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MUSICAL PRACTICES IN EARLY MELODIC DEATH METAL

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Introduction

This article examines harmonic practices in melodic death metal, a subgenre of death metal that developed in Gothenburg, Sweden, during the mid-1990s. I examine how the early bands in this scene transformed approaches to harmony, voice leading and tonality which are found in its parent genres of Swedish death metal and the New Wave of European Heavy Metal[1] (NWOEHM). This movement is usually referred to as the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) in academic texts and fan communities (Walser 1993; Christe 2003). Melodic death metal was initially labelled 'The Gothenburg Sound'[2], reflecting the view that it was a local death metal style, and only later was known as melodic death metal, a discrete subgenre (Mudrian 2004: 247; Ekeroth 2008: 267–9). The genre has since grown well beyond these roots and is commonly regarded as one of the more commercially successful international metal subgenres (Mudrian 2004). A range of international bands, such as Be'lakor (Australia), Insomnium (Finland), and The Black Dahlia Murder (USA), continued the expansion of the genre in more recent years and it has been influential on the development of melodic metalcore and other modern metal subgenres in the 2000s (Christe 2003). The point where the Gothenburg sound is generally regarding as becoming melodic death metal was at the time of the release of three albums: *Slaughter of the Soul* (1995) by At The Gates, *The Gallery* (1995) by Dark Tranquillity and *The Jester Race* (1996) by In Flames (Bowar 2016; Serba n.d.; Ward 2008)[3]. This paper, consequently, will focus on the musical practices observed in these albums to understand how early melodic death metal developed from its parent genres. All musical examples specific to this genre are taken from these albums because of their importance as the key texts that codified melodic death metal. Transcribed musical excerpts exclude the vocal and drum parts of the recordings (as both are typically unpitched in this genre) to focus on the harmonic and melodic interplay between the two guitar parts and the bass[4].

I posit that these early examples of melodic death metal transform the musical practices derived from their parent genres and result in the formation of new musical practices that are characteristic of the new subgenre. From NWOEHM, melodic death metal draws influence from uses of common chord progressions (particularly Aeolian progressions[5]) and a harmonisation of lead guitar lines in diatonic thirds. The influence of Iron Maiden, in particular, can be seen clearly in the writing of these bands (Smialek

2015: 203; Hillier 2018), with all bands involved in the scene noting the importance of Iron Maiden to their songwriting style (Ekeroth 2008: 267–9; Enslain n.d.[6]; Eriksson and Lingvall 2016). Other European bands were also influential, with German band Helloween and Danish band Mercyful Fate significantly influencing Dark Tranquillity and Eucharist respectively (Stanne 2010; Johnsson 2017). Influences from heavy metal and hard rock bands that themselves influenced NWOEHM, such as Black Sabbath and Thin Lizzy, can also be seen in the use of the aforementioned chord progressions and harmonised guitar lines. From death metal (and extreme metal more broadly), melodic death metal draws influence from the usage of chromaticism and dissonance. This stems from the origin of many early melodic death metal bands as death metal bands before they became more melodic. Dark Tranquillity began as Septic Broiler, performing in a self-described 'deaththrash' style (Ekeroth 2008: 283). At The Gates' earlier albums, *The Red In the Sky is Ours* (1992) and *With Fear I Kiss The Burning Darkness* (1993) are death metal albums, as is the earlier work of many members of At The Gates in the band Grotesque (Christe 2003: 249–51; Ekeroth 2008: 165–8, 200–4, 267–9). Jesper Stromblad, the main songwriter for In Flames, was originally in the death metal band Ceremonial Oath (that itself later began playing melodic death metal) before leaving to found In Flames and perform in a more melodic style (Enslain n.d.[6]). Eucharist also initially played more conventional death metal on their earlier demo tapes before transitioning to a more melodic style (Ekeroth 2008: 267–9). The fact that that these five bands, Dark Tranquillity, At The Gates, In Flames, Ceremonial Oath, and Eucharist, were the core of the Gothenburg scene (Ekeroth 2008; Hillier 2018) illustrates that early melodic death metal remained heavily rooted in death metal.

Unique musical practices are also found in melodic death metal, in particular the tendency for chord progressions that are based on an outworking of the tonic triad of a song and the free mixture of modes for sonority that give rise to a sense of quasi-tonality. The triad progression is also representative of a general shift in melodic death metal from a riff-based composition style, where the melodic and harmonic material are embedded within one another, to a style where distinct melodic and countermelodic lines are supported by a chord progression. A broad shift from songwriting based around riffs to a songwriting style based around these chord progressions and melodic lines can also be observed in melodic death metal. These progressions and the sense of tonality are significant because the use of harmony and chord progressions in melodic death metal is an integral element of the label 'melodic' attached to the subgenre[7] (Smialek 2015: 233). Consequently, early melodic death metal is distinct from its parent genres to the point that it warrants consideration beyond a specific style developed in the Gothenburg locale. This is important to establish because, owing to its popularity and influence in modern metal overall, melodic death metal is one of the more significant subgenres to develop in the 1990s (Phillipov 2012; Smialek 2015). Despite this, little musicological analysis has been conducted to specify the features of this genre which would connect with discussions of culture, reception and proliferation of melodic death metal. Smialek's (2015: 198–234) dissertation features a chapter analysing melodic death metal that focuses on how its uses of form inform its aesthetics, suggesting that the melodification of death metal is a response to waning record sales for the genre during the 1990s. He also identifies important features of melodic death metal's style: clarity of production, verse-chorus forms, diatonicism in riff-writing, and the use of the lead guitar as a counter-melodic device (Smialek 2015: 233). This article complements Smialek's study by analysing the genre at its inception rather than the period after it had attained mainstream success (by extreme metal standards). Owing to our considerations of different eras of melodic death metal, there are differences in our perspectives on its harmonic content, especially regarding the usage of chromaticism and dissonance observed in early melodic death metal. My own previous work in this area concentrated on the shift in aesthetics and sound between death metal and melodic death metal that occurred during this period (Hillier 2018). I observed a shift in production style and timbre that echoes Smialek's observation of production clarity, as well as a change in instrumentation and texture to more closely resemble that of NWOEHM (Hillier 2018: 7–14). Extramusical elements of style were also transformed, with album artwork, band logos, and lyrics taking on a less aggressive and characteristically death-metal approach, instead evoking a sense of melancholy (Hillier 2018: 14–8). The present article seeks to complement this study by illustrating the transformation in harmonic practices that occurs alongside these broader aesthetic developments.

Based on this context, this paper focuses on how these musical practices are used in melodic death metal to trace its development as a genre. I examine how the practices derived from parent genres are transformed into a new context and musical lexicon, as well as how new practices are used. This shows how the genre operates musically in its earliest form, providing a framework for understanding its later developments more completely. This study of harmony in melodic death metal also provides a means to develop harmonic analyses of metal more broadly, especially extreme metal and its subgenres. Much of my analytical method is based on the work of musicologists Esa Lilja (2009) and Eric Smialek (2008; 2015); I have followed their example of using a variety of conventional techniques and methods

which have been slightly modified for the needs of metal music to understand the harmonic practices of these bands. Specifically, Lilja demonstrates that a slightly modified form of Roman numeral analysis is still useful for analysing what he calls 'traditional heavy metal' (mostly NWOEHM). Given that melodic death metal is heavily influenced by this style of metal, Roman numeral analysis retains some use for analysing and identifying harmonic progressions[8]. As with Lilja, there are Schenkerian influences to my analysis (namely the occasional use of score reductions), and Riemannian influences (namely the use of his 'T/S/D' approach to chord functions)[9]. Smialek's work largely deals with extreme metal, with a focus on the connection between musical elements and aesthetics (Smialek 2008; 2015). He often adapts traditional analytical methods or creates new methods for analysing extreme metal according to its own parameters. Smialek demonstrates that pitch material often cannot be considered independently of other parameters but must be considered alongside other musical and extra-musical parameters to understand extreme metal songs. While the music analysed in this article does not resist analysis using traditional tools in the same manner as other extreme metal might, I have drawn on Smialek's inclusion of other musical parameters in the analysis with some consideration of timbre[10].

Harmonic Practices derived from NWOEHM

A strong influence from NWOEHM is one of the defining characteristics of melodic death metal compared with other subgenres of death metal and death metal itself (Hillier, 2018; Ekeroth 2008: 267–9). Significantly, melodic death metal does not merely borrow practices from its parent genres but develops their usage. The NWOEHM influence in melodic death metal appears to be the predominant reason for its being considered more melodic than other subgenres (Smialek 2015). In this section I focus on two practices (i) the use of the Aeolian chord progression and (ii) the use of harmonised melodic lines in thirds, because these practices are especially emblematic of NWOEHM and represent a prominent influence from NWOEHM in early melodic death metal.

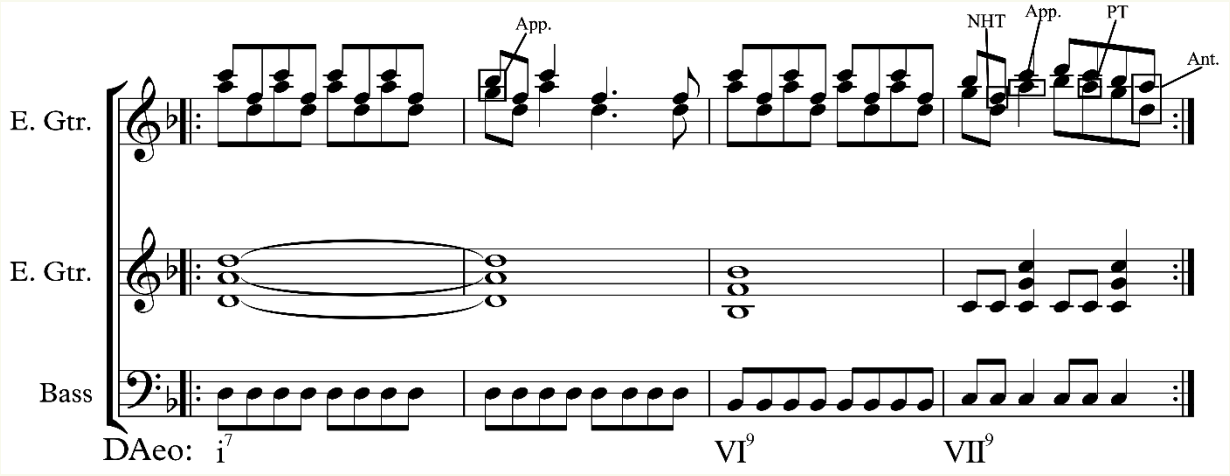
The Aeolian progression is commonly found throughout NWOEHM and is characteristic of the genre. This is similar to Lilja's 'Aeolian Cadence' (2009: 85–7), a chord progression of VI–VII–i occurring in a minor mode (or ♭VI–♭VII–I in a major mode)[11]. Example 1 demonstrates a conventional example of the Aeolian progression in NWOEHM.

Excluding the melodic line, this is the simplest form of the Aeolian progression: the tonic harmony is clearly established and the VI–VII–i progression is used to resolve back to the tonic without any additional chords or harmonic movement. In NWOEHM, this progression is often outlined by power chords (Lilja 2009), as seen in Ex. 1. The harmonised lead guitar line in this excerpt extends these chords into dominant seventh and ninth chords[12], in the same manner as other examples from both NWOEHM and melodic death metal (see Exs. 3, 10, and 11). There are other ways, however, of understanding the Aeolian progression. Lilja suggests that the i–VI–VII–i movement can be considered as T–S–d–T function, using Riemannian labels for the chord functions (Lilja 2009: 87, 200–1). As Lilja argues, both v and VII have a dominant function, although they are considered weaker than V owing to the lack of a leading tone (Lilja 2009). One could then theoretically substitute the individual chords in the VI–VII–i progression with other chords that fulfil the same functional role, as shown in Ex. 2. In this example, the VI–VII–i movement is modified and the VI–VII–i progression is implied through the held notes that begin each arpeggio. The iv^6 chord can, in this way, be interpreted as propelling the VI–VII–i movement through the bass note and additionally fulfils the S–d–T progression that underpins the functional relationships of the Aeolian progression (cf. Exs. 6 and 22 for examples of this in melodic death metal).

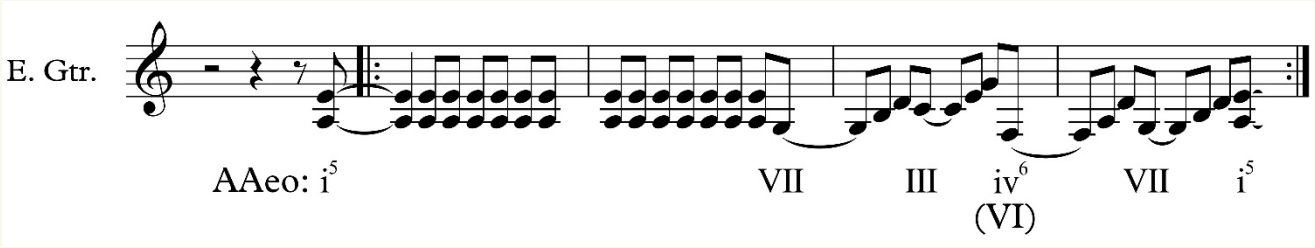
The Aeolian progression appears in a variety of forms in melodic death metal: at times it is imported directly with few changes, at times the majority of the progression is kept but chords are substituted or inverted, and at times it is abstracted to its functional relationships and transformed entirely into a new context. The sections of melodic death metal songs that utilise the Aeolian progression often bear the strongest influences from NWOEHM, an example being in Ex. 3.

