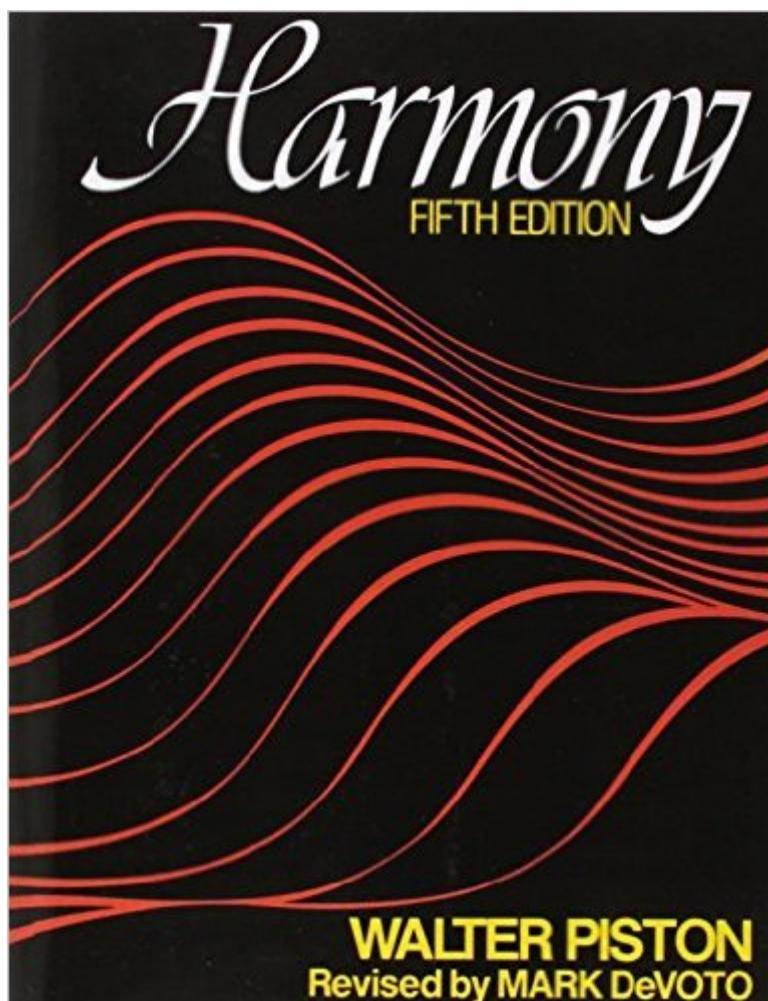


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# Harmony: Fifth Edition



## Synopsis

This fifth edition of *Harmony* marks the forty-fifth year of its successful use. Years after Walter Piston's death, his students and their students can still take great pride in the enduring vitality of his teaching. By now it is plain that the book is different from what it used to be, but its essential approach and its basic substance remain as they were. The major departure of the fourth edition was the addition of seven new chapters, including four on the complicated subject of harmony after common practice, which had not been discussed in the first three editions. However, then as now, the core of the book remains the exhaustive treatment of common-practice harmony, the subject of most one-year or two-year courses in tonal harmony. In the present edition, the entire text has been carefully revised with a view to clarifying the language and illuminating the essential principles. Wherever possible, the text has been "opened up" to allow the reader to adopt a more leisurely pace through what had been a terse and detailed presentation. The results will also be perceived in the more spacious design of this edition. New exercises have been added to the early chapters as well as some fresh music examples. There is an entirely new chapter on musical texture that serves to clear up many difficult points encountered by the beginning student. Another innovation is the rearrangement of the chapters dealing with harmonic rhythm and the structure of the phrase as well as the inclusion of a short summary of analytical method. This book has long been known as an introductory textbook, but because of its comprehensive range, it also serves as an invaluable reference book. The acquisition of an consummate knowledge of composers' practice—the goal of any study of harmony—is admittedly an endless assignment. *Ars longa, vita brevis*, but consolation may be derived from the thought that intellectual and artistic rewards are to be found at all stages along the way.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I'm hearing a lot of politics and bad music school flashbacks from some of these reviews of Piston's Harmony, but I think the book's usefulness depends on what you're looking to learn. When I first came across the book (late 70's, early 80's) I was more interested in composition than performing or analysing existing music. Piston's Harmony teaches by demonstrating snapshots of particular harmonic practices from more or less standard classical pieces. These illustrations are then combined with variations on figured bass or melody harmonization exercises. For what I was interested in at the time, this approach left little room for creativity. A composer-friend suggested Schoenberg's Theory of Harmony, which approaches harmony from the standpoint of a beginning composer learning the craft of connecting chords and gradually mastering the material by composing his own chord progressions. There are no illustrations of existing pieces and no "half-filled in" exercises to complete. Sure, there are also pages of Schoenberg's rants and diatribes to wade through (what a blogger he would have made!), but this approach made sense to me and I was on my way. So why four stars for Piston? Well, years later as a player and lifelong student, I became more interested in understanding existing tonal music. I came back to Piston and discovered that I was now more familiar with many of the examples and could better appreciate the harmonic effects as one aspect in the overall context of the whole piece of music. For myself, the written exercises still have limited value, although I feel better prepared for them and, as Schoenberg himself might have said, worked on seriously they won't do anyone harm.

