

In 1927, Charles Koechlin, the French composer and music theorist, published a brief book about the music of his friend and former teacher Gabriel Fauré. The book brims with sympathy, insight, and colourful epigrams. But I'd like to single out one moment that may induce some head-scratching. [click] Discussing Fauré's "modal" style, Koechlin describes this progression as Fauré's "well-known cadence" [click], which he attributes to the "Gregorian domain" [click] [play]. But the progression belongs to no diatonic scale [click], and it features both chromatic alteration [click] and an inverted seventh chord [click]. What, if anything, does it have to do with the diatonic monophony of Gregorian chant?

This is not an isolated incident. French commentators [click] sometimes seem to imply that the "modality" of Fauré's music goes beyond the simple presence of pitch material derived from modes like Lydian or Dorian, to a deeper kinship with the music of the Renaissance or earlier. But Fauré's music exhibits frequent modulation, enharmonic reinterpretation, and the use of every manner of seventh chord as effectively consonant sonorities. So in what way is it justified to call it "modal"—let alone "Gregorian"?

Today, I'll suggest that the answer to this puzzle lies in the influence of the composer and theorist Louis Niedermeyer [click], founder of the eponymous *École Niedermeyer*, the school of church music where Fauré studied between the ages of nine and twenty. Niedermeyer's main contribution to French music was his conception of plainchant harmonization. He gave this conception various names, including "Gregorian harmony" [click], "ecclesiastical tonality" [click], and, the term I will adopt today, "plainchant tonality" [click].

Two basic rules are particularly important to the practice of plainchant tonality [click]. The first is a rigid insistence on the exclusive use of "the pitches proper to each

mode” [click], that is to say, the pitches of the diatonic scale. Raised leading tones are emphatically rejected [click], as are other chromatic alterations [click], such as the “bastard harmony” [click] that results from raising the third degree [click] of the Phrygian mode. The second basic rule of plainchant tonality is the exclusive use of consonant triads [click]. Not only harmonic dissonances like chordal sevenths, but also contrapuntal dissonances like passing tones and suspensions, are forbidden [click].

One remarkable thing about these rules is that they are utterly ahistorical. In Western music history, chromatically altered leading tones came long before the use of consonant triads as a normal sonority. So Niedermeyer’s “plainchant tonality” wasn’t about restoring sacred music to some earlier condition. It was instead an original invention. I’d like to single out three implicit aspects of this original invention that I believe were adopted into the subsequent French concept of “modality”: [click] 1) the reconceptualization of “cadence” [click], 2) the active avoidance of common-practice progressions [click], and 3) the avoidance or neutralization of tendency tones [click].

[click] The cadences of “plainchant tonality” are simply successions of diatonic triads that happen to close on the final of each mode, and preferably involve stepwise or oblique motion in as many voices as possible. Here, for illustration, are Niedermeyer’s Dorian cadences [click] [play]. It’s worth dwelling for a moment on the implications of these cadences. A cadence, for Niedermeyer [click], does not gain its status as a cadence because it realizes a certain interval succession [click], as it would have for Zarlino. Nor does it gain its status as a cadence because it realizes a certain key-defining harmonic progression [click], as it would have for Rameau. Instead, it is a cadence simply because it closes upon the note understood to be the tonal center [click]. Ironically, then, despite its avowed rejection of what he would have called “modern tonality,” Niedermeyer’s “plainchant tonality” actually depends on a relatively modern conception of “tonal

center” for its notion of cadence. This notion of cadence then admits progressions that, as far as I am aware, had never before in Western music history been considered satisfactory cadences.

[click] Perhaps even more important is the fact that, for Niedermeyer, “plainchant tonality” doesn’t merely differ from “modern tonality,” but is in active and antagonistic opposition to it. “There exists,” as he puts it [click], “a radical incompatibility [between the two], as our theory demonstrates on every page.” For Niedermeyer, then, it is necessary to avoid chromatic alterations and dissonances, but it is not sufficient. One must also avoid any formulation too reminiscent of the norms of functional harmony.

A particularly striking illustration is Niedermeyer’s proclamation that, at cadences in the Lydian mode, the six-four chord is to be avoided [click] in favour of the root position tonic chord [click]. Otherwise, the cadence “[becomes] melodically identical with those common to our major keys” [click]. But the six-four chord is a dissonant chord, and so it is already prohibited by the rule against all dissonance. Nevertheless, Niedermeyer goes out of his way to specifically prohibit it, and, moreover, his prohibition does not appeal to the chord’s dissonance, showing that even when other, apparently more basic criteria are available for forbidding a progression, the imperative to avoid common-practice harmony looms larger than any of these.