The power chords are expanded into triads and extended chords through the harmonised melodic line played by the lead guitars, as in the conventional Aeolian progression. The songwriting of In Flames demonstrates, in many cases, the most conventional adaptation of NWOEHM practices, adapting chord prgressions and melodic practices more directly than Dark Tranquillity and At The Gates. While there are some variations to the conventional harmony of the Aeolian progression (most notably in the VI_M^7 and VII^7 harmonies arising

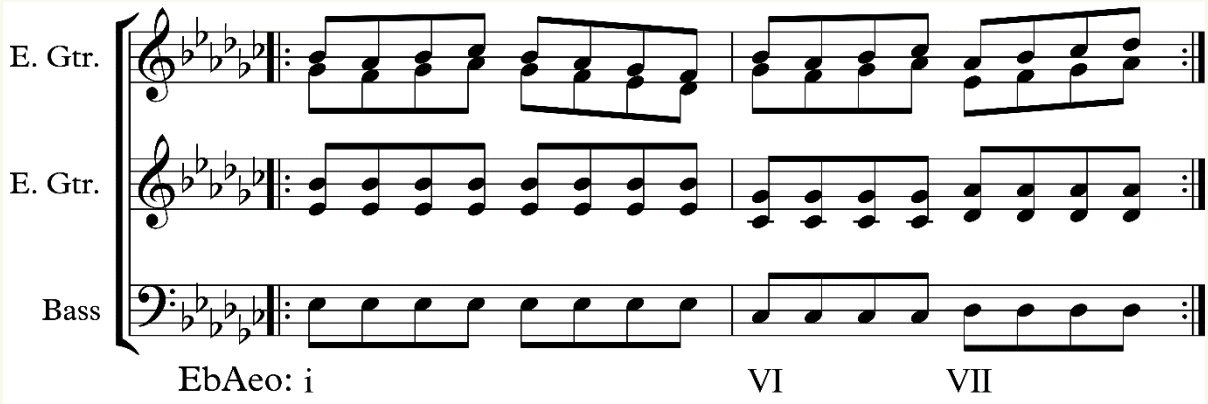
Example 1. Use of the Aeolian progression in NWOEHM from Helloween's 'I Want Out' (1988) [0:02–0:13]



Example 2. Aeolian progression variant in Judas Priest's 'Hellbent for Leather' (1978) [0:44–0:54]



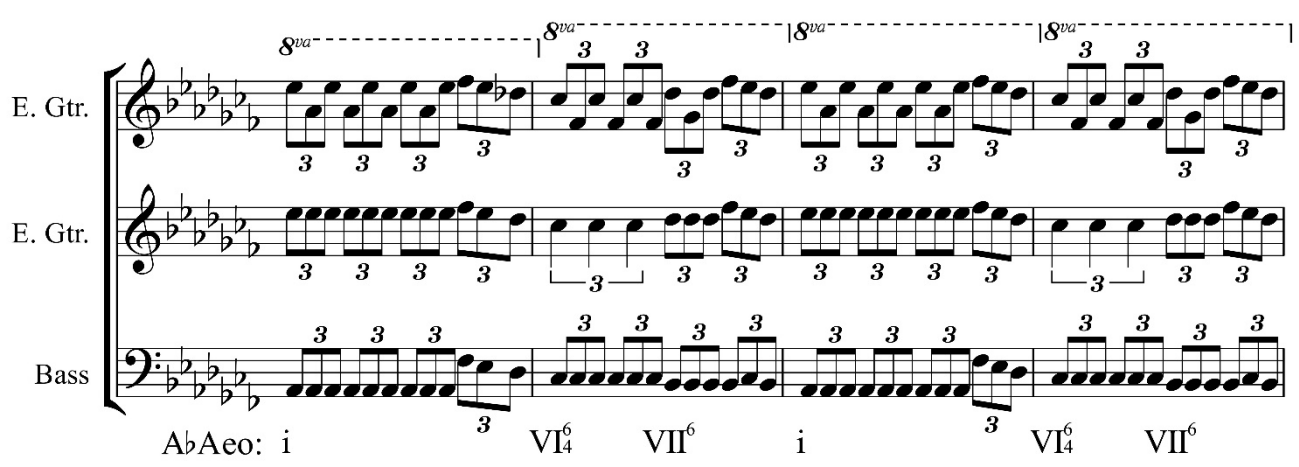
Example 3. Use of Aeolian progression in In Flames' 'Dead Eternity' (1996) [0:00–0:07]



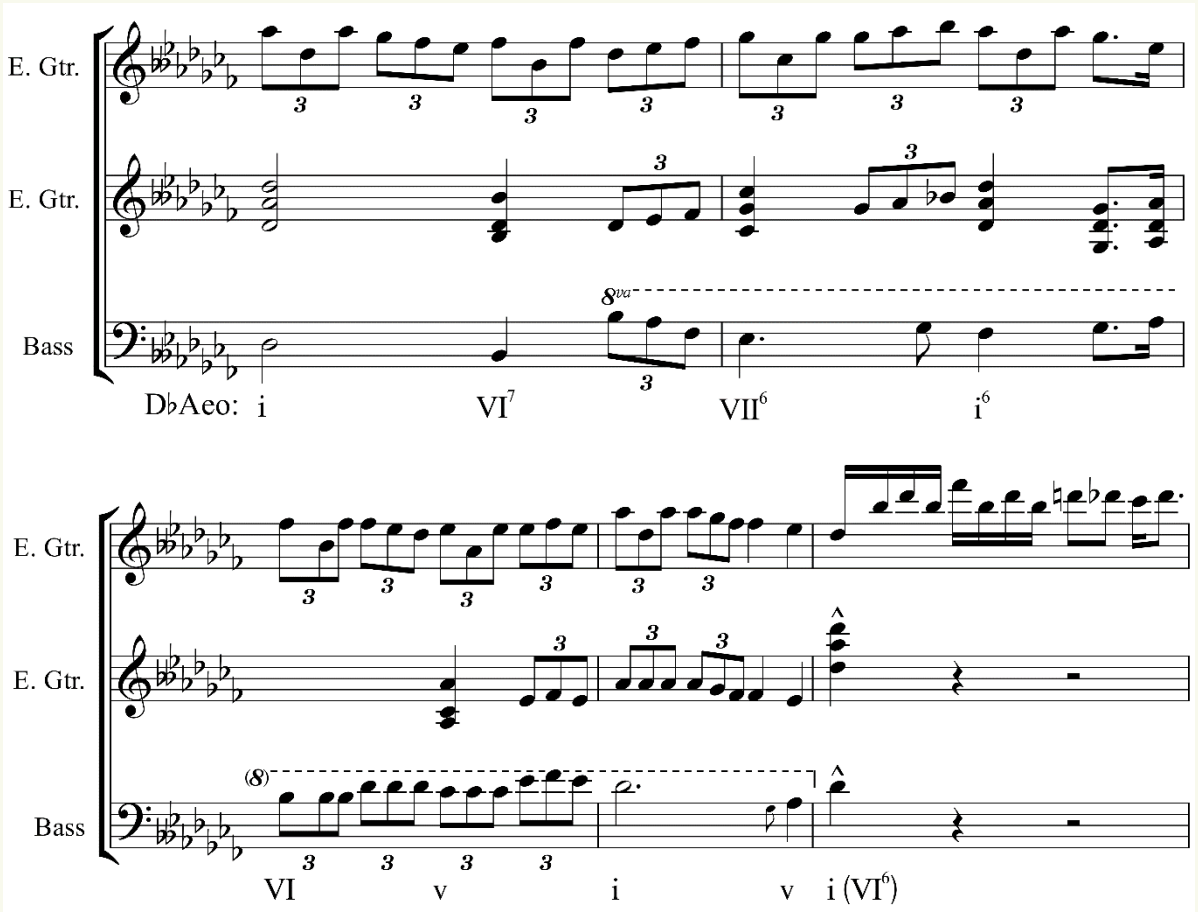
from the lead guitar harmonies), there is a clear, direct resemblance between Ex. 1 and Ex. 3. A variant on this progression in melodic death metal is shown in Ex. 4.

This section uses the Aeolian progression to briefly establish a key centre of A♭ Aeolian (as opposed to the D♭ Aeolian modality seen in the section immediately beforehand) combining a shift in modality with an abrupt shift in tempo and pulse. The instrumentation and register of this section further resemble NWOEHM practices, bearing as they do a close resemblance to Iron Maiden's songwriting style (Hillier 2018). The Aeolian progression is also somewhat transformed in this example: dyadic power chords are replaced with a triad on chord VII, and chords VI and VII are both in inversion to allow the bass to descend to the tonic, rather than being linear, root-position power chords or chord extensions via harmonised thirds. The linear voice leading pattern of i–VI–VII–i, however, is still clearly visible in the two guitar parts despite the inversions added by the bass guitar.

Example 4. Aeolian progression variant in Dark Tranquillity's 'Punish My Heaven' (1995) [0:50–0:57]

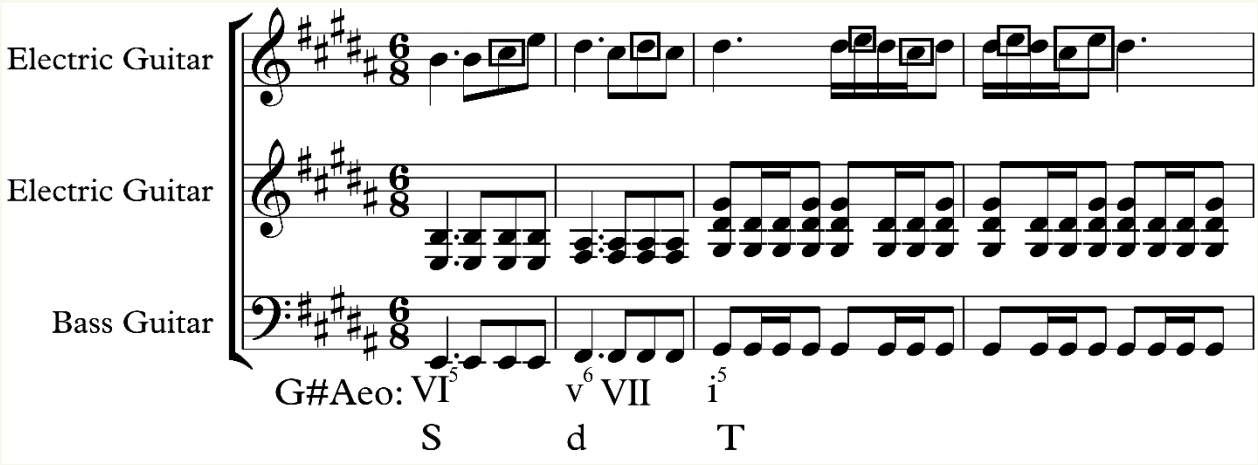


Example 5. Modulation via Aeolian progression in Dark Tranquillity's 'Punish My Heaven' (1995) [0:57–1:05]



Example 5 shows the transition between the chorus and the beginning of the second verse, which contains a different version of the Aeolian progression. The strong triplet feel of Ex. 4 is rhythmically weaker in Ex. 5, leading to the next verse at the end of Ex. 5. The Aeolian progression is used harmonically to confirm an abrupt modulation back to D♭ Aeolian in the second half of bar 2 of Ex. 5[13]. The Aeolian progression shown here is again not strictly conventional, owing to the triads formed between the middle guitar line and the bass guitar melody in bars 1–2. Nevertheless, the linear resolution of the i–VI–VII–i progression is more clearly visible in the middle guitar part shown in bars 1 and 2 of this excerpt. This again shows the influence of common NWOEHM harmonic progressions in early melodic

Example 6. Aeolian progression in Dark Tranquillity's 'Lethe' (1995) [1:32–1:38]



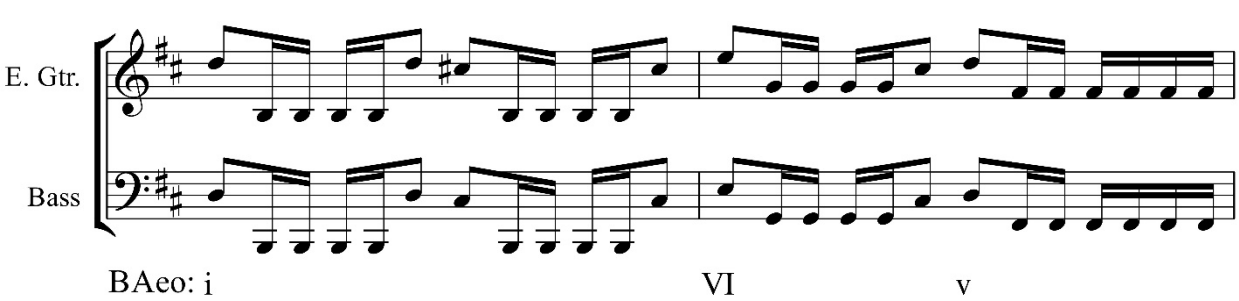
death metal, transformed into their new context. Additional influences from NWOEHM are seen in the same texture carried through from the chorus and in the usage of the bass guitar in a melodic and countermelodic role[14].