Interesting to read the reviews about this book. Just because a book is "hard" or confuses you doesn't mean it's a bad book. Look, I'm a professional musician, composer and teacher. This book is the most complete and best harmony text out there. There's plenty of room for personal preference, and it's probably not fair to say one book is better than another. This book, however, is truly exceptional, and the 5th edition is the best so far. BTW, I taught myself harmony from this book when I was in high school (with the guidance of a teacher reviewing my exercises) and tested out of all theory at a prestigious university. Basically I got the equivalent of an undergrad theory background from studying this text.

When I first learned Harmony in the ninth grade, I was taught on an aged and practically antique fourth edition of Piston's Harmony. The first thing I noticed is that the fifth reworked some of the chapters and the order they are in. For example Chapter 10 in the 4th edition was Cadences, but the 5th it is the six-four chord. After many years away from practice and learning harmony, I came across it again and was tempted. Should I buy it? Would it be changed after all those years? I am glad to say that it's like an old friend came by. Despite some of the chapters are different in order, the structure remains the same. Piston uses a lot of musical examples to show what he is trying to teach. He starts out with very easy concepts (positions of notes in a chord and intervals). It is assumed that the reader can read music and knows the difference between a whole note and a quarter note, etc.) The concept of inversions is covered quite thoroughly, giving the reader time to ingest and start to feel comfortable with first inversion, he gets into the second. Finally, in the section on dominants, he gets into third. In between there are chapters on harmonization of a melody, cadences (the old ii-V-I, etc.), triads, modulation, seventh chords, textures, Neapolitan sixths, etc. One of the greatest strengths of this book is the musical examples that it is drawn from. Once you start getting into triads, etc. you start seeing output from actual composers (usually keyboard reductions) for teaching the works with a piano or keyboard. If you are a reader interested in learning the craft and the technique of composition, Piston's book will not steer you wrong. It is good to welcome back an old friend.

If you feel that your knowledge in harmony is incomplete, that is the right book for you! It is very systematic and not hard at all (even for me: english is not my mother tongue) Some people complain about the fact, that it is dry. Well what do they expect from a harmony book? It gives you all the knowledge you need starting from zero, building it gradually to more sophisticated exercises. You really don't have to be super-intelligent to be able to understand it, you just have to work on it systematically and with discipline, you might even enjoy it (I did) By the time you finish the book, you will not feel anymore that your knowledge in harmony is insufficient, on the contrary the word harmony will be more associated as a friend than as an enemy.

I am a composer and teacher of music theory - and have been for many years, both in an institutional and private basis. I have been using the Piston Harmony books for nearly thirty years, starting with the 3rd edition, onto the fourth, and then the fifth. When I got into the fifth edition I found that much of the clarity was destroyed and much superfluous material was added. The third was too terse, with not enough helpful explanation. The fourth edition is by far the best harmony book I have

ever seen, and although I have not seen all of them, I find no reason to change from a perfectly clear system to anything else. [...]

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