[click] A final, and perhaps most subtle, nuance in Niedermeyer’s “plainchant tonality” is illustrated by his explanation of why the first-inversion diminished triad D-F-B [click] is acceptable. For Niedermeyer, there is an “essential difference” between this chord and the forbidden dominant seventh chord. This difference lies in the treatment of the tritone F and B [click ONCE]. In the dominant seventh, these pitches are tendency tones, with prescribed resolutions: F must resolve downwards, and B must resolve upwards. In the diminished triad of plainchant tonality, in contrast, F and B are “devoid

of significance and can resolve equally well up or down” (54). Niedermeyer illustrates this with an example in the Mixolydian mode [click] where B resolves downwards [click], contrary to its common-practice tendency, and F is held over as a common-tone to the next chord [click]. (I’ve added an initial chord before Niedermeyer’s example in an effort to establish the G tonic but, as you’ll hear, it’s nevertheless difficult not to hear this passage as firmly lodged in C major) [play].



[click] I propose that when French musicians like Koechlin describe Fauré’s music as “modal,” they do so largely on account of the presence of the implicit features that I have just been discussing. “Modality” here need not involve restricting oneself to the pitches of a single diatonic scale; nor need it imply an association between particular melodic and harmonic formulae and specific church modes. It is instead, above all, the use of those progressions which the diatonic scale affords, yet which tonality disfavours or avoids, what one might call “the negative image of tonality.” Even in the major scale, one can write “modal” music by avoiding—or at least de-emphasizing—the characteristic elements of common-practice tonality.

[click] This brings us back to the example with which I began. Despite exhibiting both chromatic alteration and a dissonant seventh chord, then, this cadence is “Gregorian” to Koechlin because it exhibits “the leading-tone lowered to G-natural in the key of A minor” [click] [play]. Another of Fauré’s “modal” techniques, Koechlin writes, is “the suppression of the leading tone in the major mode,” [click] illustrated with this

progression [click] [play]. Here, all pitches belong to the major mode and, moreover, the harmony plainly suggests the paradigmatic dominant-tonic progression of common-practice tonality. What makes it “modal” (and even perhaps “Gregorian”) is simply the deliberate avoidance of the most characteristic element of the dominant-tonic polarity: namely, the leading-tone-to-tonic resolution.

[click] We’re now in a position to see how all this plays out in Fauré’s music and, more specifically, in his late style, which manifests the relevant features most consistently. Let’s take a moment to listen to the opening theme of the *Andantino* from his Piano Trio [click].

The theme we’ve just heard is in F major, but it is nevertheless “modal” in the sense I have just been discussing, generally avoiding paradigmatic common-practice progressions and de-emphasizing tendency tones. Fauré goes especially out of his way to avoid using scale degree $\hat{7}$ as the leading tone of a clear dominant-to-tonic resolution [click]. Consider the penultimate dominant chord of the theme [click]. Here, Fauré suspends F in the piano's tenor register [click], and never resolves it to the leading tone [click] [play].

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The image shows a musical score for the opening theme of the *Andantino* from Fauré's Piano Trio. The score is in F major and 3/4 time. It features three staves: Violin I, Violin II, and Piano. The Piano part shows a penultimate dominant chord with a suspended F in the tenor register. The score includes dynamic markings such as *dim.* and *dim.* and a final *dim.* marking. The score is numbered 10 at the beginning.

This is, as you may recall, the same procedure we have just seen Koechlin describe [click], except that Fauré has rendered the dominant chord still weaker by placing it in inversion.

[click] A similar, but even clearer case of leading-tone aversion is the phrase-ending upon the dominant at measure 5 [click]. Here as well, a suspension is never resolved to the leading tone [click]. But in this case, the suspension is unprepared, preceded instead by precisely the pitch to which it avoids resolving [click]: namely, the leading tone B, present in the previous E minor seventh chord [play].