Example 6 further demonstrates an expansion of the conventional Aeolian progression harmony. While the VI–VII–i movement can still be seen, especially in the bassline, the combination of the melody and the underlying bassline and chord progression in the rhythm guitar part in the second bar complicates the harmony slightly. The first half of the bar can be read as chord v in first inversion owing to the prominent D♯ in the melodic line, though the VII harmony is reasserted in the latter half of the bar[15]. This bears some resemblance to the practice observed in Ex. 2 where the Aeolian progression harmony can be modified or expanded provided that its functional relationships are retained. Significantly, the melodic line in Ex. 6 could also be harmonised in the relative major key of B as it is prominently based around B and D♯. This melody does not significantly complicate a G♯ Aeolian reading of the underlying harmony, but it is odd that the tonic note does not appear anywhere in the melody of this section. This is an example of quasi-tonality in melodic death metal, because of the combination of an idomatically Aeolian progression alongside a major-implying melody; something which will be further explored later in this article.

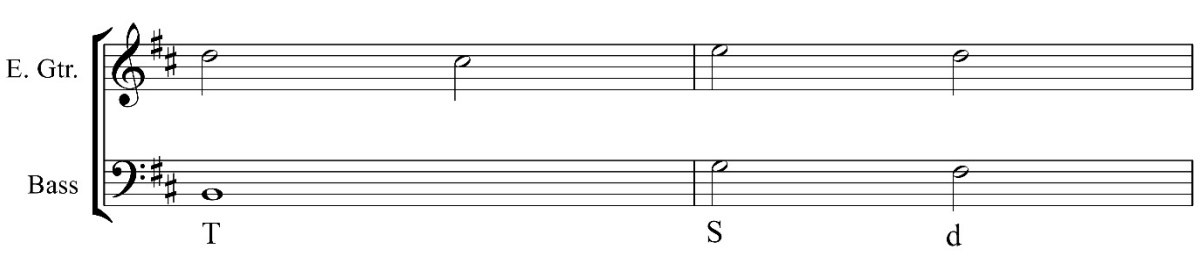
A final variation on the Aeolian progression will be considered in Ex. 7. There are multiple readings of this riff, yet the annotation above reflects most closely what most listeners are likely to hear when listening to the piece[16]. Example 7, in contrast to the previous example, does not feature separate melodic lines supported by chordal lines but rather the melodic material is embedded within the main riff. In view of the emphasis on their duration and pitch, I understand the bass notes in both parts as the only harmonically significant pitches in this excerpt (with melodic notes being non-harmonic tones), implying the harmonies indicated in Ex. 7. The listener consequently hears something of a separation of the two lines. As this excerpt is based around a riff, rather than a chord progression, Roman numerals are less revealing of harmonic movement than other methods such as Riemannian analysis. Example 8 presents the main riff of 'Blinded By Fear' in a rhythmic reduction showing two separate melodic lines analysed with Riemannian function labels.

This illustrates that the same functional roles which Lilja outlines for the Aeolian progression also underpin the main riff shown in Exs. 7 and 8. I posit that this, too, is a transformation of the Aeolian progression into a new form for melodic death metal where chord v is substituted for chord VII whilst retaining the weak dominant function used to resolve the progression. This is not to say that the members of At The Gates deliberately experimented with chord substitutions on a common chord progression thinking in terms of Riemannian chord functions. It is far more likely that the riff was simply written as is and judged to be aesthetically suitable[17]. This T–S–d–T progression and the resultant aural effect were inherited from NWOEHM into melodic death metal, whilst the individual chords were more malleable[18]. For bands that are aesthetically closer to NWOEHM, such as In Flames, the Aeolian progression can be used with minimal change.

Example 7. Aeolian harmony in At The Gates' 'Blinded By Fear' (1995) [0:38–0:39]



Example 8. Riff reduction with Riemannian function labels in At The Gates' 'Blinded By Fear' (1995) [0:38–0:39]



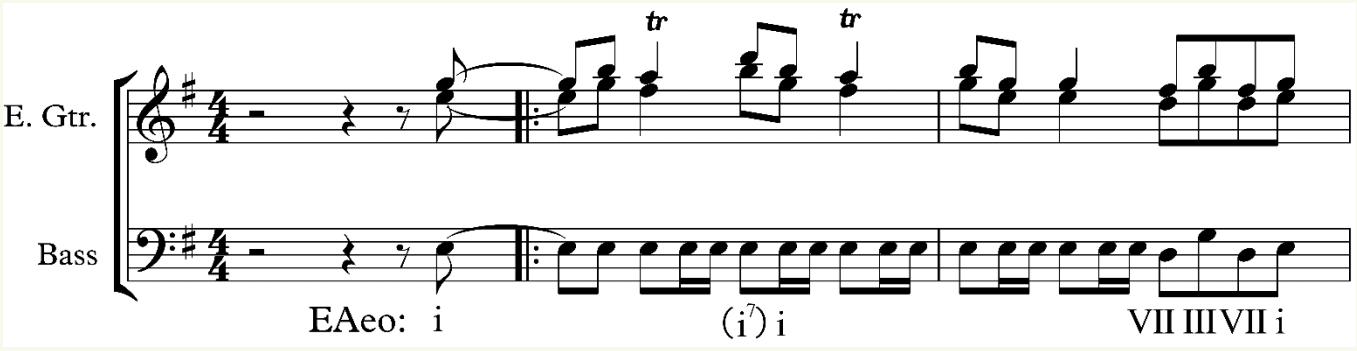
Conversely, for those aesthetically closer to Swedish death metal, such as At The Gates, the functional roles of the Aeolian progression may be adapted in a manner more suited to riff-based songwriting without the exact sequence of chords that usually represents these functions in metal music. These examples illustrate uses of the Aeolian progression that resembles its usage in NWOEHM, though permutations and developments of the practice are clear. While the previous examples have mostly used the same chord progression, melodic death metal bands have expanded its expression with chord inversions, the use of full triads, and with chord extensions, demonstrating a development in the usage of this progression in line with a broader harmonic palate.

Another practice that is adapted into melodic death metal from NWOEHM is the use of melodic lines harmonised in thirds. This practice is ubiquitous in NWOEHM but occurs infrequently in death metal, suggesting that its prevalence in melodic death metal is due to the NWOEHM influence. A lead guitar line is conventionally harmonised in diatonic thirds by the second guitarist when played live and may be overdubbed in a studio recording. This is illustrated in Ex. 9.

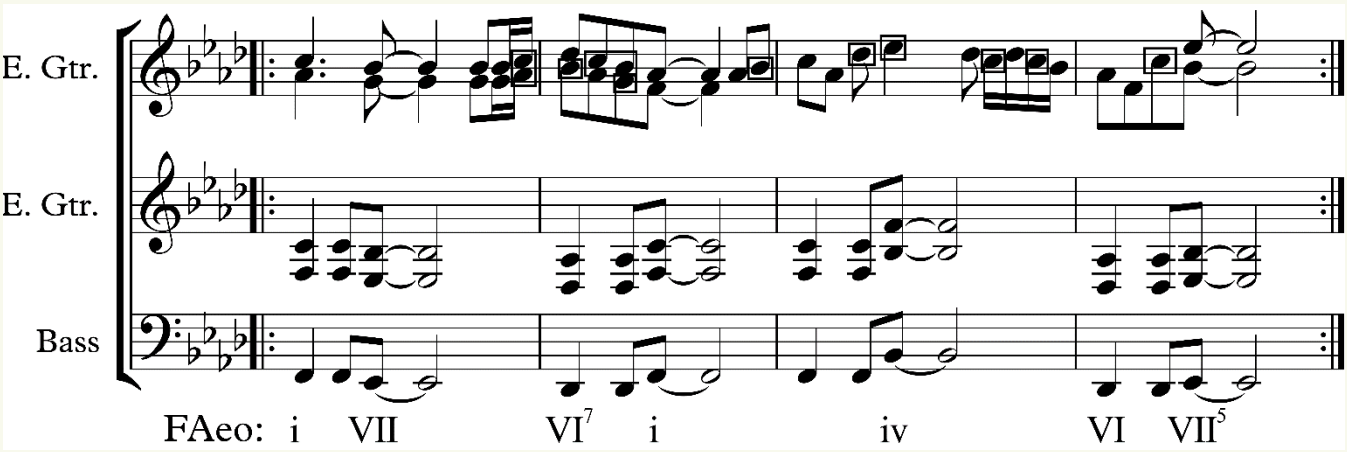
The conventional NWOEHM approach to harmonising thirds can be seen in Ex. 9, where the two guitar parts are supported by the bass alone. The whole melody is harmonised in thirds, with the conflicting F♯ and A notes being easily understood as neighbour tones to the main E minor melodic notes. A similar example in melodic death metal is shown in Ex. 3, where the whole melody is harmonised in thirds and the bassline is supplemented by a third guitar part playing power chords. A common variant practice in melodic death metal is where harmonised thirds are used only at certain points in phrases, often accentuating key moments of a phrase, as seen in Ex. 10.

Example 10 demonstrates an elaboration of the NWOEHM practice of harmonising in thirds with a more complex melody. The combination of a more elaborate melody along with more frequent harmonic movement gives rise to a range of non-harmonic tones in the upper voice that conflict at times with the harmony outlined below. Because the melodic material is not embedded within the harmonic progression or riff (cf. Exs. 7 and 12), both the melody and its harmonisation can be more complex with the harmonisation serving to foreground the melodic line in the ear of the listener. The melody in Ex. 10 is notably not harmonised for the entire phrase, dropping to a single melodic line in the second phrase while the final note is harmonised at a fifth. This essentially replicates the power chord from the accompaniment in the melody. This practice of only harmonising part of a phrase in thirds appears to be idomatic of In Flames specifically and can also

Example 9. Harmonised thirds in Iron Maiden's 'The Trooper' (1983) [0:13–0:24]



Example 10. NWOEHM influence in In Flames' 'Artifacts of the Black Rain' (1996) [0:39–0:46]

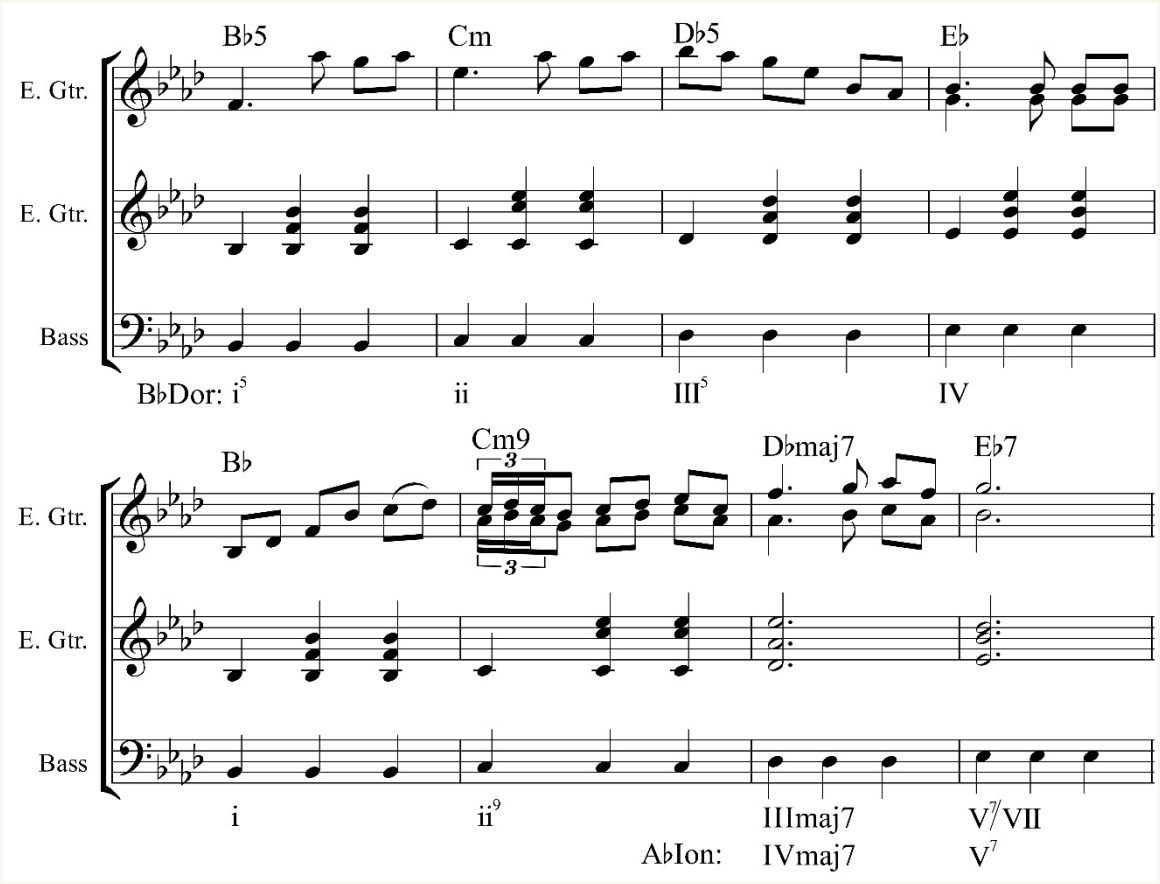


be observed in Exs. 3, 11, and 28. Example 11 demonstrates the shift from unison to harmony toward the end of a phrase, as well as a shift from thirds to sixths[19] toward the end of the excerpt and the implications that this has for the harmony in these sections.

