales construction, the actual playing of the harmonized scales which in many keys requires barre chords, the getting the sound of them in your ear and ear training in general, and of course simply practicing transcribing with actual songs. It may seem like a lot of work, but the payoff is immeasurable when you consider that I spent virtually no time at all transcribing the above, and I barely touched a guitar while writing this.

Good luck and have fun.