The image shows a musical score for piano, likely from a piece by Fauré. It consists of three staves: a vocal line at the top, a piano accompaniment in the middle, and a piano accompaniment in the bottom. The piano accompaniment in the middle staff is marked 'mezzo p'. The score shows a phrase ending on the dominant chord in measure 5. The leading tone B is highlighted in green, and a green box highlights the suspension of the leading tone B in the piano accompaniment. The piano accompaniment in the bottom staff shows the piano's right hand with two voices.

In the entire theme, the dominant of the home key of F major appears only once with a leading tone [click], in measure 3 [click]. But even here, the effect of the leading tone [click] is softened by its introduction as a common tone held over from the preceding A-minor triad [click]. This is in a sense the opposite of the usual procedure, prevalent since the Renaissance, of announcing the leading tone with a prominent suspension. Whereas the suspension creates an expectant “desire” for the leading tone, the common tone ushers the leading tone in almost without our noticing. And once the leading tone has been ushered in, Fauré goes out of his way to avoid giving it its normal resolution [click]. Rather than complete the ensuing tonic triad in the piano’s right hand with the requisite F, as he easily could have done, he reduces the piano’s right hand to two voices [click].

It's not the case, however, that Fauré simply avoids scale degree $\hat{7}$ altogether. [click] In fact, the pitch-class E-natural occurs in nearly every measure of the theme [click]. Its "leading-toneness," however, is de-emphasized because it never discharges into the tonic as the third of the dominant chord. Indeed, in its many appearances, scale degree $\hat{7}$ only progresses upwards by semitone twice, and in neither case is it accompanied by anything resembling a V-I resolution.

In the first of these, in m. 6 [click], E-natural is merely a brief ascending passing tone over a B-flat harmony.

[click] In the second case, from mm. 7 to 8, the ascending half step from E to F is much more marked [click]—it attains both the highest pitch and the loudest dynamic of the theme. The accompanying harmony, however, is distantly removed from a dominant-to-tonic progression. Instead, E is the seventh of a FM7 chord [click], ascending to an F that is the third of a Dm7 chord [click] [play].

Throughout the theme, in sum, scale degree $\hat{7}$ takes on a more neutral role, in which it can ascend or descend, exactly like the B and F of Niedermeyer's first-inversion diminished triad. Whereas common-practice scale degree $\hat{7}$ functions as a powerful emissary of dominant function, Fauré's scale degree $\hat{7}$ has been freed from its necessary association with the dominant.

[click] Another familiar tendency tone of common-practice tonality is scale degree $\hat{4}$, which, when used melodically, “pulls” downwards to the third of the tonic triad, especially in its role as the seventh of the dominant chord. In this theme, Fauré does not deflect the resolution of $\hat{4}$ to $\hat{3}$ as assiduously as he does the resolution of $\hat{7}$ to $\hat{8}$. $\hat{4}$ moves to $\hat{3}$, for instance, at each of the three dominant chords we have already seen [click]. Nevertheless, these instances all remain in the accompanimental background [click]. The most prominent *melodic* appearances of scale degree $\hat{4}$ are found in mm. 2 and 4 at the outset of the theme [click], and in m. 11 at the concluding cadence [click], and none of these resolve downwards. Instead, they constitute low points of the melodic contour, from which the melody subsequently ascends [click]; for example, in m. 2 [play].

Here, any downwards tendency that scale degree $\hat{4}$ may possess is simply left hanging; scale degree $\hat{4}$, much like scale degree $\hat{7}$, has been freed from its common-practice tendency, and takes on a more neutral role.

[click] So far, I’ve been talking about scale degrees $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{4}$, but late-tonal composers certainly did not restrict themselves to the tendency tones of the unaltered diatonic scale. Instead, they availed themselves of every manner of applied dominant, augmented sixth, and minor subdominant chord, as well as an accumulation of chromatic

“specific accompaniments” or “projections” (to borrow Daniel Harrison’s terminology). In light of this, one might ask whether it is the case that Fauré has merely de-emphasized the particular tendency tones of the diatonic scale, in favour of chromatic tendency tones? I do not believe this is so. Instead, I believe that the origin of chromatic notes in later Fauré is more “neutral”—by which I mean that, rather than yearning upwards or pulling downwards in the manner of tendency tones, his chromatic notes more typically provide harmonic colour, without seeming to demand further motion. In light of the discussion above, we might even (somewhat oxymoronicly) call such chromaticism “modal” or even “Gregorian”—as I believe Koechlin might have done.