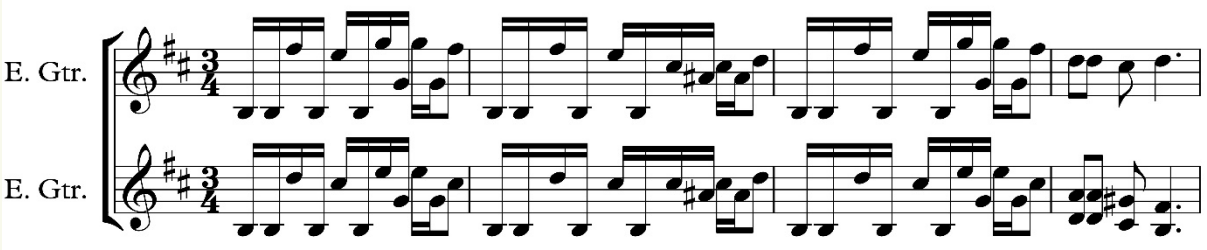
The harmonies that result from the harmonisation of the melodic lines notably result in several extended chords that are uncommon in extreme metal. Certain tendencies, when taken together with Exs. 3 and 10, can be observed from the relationship between harmonised melodic lines and the accompaniment beneath. Firstly, the lower melodic line often expands power chords into triads through the addition of thirds (see bars 4, 6, 7 and 8 of Ex. 11). The upper melodic line, harmonised in thirds, subsequently often extends these chords: specifically, dominant seventh chords are commonly found on dominant function chords (e.g. V^7, VII^7) and major seventh chords are commonly found on subdominant function chords (e.g. VI_M^7 and IV_M^7). Because power chords are used in melodic death metal where a single bass note would be used in NWOEHM, melodic death metal has a broader harmonic palate and denser texture resulting from the combination of power chords with harmonised melodic lines. This is most notable in the songwriting of In Flames, who bear the strongest influence from NWOEHM in their melodic writing, but is still present in the music of At The Gates (e.g. the solo to 'Blinded By Fear' [2:21–2:28]) and Dark Tranquillity (e.g. Ex. 5).

Example 12 demonstrates harmonisation in thirds in the context of riff-based melodic death metal. This represents a midpoint between heavier death metal riffing and the developing sense of melody in melodic death metal: a fairly conventional pedal tone riff, as seen throughout extreme metal subgenres, is here augmented with a harmonised line in thirds. The harmonised thirds, as with the previous example, are seen in the higher pitches while both guitar parts share the B pedal tone and any pitches that would produce a dissonance if harmonised in thirds (e.g. the end of bar 2 in Ex. 12). The melodic material, in this case, is foregrounded by the harmonisation, being embedded within the riff as opposed to a separate melodic line over a chord progression.

Example 11. Harmonised thirds and their implications for harmony in In Flames' 'Moonshield' (1996) [2:10–2:18]



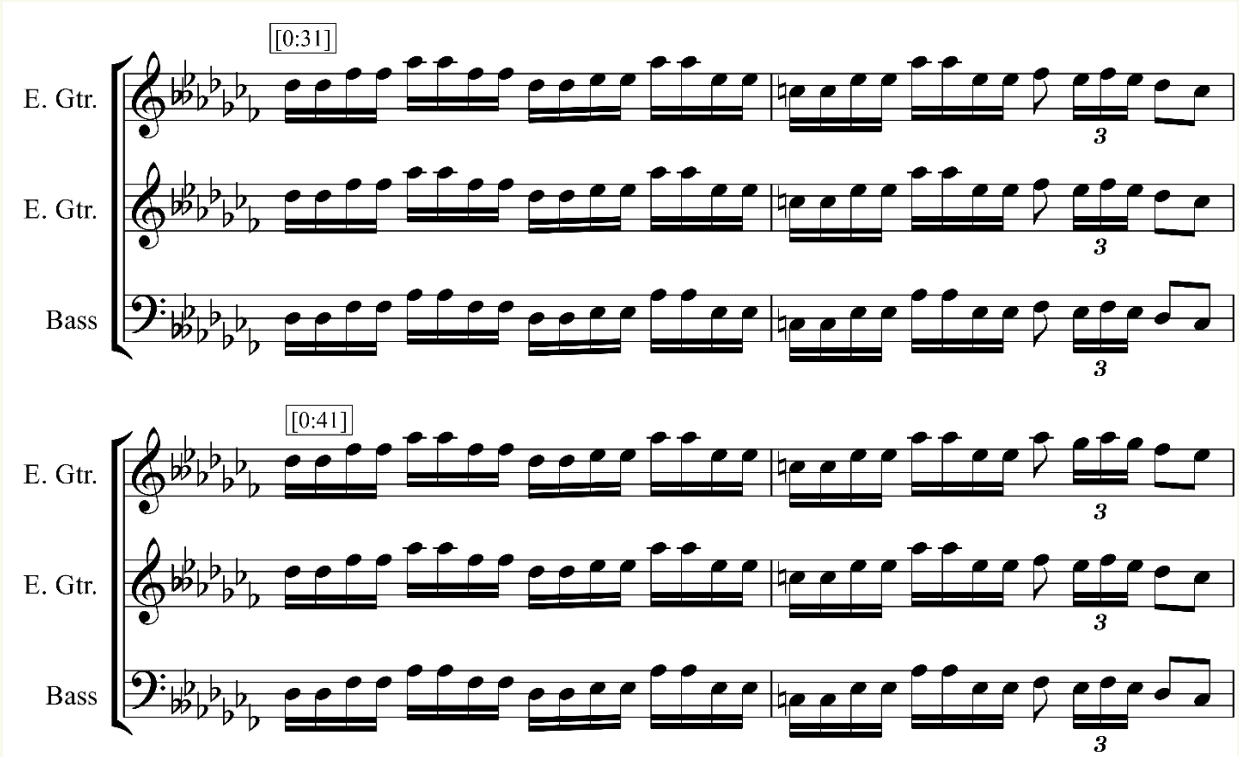
Example 12. Harmonised thirds in At The Gates' 'World of Lies' (1995) [0:56–1:01]



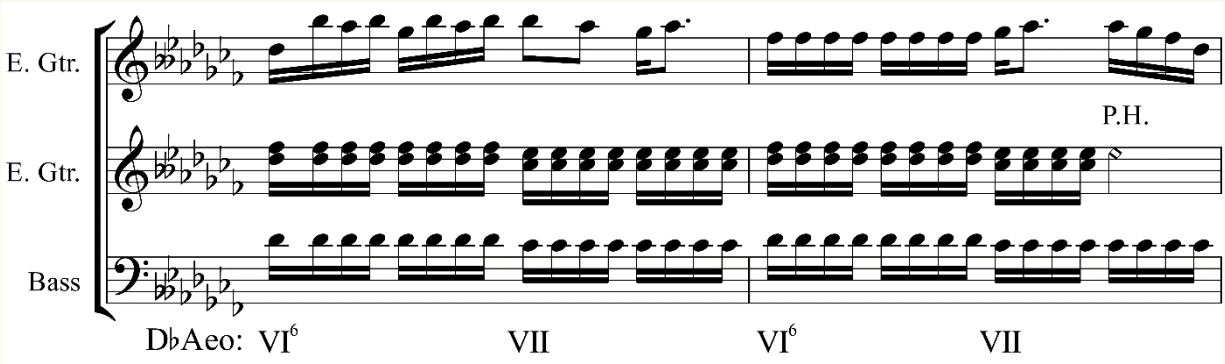
Example 13 illustrates a contrasting practice where a harmony in thirds is used instead to vary a repeated melodic figure (note that only the final two beats of the repeated phrase are harmonised in Ex. 13). This illustrates an additional transformation of a practice from a parent genre into a new aesthetic. Harmonised thirds characteristic of NWOEHM, in this case, are combined with a tremolo-picked riff characteristic of death metal creating an aesthetic style that became characteristic of melodic death metal. The speed of this excerpt and the semiquaver guitar accompaniment evokes extreme metal riffing, while the use of diatonic thirds evokes a sonority more closely associated with NWOEHM that solely using power chords would not.

The second guitar part in Ex. 14 shows another fusion between extreme metal and NWOEHM practices where harmonised thirds as dyads are used to achieve a certain sonority. The combination between speed and sonority again blends extreme metal and NWOEHM in

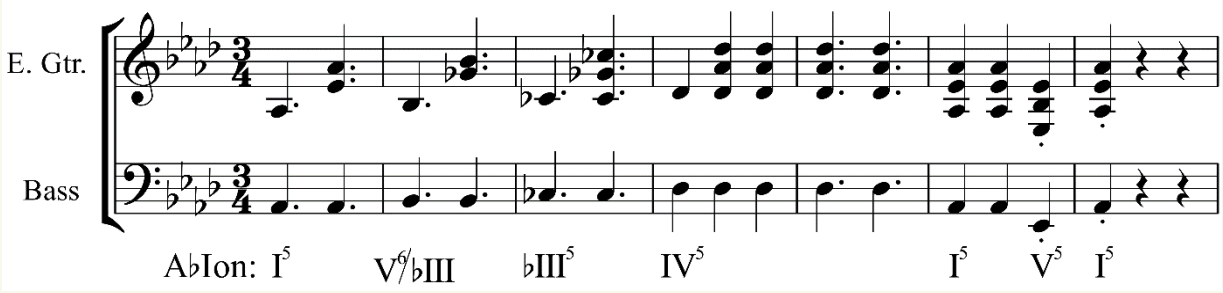
Example 13. Harmonisation in thirds for variation on a repeat in Dark Tranquillity's 'Punish My Heaven' (1995) [0:31 and 0:41]



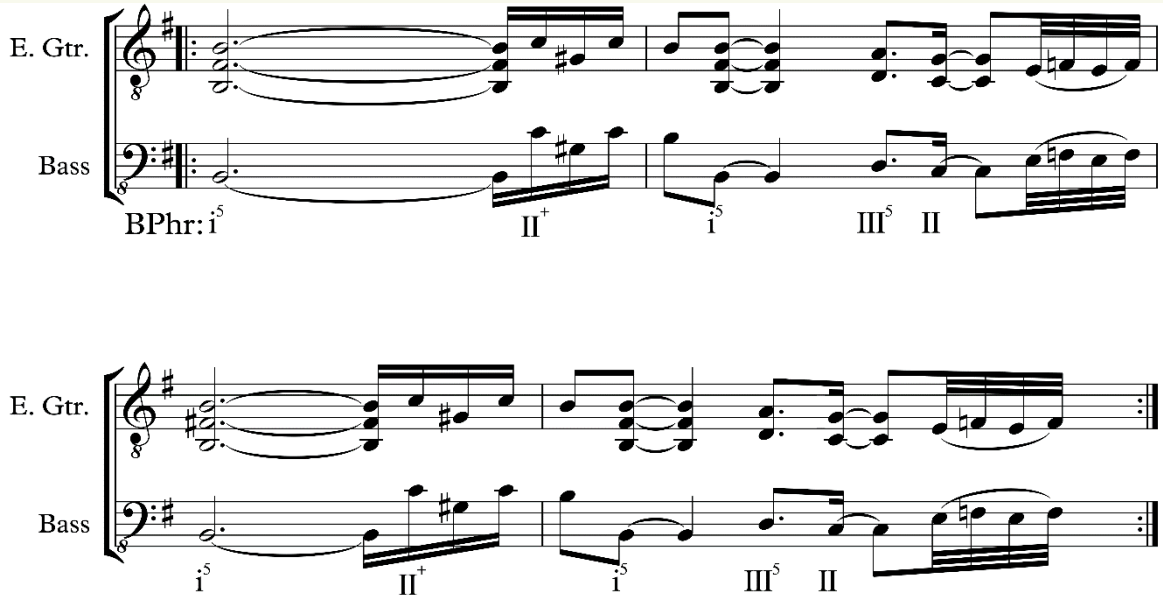
Example 14. Harmonisation for sonority in Dark Tranquillity's 'Punish My Heaven' (1995) [0:38–0:41]



Example 15. Dyads to facilitate chord resolution in In Flames' 'Moonshield' (1996) [4:01–4:07]



Example 16. Conventional death metal musical practices in Entombed's 'Left Hand Path' (1990) [1:00–1:29]



a way that solely using power chords would not. Regardless of the reason for this practice, it represents another adaptation of NWOEHM into a new form for melodic death metal. A final permutation of this practice can be seen in the use of these dyads in more conventional progressions where power chords might usually be expected. The reasons for this seem to vary somewhat: occasionally, a third is used at a cadence point or to facilitate smoother voice leading in an otherwise linear progression, as shown in Ex. 15. While this is not unique to melodic death metal, it became increasingly common in the subgenre as it developed and further illustrates the adaptation of practices from NWOEHM into new contexts within a new genre.

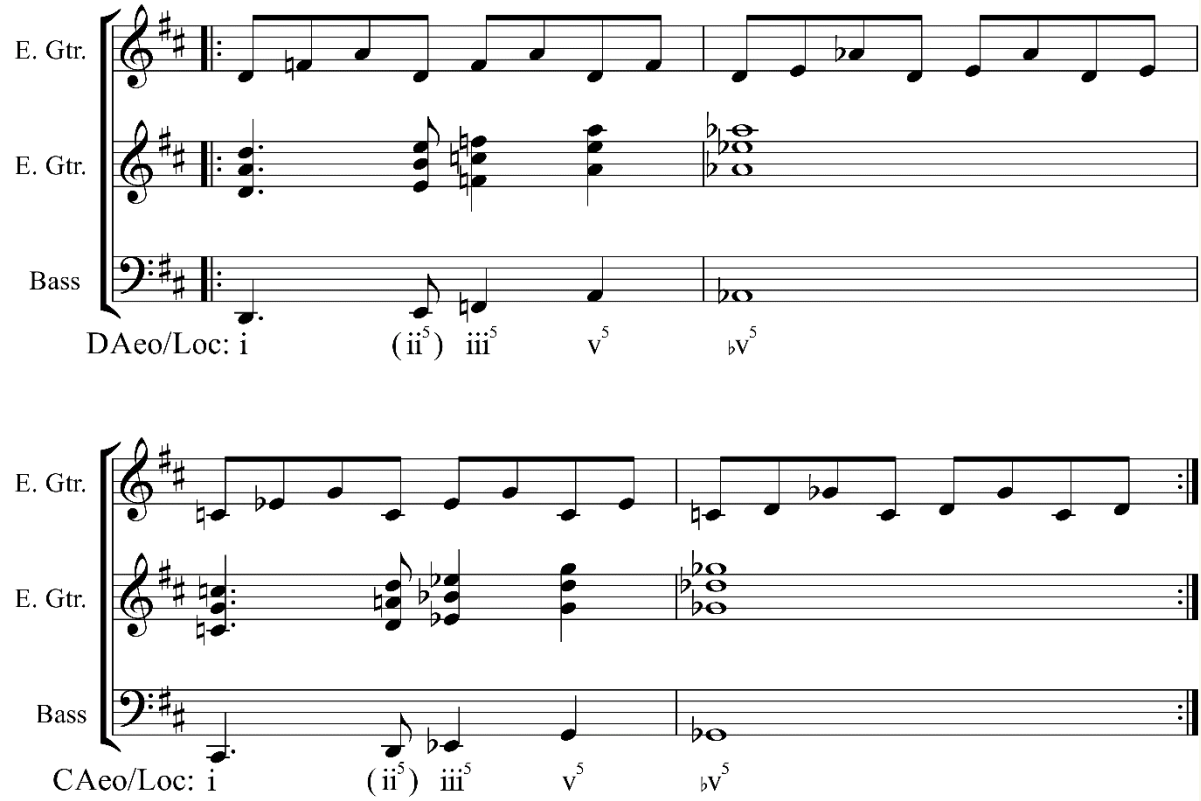
Harmonic Practices derived from Death Metal

The other main influence on melodic death metal is death metal itself, particularly that from Sweden. This is reflected in the original name for the genre, 'the Gothenburg sound', which contrasts it with other localised death metal sounds such as the Stockholm sound, suggesting that it was initially viewed as a style of death metal rather than a proper subgenre. Despite this grounding in death metal, the harmonic practices that are adapted from it into melodic death metal are more difficult to identify, given that conventional harmony is less integral to songwriting in extreme metal (Scotto 2016; Smialek 2015). The most obvious influences from death metal are the use of harsh vocals (screams, growls, yelling etc.), a heavily distorted guitar timbre, and, in some cases, a more complex song structure[20]. I will concentrate on elements of harmony and voice leading from death metal that influenced melodic death metal because the aesthetic characteristics of early melodic death metal have been thoroughly investigated elsewhere (Hillier 2018; Smialek 2015: 195–229).

An excerpt of Entombed's 'Left Hand Path' (1990) is presented in Ex.16 as an illustration of Swedish death metal and to highlight some of the musical commonalities between this style and the melodic death metal examples discussed throughout this section. A number of idomatic death metal elements can be seen here: the use of darker modes[21] (in this case, the Phrygian mode); the use of chromaticism and dissonance (e.g. the use of $\hat{\flat 2}$ in both the melody and harmony, as well as the augmented harmonies); and the absence of a clear pattern of harmonic function or voice leading driving a resolution (apart from linear chord movements). Melodic death metal will at times conform to these stylistic examples and at times depart from them.

Chromaticism can be somewhat difficult to identify in death metal because conventional approaches to tonality, modality, and diatonicism do not always apply to the systems of pitch organisation used by extreme metal musicians. As Harris Berger notes, how an analyst

Example 17. Dissonance and modal mixture in At The Gates' 'Blinded By Fear' (1995) [1:59–2:06]

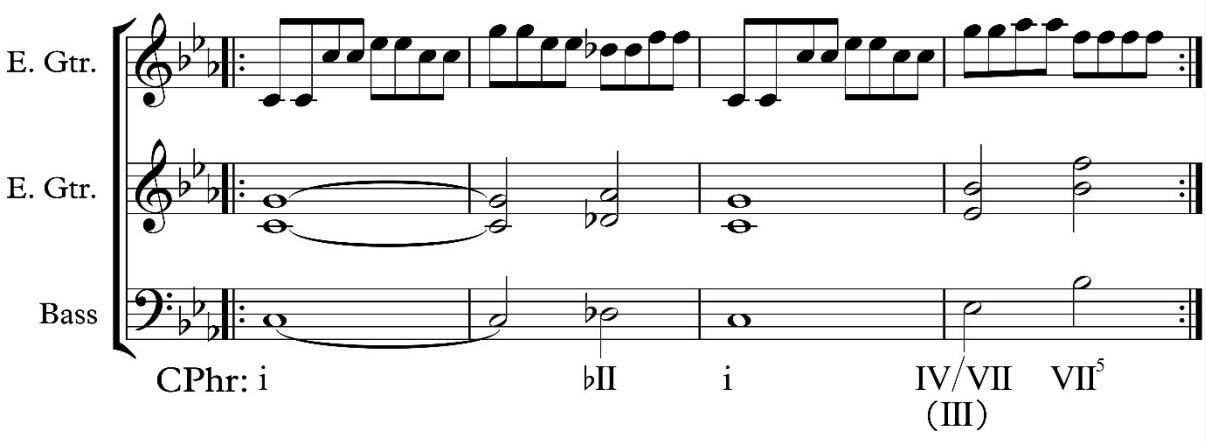


constructs tonality (and therefore what is diatonic or chromatic) in death metal depends on their listening and their organisation of musical structures in the living present (Berger 1999: 227–9). During a conversation with death metal songwriter Dann Saladin, Berger observes a passage featuring notes from the natural minor scale with a lowered second and fifth scale degree that he classifies as an example of the Locrian mode or a pitch-axis riff based around E. Saladin asserts, however, that he perceives the passage as an example of the Phrygian mode with a $\hat{\flat 5}$ that exists alongside the diatonic $\hat{\natural 5}$ as a scalar note. Berger is careful to explain that this analysis is not arbitrary but based in Saladin's phenomenological experience (Berger 1999: 229). Given that melodic death metal does have a clearer sense of modality derived from its NWOEHM influences, it can be easier to see what chromatic elements have been retained from its death metal roots as aberrations against this sense of modality[22]. Indeed, the use of chromaticism in Ex. 17 is strongly reminiscent of Berger's observations on tonality in death metal (Berger 1999).

This sense of a dual $\hat{\natural 5}$ and $\hat{\flat 5}$ is present in this excerpt, with the chromaticism derived from the unprepared and unresolved ♭v chord[23] seen in the second and fourth bars. Accordingly, there is a sense of modal mixture here between the Aeolian modality implied by the first bar and the Locrian modality implied by the ♭v chord. Following Saladin's method of analysing these kinds of musical structures, we might consider this an example of $\hat{\natural 5}$ and $\hat{\flat 5}$ being used as equally important structural notes. Melodic death metal, however, establishes a practice of constructing a tonic-triad based chord progression (i–III–v in this case) as a means of establishing modality and a sense of quasi-tonality, as elaborated in later sections of this article. While the D and C Aeolian–Locrian modalities in this excerpt are only very briefly stated, the B Aeolian modality dominates every other section of 'Blinded by Fear'[24]. This section demonstrates a mixture of the key elements of the Aeolian and Locrian modes that is made apparent through the greater emphasis that melodic death metal places on tonality and modality compared with death metal. Due to this heightened sense of Aeolian modality in the overall song, I am inclined to hear this excerpt as based primarily in the Aeolian mode with the ♭v chord as a chromaticism derived from modal mixture rather than a diatonic structural note as seen in Berger's discussion with Saladin[25]. The chromaticism from death metal, in this sense, is mediated into a more conventionally modal context within melodic death metal.

Example 18 illustrates the more conventional practice of a darker mode being used in melodic death metal. The vast majority of examples during this period of melodic death metal are centred around an Aeolian modality (perhaps due to the NWOEHM influence) but Exs. 17

Example 18. Modality in In Flames' 'Gravelands' (1996) [1:50–1:56]



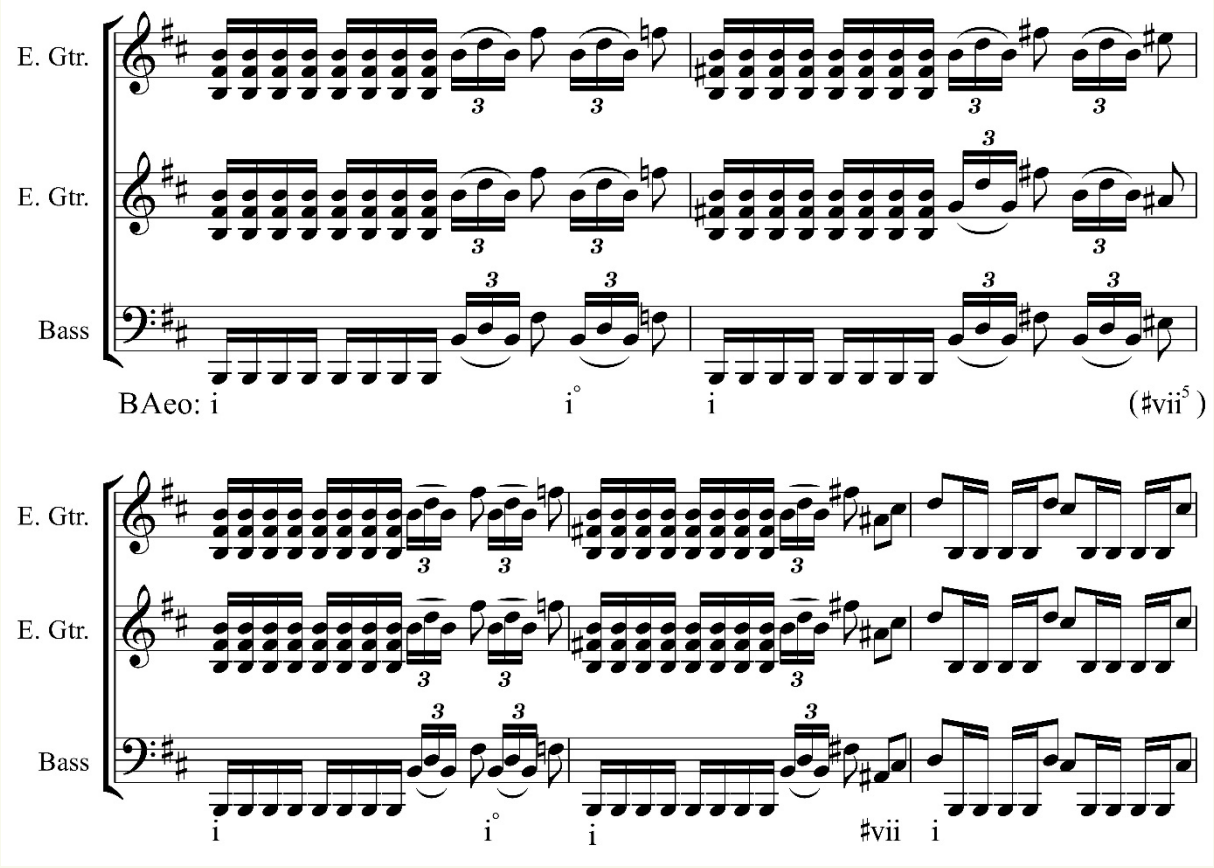
and 18 show significant deviations from this. The use of the Phrygian mode in Ex. 17 is indicated by the prominent usage of ♭2̂/♭II in both the melody and harmony, in a manner conventional to heavy metal. Although VII^{5}, notably, is used to resolve back to the tonic, the Aeolian progression is not used here but instead chord III acting in a pseudo-secondary function as IV/VII is used to bridge the gap between chord i and chord VII[26].