[click] Among the manifestations of this “modal chromaticism” are “wobbly” chromatic lines not impelled by any other feature of the music. The term “wobbly” is sometimes used to refer to chromatic inflections, usually in an inner voice, necessary to accommodate the harmony of the outer voices, and not intrinsically motivated by the shape of the chromatic line itself. In Fauré’s music, however, we sometimes find inner-voice “wobbles” that exist, not to accommodate the outer voices, but instead merely to provide chromatic activity to the given voice and, in so doing, to add harmonic coloration. An example is found in the piano and cello parts in mm. 10–11, where the pitch E-flat [click], the fifth of A \emptyset 7 [click], alternates with E-natural [click], the seventh of FM7 [click]. These two chords are then repeated [click] before being sequenced down a whole tone [click] [play].

A^{ø7} F^{Maj7} A^{ø7} F^{Maj7} G^{ø7} E^bMaj⁷

This progression also illustrates an important way in which Fauré’s music confounds the “tendencies” of pitches in common-practice harmony [click]: sevenths are treated much like other basic chord factors, and are no longer constrained to resolve in prescribed manner—that is, to descend. In other words, seventh chords become effectively consonant sonorities. In the measures we’ve just now seen, for instance, the seventh of the A half-diminished chord [click] proceeds upwards, to the third of FM7 [click], while, in turn, the seventh of this FM7 chord [click] proceeds by chromatic semitone to the fifth of A half-diminished [click].

In similar manner, [click] when scale degree ⁷ proceeds to the tonic from measure 7 to 8, as we saw earlier, it does so as the seventh of FM7 [click], moving upwards to the third of Dm7 [click]. In fact, every harmony in measure 7 is a seventh chord [click], and in not one of them does the seventh descend [click] [play].

This free treatment of sevenths is a sort of very circumscribed “emancipation of the dissonance,” although it more resembles the “emancipation” of the previously dissonant third in the fifteenth century than the innovations of the second Viennese school. Much as with Niedermeyer’s prohibition of all dissonant tones, the end result is to reduce the number of tendency tones. The means, however, are opposite to

Niedermeyer's: instead of avoiding sevenths, Fauré releases them from their obligation to behave like dissonant tones.

[click] In this paper, I've given a brief account of the "modal" techniques of Fauré's piano trio, such as the de-emphasis of both tendency tones and the dominant-tonic polarity. Nearly sixty years, however, separate Fauré's attendance at the École Niedermeyer from his composition of the piano trio in 1923. As you may have heard, a lot happened in those intervening decades, and so I should clarify that I am not arguing that the style of Fauré's late music comes directly out of Niedermeyer. Instead, I'm suggesting that Niedermeyer [click] informed the French conception of "modality" as the negative image of tonality [click], and that this conception was then read back onto Fauré's music by musicians such as Koechlin [click]—and furthermore, I believe reading Fauré's music in this way is illuminating. As to what extent the relevant features of Fauré's music directly derive from Niedermeyer's influence [click], I am not certain, but it seems plausible that they do in at least part. This is especially so because elements of the "modal" techniques we've been discussing can be found in pieces by Fauré dating back to at least the late 1870s. Although there is not time to do so now, I would be happy to show some examples of these in the discussion.

Extra stuff:

Discussion about leading tones

The authors seem to acknowledge this, writing that, at the time of the "earliest harmonists, [...] ecclesiastical tonality [i.e., Niedermeyer's conception of plainchant harmonization] was threatened in a manner no less real or profound than at a later date." It does not seem, however, that they understood from this that "ecclesiastical tonality"

was in fact Niedermeyer's original invention. They seem, instead, to have assumed that it had some prior, albeit unspecified, existence. Perhaps they presumed that it must, as a matter of logical necessity, have been the manner in which the earliest plainchant was harmonized, even if all historical record of this practice had been lost. Or perhaps they merely thought that diatonic plainchant harmonization belonged to the platonic realm of ideal forms.

Nevertheless, I do not mean to give the impression that Fauré entirely avoids the use of conventional tendency tones and applied chords. For instance, an applied chord occurs in m. 6, [click] with scale degrees $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{4}$ borrowed from B-flat both resolving according to their normal tendencies. This is, however, the only occurrence of borrowed tendency tones behaving conventionally in this passage. Moreover, while it is true that the chromaticism of the theme under discussion is relatively constrained, I believe a more complete treatment of Fauré's later music would give broadly similar results.