Other more conventional chromaticisms are present in melodic death metal. One can see, by referring to Ex. 15, both a secondary dominant and a borrowed ♭III chord used in the bridge section of 'Moonshield' to embellish a linear progression from I–IV. A diatonic version of the linear stepwise bassline would be harmonised as I–ii–iii–IV[27]. It is, instead, harmonised as I–V^{6}/♭III–♭III–IV by the guitar with a chromatic G♭ dyad in first inversion being used in place of either a power chord or a chord built on B♭. This provides a contrast in sonority alongside slightly smoother voice leading and represents something of a fusion between the NWOEHM tendency toward linear progressions and the death metal usage of chromaticism. The chromaticism in this section is further emphasised through rhythm, as this bridge is the only section of the song to break from the triple-time feel of the rest of the song by accentuating a duple hemiola in the drum part. The 6/8 feel of the drum part against the 3/4 feel of the other instruments is metrically dissonant and emphasises the chromaticism in the harmony through metric dissonance. Such metric dissonances are often used this way in rock and metal music to mark certain sections as dissonant, chromatic, or tonally unstable, further clarifying the form of a piece (Biamonte 2014). Pulse obfuscation, rhythmic instability, and metric dissonance are widely used in death metal as a means of disorienting the listener, though typically in a much more exaggerated manner (Lucas 2018; Smialek 2015).

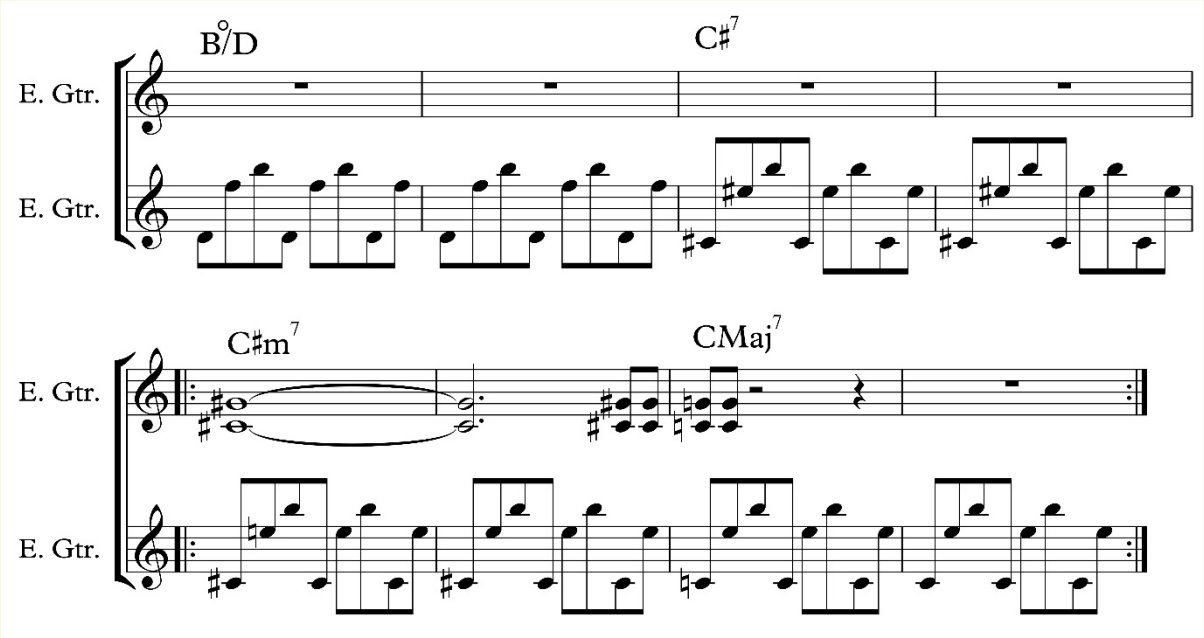
More liberal uses of dissonance (mainly involving the use of a tritone[28] as part of a riff or building a chord on the ♭5̂ scale degree) are an additional influence derived from death metal. These uses of dissonance in melodic death metal tend to be somewhat fleeting compared to those in death metal and are often quickly resolved or soon passed. Example 19 shows a case where tritones are used to construct a i^{o} chord and Ex. 17 shows an instance where chords are built on the ♭5̂ scale degree.

The i^{o} chord created briefly at the end of bars 1 and 3 is here almost immediately left, with the dissonance briefly registering towards the end of the riff. This dissonant F♮ (and resultant i^{o} harmony) does not truly resolve but is more accurately passed, given that it does not function as a leading tone by resolving upward to F♯ nor does it resolve conventionally to another pitch in the subsequent B5 chord. It is replaced with an implied ♯vii^{5} chord in bar 2 to create a stronger sense of resolution back to i by essentially building a brief power chord[29] on the leading tone of A♯ and using this to drive a greater sense of resolution. At the end of bar 4, the ♯vii harmony is more strongly established with the A♯ and C♯ in both voices resolving back to the beginning of the main riff shown in bar 5. This usage of dissonance and attention to quite minute detail of voice leading, while quite brief, contrasts with typical death metal practices, which would retain the dissonance and simply move on to the next riff without considering resolution or voice leading. The use of chromaticism in Ex. 17,

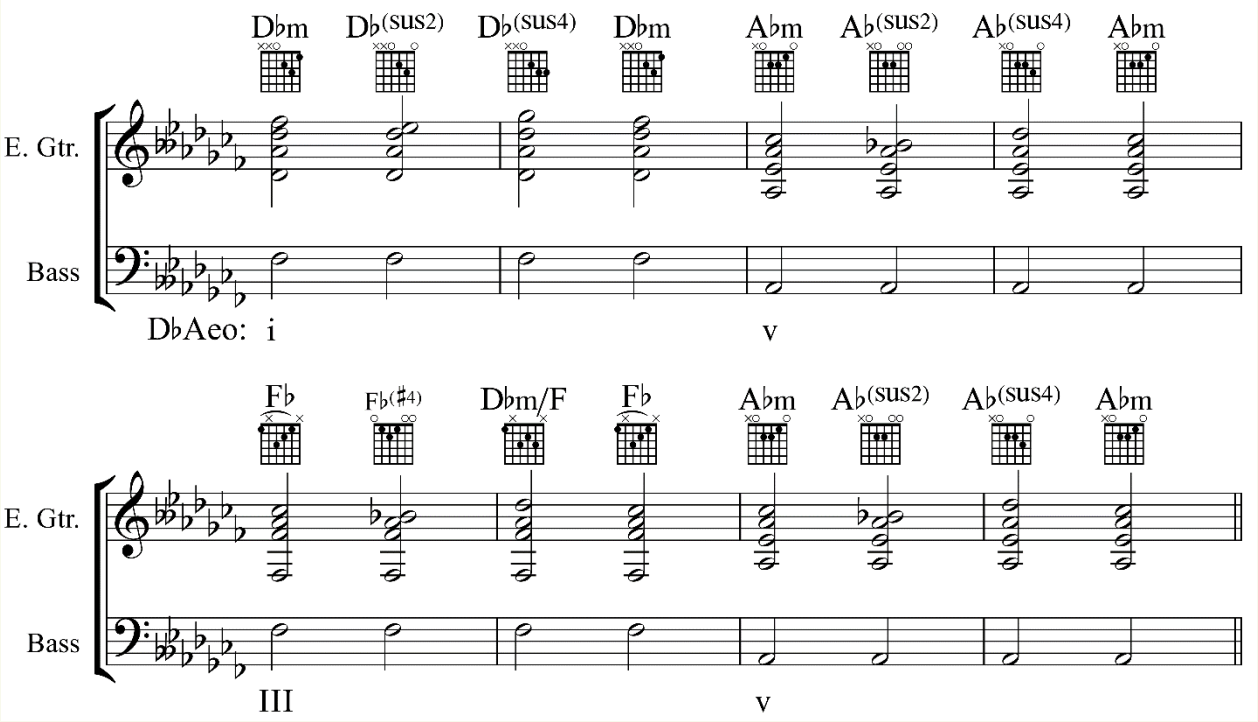
Example 19. Chromaticism and dissonance in At The Gates' 'Blinded By Fear' (1995) [1:18–1:26]



Example 20. Non-functional harmony and chromaticism in At The Gates' 'Under a Serpent Sun' (1995) [2:54–3:07]



Example 21. Reduction of chord progression from Dark Tranquillity's 'Punish my Heaven' (1995) [based on 2:20–4:29], illustrating chord fingerings on guitar



furthermore, is significant when compared to that shown in Ex. 19. Though both use chromatic harmonies, the harmonies in Ex. 17 are more consonant and rely on metric dissonance for emphasis, while Ex. 19 embraces dissonant note choices alongside clearly structured rhythm. This again demonstrates the adaptation of practices from NWOEHM and death metal entering into the musical lexicon of melodic death metal. Melodic death metal is thus a midpoint, being more dissonant than NWOEHM and less dissonant that death metal, but approaching dissonance and voice leading in a different manner to both given its hybridity of different practices.

Melodic death metal, at times, closely resembles death metal in that it is almost entirely chromatic and non-functional. This is particularly prominent in the songwriting of At The Gates, which trends more closely toward conventional death metal among the early melodic death metal bands. This is shown in Ex. 20.

This progression is entirely non-functional with no clear sense of resolution and, as such, I have not given the chords functional labels. The B Aeolian modality that dominates the rest of the song and much of the *Slaughter of the Soul* album is here interrupted by the chromatic progression[30]. A sense of continuity is provided, in spite of this, by the voice leading between each chord, achieved by lowering a single note by a semitone between each chord. The tritone in the B^{o} and C♯^{7} chords, significantly, are foregrounded by being the highest pitches in the first four bars. Furthermore, the interaction between the distorted power chords in the upper guitar part and the clean, arpeggiated lower guitar part produces interesting harmonic consequences. Following Lilja's (2004, 2009, 2019) assertion that distorted power chords have a similar aural effect to a major triad, the C♯m^{7} chord sounds notably dissonant within this progression, more so than one might expect in the context of being surrounded by C♯^{7} and C$_{M}{}^{7}$ chords. This is because distortion generates a clash between the flat third played in the triad and the natural third generated as a partial from the fundamental pitch (Lilja 2015; 2009: 101–51; 2004: 10–21). In NWOEHM and earlier rock and metal music, minor triads are accordingly generally avoided by musicians using distortion, though the dissonance is less frequently avoided in extreme metal genres such as death metal. It is unsurprisng that At The Gates retain the most influence from Swedish death metal because they are the oldest of the Gothenburg melodic death metal bands, beginning as a pure death metal band and gradually becoming more melodic (Ekeroth 2008). Their peers, Dark Tranquility and In Flames (along with bands

such as Ceremonial Oath and Eucharist active in Gothenburg during this time), conversely began their careers later and took influence from this gradual shift in At The Gates' style (Ekeroth 2008; Mudrian 2004). Chromatic and dissonant passages, such as those shown in Exs. 17, 19 and 20, demonstrate the prevalence of this approach in the music of At The Gates though passages such as those shown in Exs. 18 and 21 demonstrate that an influence from death metal harmony also exists in the music of In Flames and Dark Tranquility respectively.

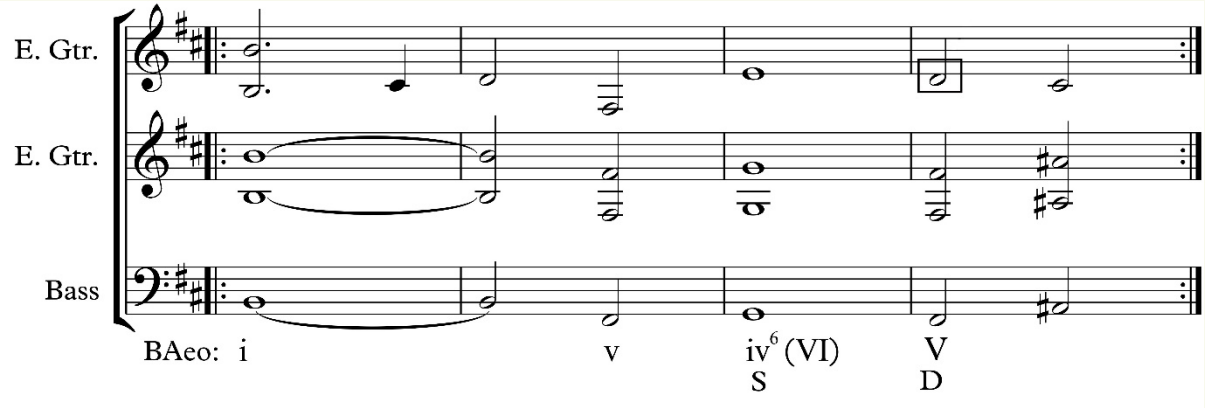
The use of distorted minor triads shown in Ex. 21 is particularly intriguing, given the tendency for musicians using distortion to avoid the clash between thirds. The chord progression stems largely from an intuitive pattern on the guitar, where the movements from D♭m–D♭sus2–D♭sus4–D♭m (and the similar movements with A♭m and F♭) are achieved by raising and lowering either the index or little finger[31]. Significantly, the minor triads here are not avoided, but rather the dissonance is prepared for the listener. When this progression is first played from 2:20–2:35, it is palm-muted, reducing the resonance of the upper partials (where the dissonance is accentuated) whilst introducing the modality of this progression. This modality will be discussed in greater detail later. The following section from 2:35–3:02 is mixed in such a way that the listener's attention is drawn to the vocal part and guitar solo, rather than the rhythm guitar parts. Subsequent sections feature both guitars playing these chords and are characterised by a muddy timbre (in part resulting from the aforementioned clash of partials), where the dissonance is somewhat alleviated by the quick movement from the minor triad to the suspended chords that lack a third. What is most interesting about this practice is that distorted minor triads are not typically associated with death metal, but rather are characteristic of certain black metal subgenres[32] (Ekeroth 2008: 251). While it is plausible that the chord progression itself may have been written and included due to its ease of playing on the guitar, the aesthetic judgement of including musical practices associated with black metal into a nascent style based around death metal and NWOEHM is interesting. This may point to a wider sphere of influence for some of the bands in Gothenburg and emphasises that genres are rarely completely uniform in their expression and development. A likely source of black metal influence on this song is the band Dissection, another Gothenburg band active at this time that is credited with developing the analogous subgenre of melodic black metal (Ekeroth 2008: 268). The small size of the Gothenburg scene and its localisation around a single bar and record store (Ekeroth 2008: 268; Eriksson and Lingvall 2016) make it likely that Dissection performed with the other Gothenburg bands, since there was no melodic black metal scene in Gothenburg or Sweden at the time. The fact that Dark Tranquillity may have been familiar with the aural effect of this minor-triad dissonance merits its inclusion as an element of the band's style at this stage in its development. This may also provide a means to iterate on similar usages derived from its parent genres.

New Practices Developed by Melodic Death Metal Bands

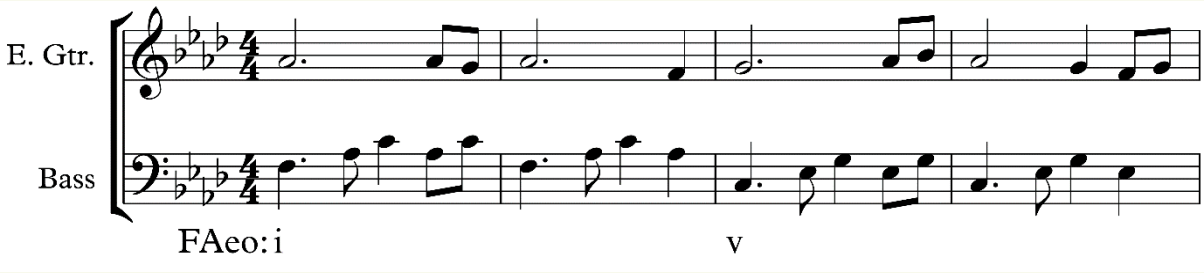
Melodic death metal, in addition to assimilating and modifying practices derived from its parent genres, develops its own new practices that illustrate its independence as a genre. Chief among these is a sense of 'quasi-tonality', a term I use to describe the way in which melodic death metal establishes its sense of tonal centre (i.e. a pitch that serves as the tonic) and modality (i.e. the relationships between a set of pitches typically described as Aeolian, Phrygian, etc). I use the term 'quasi-tonality' because the way that melodic death metal establishes this sense of tonality and modality is anomalous with regard to other genres of music[33]. I will demonstrate, in the excerpts in this section, that a sense of tonal and modal centre is either clearly established through unconventional means or is simultaneously clearly established in the harmony and undercut by the melody. Melodic death metal bands establish this sense of quasi-tonality in several ways: at times using a mixture of modal harmony and common practice harmony; at times by building chord progressions based on the notes of the tonic triad of the piece and at times mixing minor mode harmonies with implied major mode melodies. This sense of quasi-tonality is integral to the style and melodiousness of melodic death metal and I believe that this is what Smialek refers to when he notes that power chord progressions in melodic death metal imply a diatonic chord progression (Smialek 2015: 233). The use of this practice in early melodic death metal, however, is not purely diatonic, but rather freely mixes characteristic pitches of different modes to achieve certain sonorities, embracing a very mild form of the chromaticism illustrated in earlier examples to cement this quasi-tonal atmosphere.

Example 22 demonstrates an approach to quasi-tonality based around a mixture of modal and common practice harmonic frameworks. While the harmonic progression bears some resemblance to Ex. 2 in the use of iv^6 as a substitute for VI in the Aeolian progression, the rest of the progression is markedly different. The B Aeolian modality is clearly established in the preceding parts of the song and, as mentioned earlier, much of the album to this point. This sense of modality is present in the first half of this progression, especially with

Example 22. Quasi-tonal harmony in At The Gates' 'Cold' (1995) [0:47–0:58]



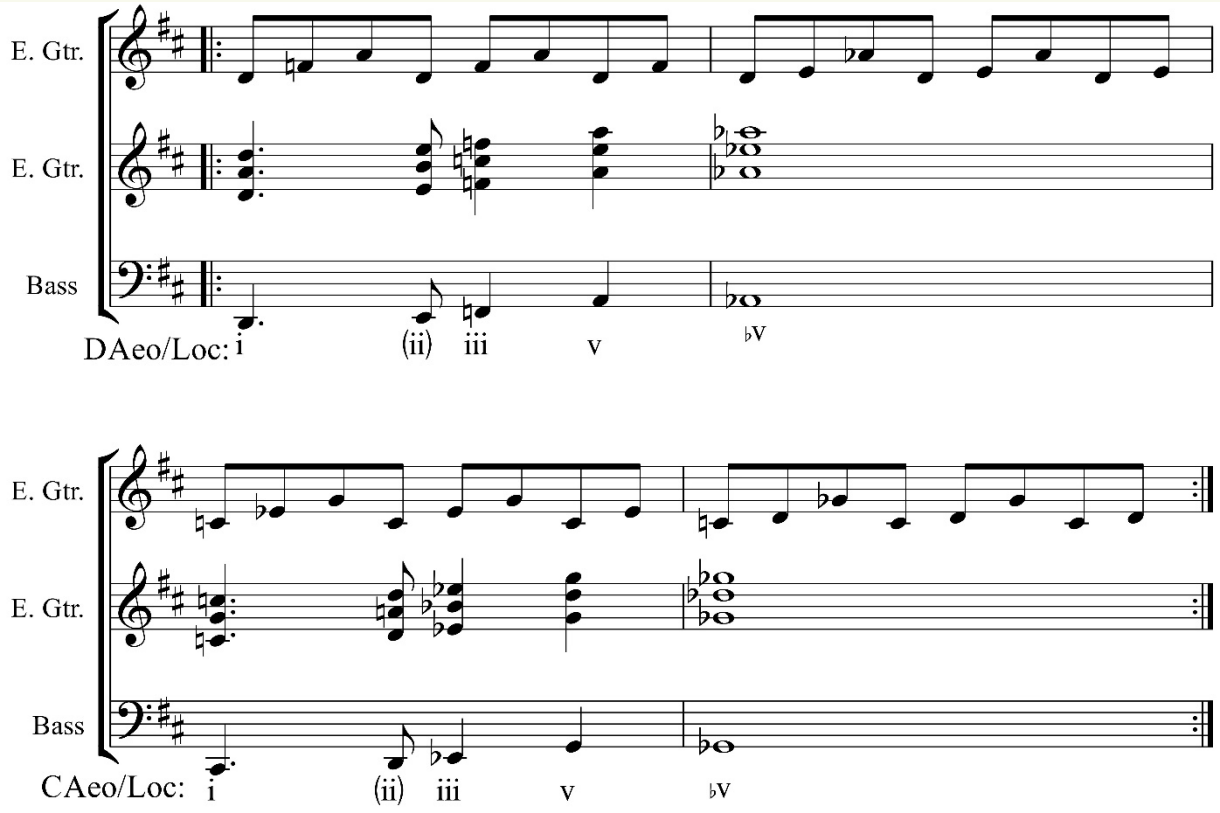
Example 23. Implied modality in Dark Tranquillity's 'The Gallery' (1995) [1:32–1:39]



the minor chord v and the use of iv^6 leading toward a resolution. The final resolution, however, is achieved via a major V, using a leading tone in the bass to return to the tonic. One might be inclined to read this as a more conventional instance of B minor as opposed to B Aeolian. The wider context of the Aeolian modality in both this song and the overall album, the brevity of this chord within this excerpt, and the immediate reversion to modal harmony as the progression repeats all suggest, however, that this is a brief instance of modal borrowing for the purposes of resolution. The excerpt is, in this sense, quasi-tonal in that it uses a mixture of conventional metal modal harmony and tonal harmony that is more commonly associated with the common-practice period of western art music (which establishes a clear tonal centre and sense of function) but does not conform to conventional tonal or modal harmonic progressions or functions seen previously in metal music.

Another means of developing a sense of quasi-tonality is found in the interplay between the melodic lines and the underlying harmony. Melodic death metal bands will, in many cases, begin the melody of a given section on the third degree of the scale, as shown in Ex. 23. The F tonal centre is clearly established in this instance, though the Aeolian modality is only implied and more fully understood within the context of the rest of the song. While the bass guitar accompaniment outlines the i–v movement across this section, the melody is based prominently around A♭ and resolves back toward this pitch. The prominence of A♭ should be understood as an extension of the tonic function, acting as the third of the tonic triad F–A♭–C, though the melody taken on its own implies an A♭ Aeolian modality. The resolution back toward A♭ is achieved in bar 4 through the final pitches of F–G–A♭[34], resembling the voice leading of the Aeolian cadence ($\hat{\flat 6}$ –$\hat{\flat 7}$–$\hat{1}$ in A♭ Aeolian) and ensuring that the sense of modality is not compromised even if the tonal centre of the melody might be understood as A♭ against an F Aeolian harmony. The excerpt, in this sense, is quasi-tonal: the implication of A♭ Aeolian is not clear enough to consider this fully bitonal, the underlying harmony establishes an F tonal centre clearly and the prominence of A♭ is easily understood as an extension of the tonic function. This excerpt is, nonetheless, not conventionally tonal. A similar style of melodic writing is shown in Ex. 6, where the melody implies a B major tonal centre against a clearly G♯ Aeolian chord progression.

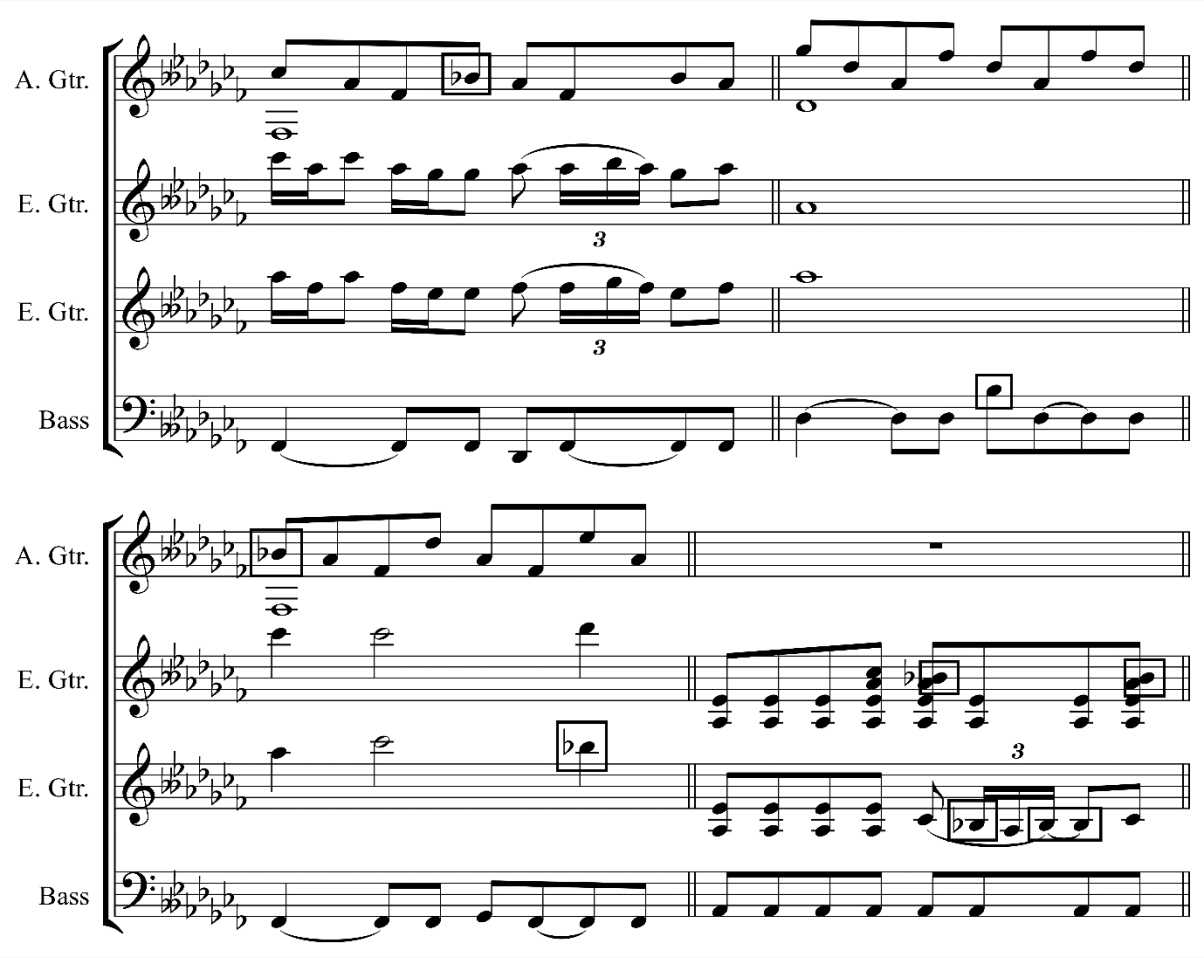
Example 24. Tonic triad progression in At The Gates' 'Blinded by Fear' (1995) [1:59—2:06]



Examples 10 and 28 are also instances of this melodic-harmonic interaction. Harmonisation in thirds, in both of these examples, is used to expand a power chord harmony into a full triad, with the melody in both examples providing a $\hat{\flat 3}$ scale degree to convert the power chord into a tonic triad. This highlights one reason for the prominence of melodies based around the third in melodic death metal: they allow for full triads to be constructed between the melody and the harmony without having to add a third to a distorted power chord. Distorted power chords, as Lilja notes, create an aural implication of a major triad. Consequently, a minor third physically played by the guitar would not only clash with the major third generated as a partial by the distortion, but would generate its own series of partials that would clash with the rest of the chord (Lilja 2004; 2009). It is unsurprising that melodic death metal avoids these direct dissonances given the greater emphasis on diatonic consonant harmonies compared with death metal, although there are examples of metal bands using distorted minor triads anyway, especially in extreme metal subgenres (Ekeroth 2008). The melodic use of a minor third is a neat compromise because it is usually set at least an octave above the power chord accompaniment and is played on another guitar, thereby reducing the clash between partials. The final means of establishing a sense of quasi-tonality is through the practice of building chord progressions based around the notes of the tonic triad. This is shown in Ex. 24.

The earlier reading of this section that interpreted the flat fifth scale degree as a chromaticism relies on understanding each two-bar phrase as being in the Aeolian mode. This sense of modality is established through the chord progression that is largely based around i–III–v, which is an outworking of the tonic triad ($\hat{1}$ –$\hat{\flat 3}$ – $\hat{5}$). When combined with the tonic arpeggio played over this chord progression, the Aeolian modality is clear while the respective D and C pitch centres are also established. Bars 2 and 4, however, complicate this with a clear ♭v chord that implies the Locrian mode. Significantly, the progression based around the tonic triad can be understood in either mode: if ♭v is understood as diatonic, then the progression is based on $\hat{1}$ –$\hat{\flat 3}$ – $\hat{5}$ in the Aeolian mode. If ♭v is understood as diatonic, then the progression is based on $\hat{1}$ –$\hat{\flat 3}$ – $\hat{\flat 5}$ in the Locrian mode. Additionally, one could consider these chords as examples of an implied Aeolian context followed by an implied Locrian context, depending on the listener's aural perception. Regardless, the progression is an outworking of the tonic triad that establishes a D or C tonal centre even if the modality is ambiguous. This is what is meant by a sense of

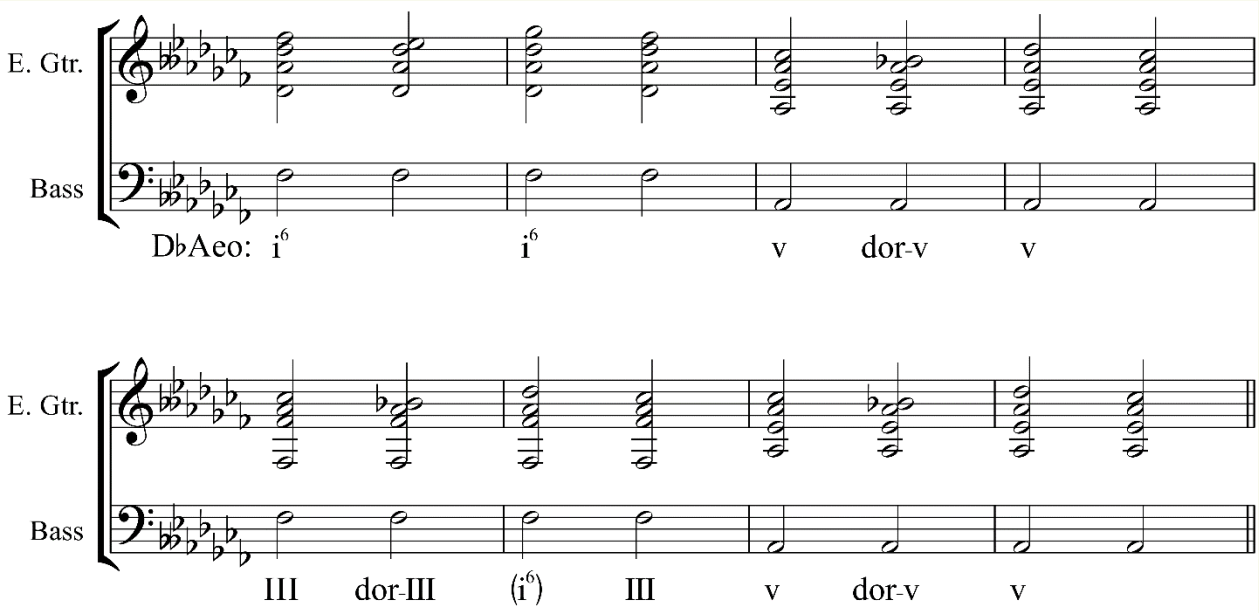
Example 25. Modal mixture in Dark Tranquillity's 'Punish My Heaven' (1995). Bar 1 [3:38] shows the use of B♭ over the F♭ harmony (note that the B𝄫 used alongside it is likely a result of harmonising the melodic line in thirds). Bar 2 [3:47] shows the use of B𝄫 over a D♭m harmony. Bar 3 [3:54] shows the use of B♭ over an A♭m harmony. Bar 4 [4:03] shows the use of B♭ over an A♭m harmony.



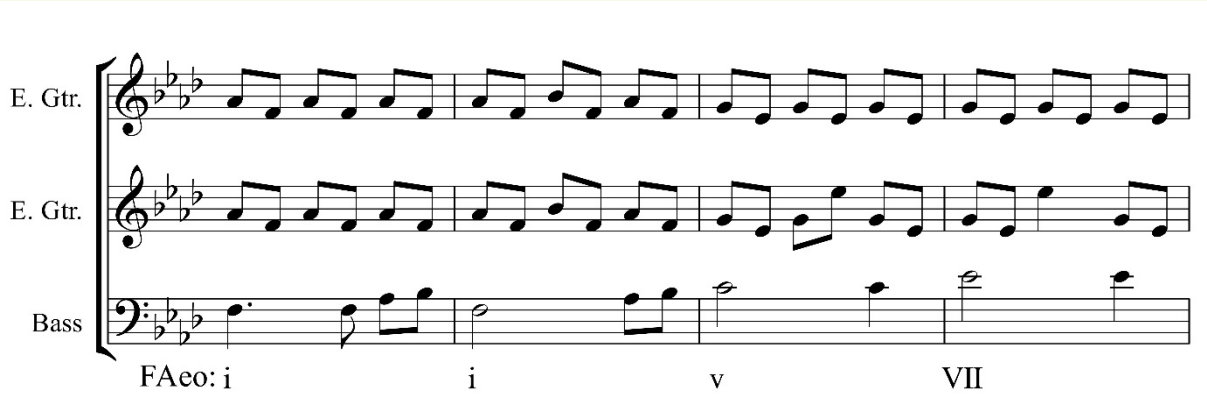
quasi-tonality: while the lack of a cadence makes it difficult to understand this as a full modulation, the sense of tonality and modality is more than a tonicization and is what causes the ♭v chord to be a dissonance against the Aeolian modality. Though this example is brief, other examples demonstrate how this quasi-tonality can be more thoroughly established and maintained.

The chord progression shown in Ex. 21 demonstrates another example of a progression built on the tonic triad. This chord progression underpins almost the entire final section of 'Punish My Heaven' from 2:20–4:29, though the full chords shown in the guitar part of Ex. 21 are occasionally replaced with a riff or something similar that follows the same harmonic movement. This progression can be seen broadly as I: D♭m–A♭m–F♭–A♭m :I (i–v–III–v), an extrapolation of a D♭ minor triad. As the material for the entire progression is derived from the tonic triad, the D♭ pitch centre is well established, bolstered by the v–i cadence on the repeat, creating the sense of quasi-tonality. The lack of proper harmonic function and the mixture of modes weakens this sense of tonality, but the tonality and modality that are established are done so in way that is unique to melodic death metal. Modal mixture is utilised here between D♭ Aeolian and D♭ Dorian, with the alternate use of B♭ or B𝄫 over certain pitches, as indicated by black boxes in Ex. 25.

Example 26. Reduction of ‘Punish My Heaven’ labelled after Lilja (2009)



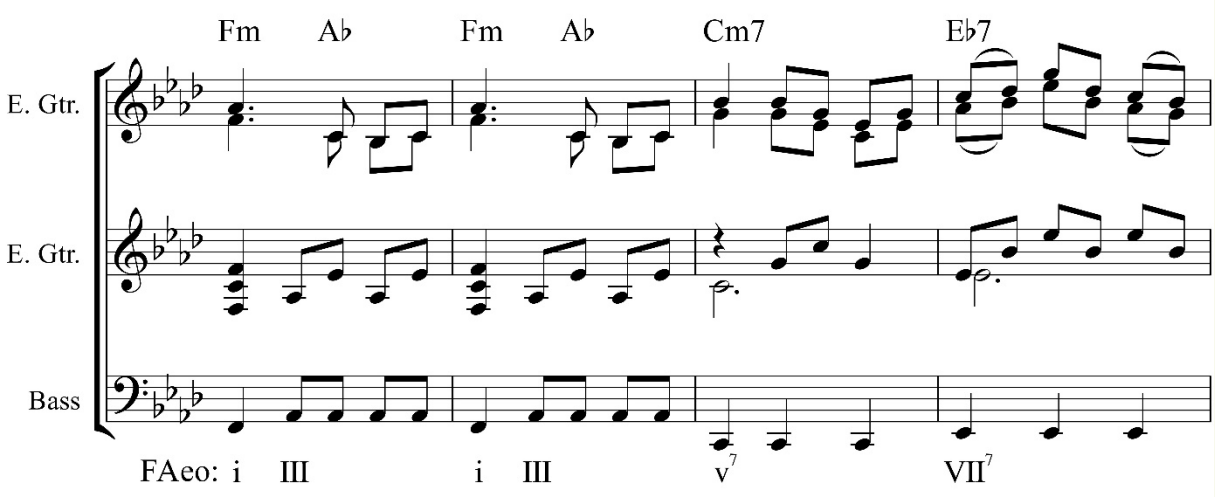
Example 27. Opening progression in In Flames’ ‘Moonshield’ (1996) [0:00–0:04]



With the use of ♭$\hat{6}$ and ♭♭$\hat{6}$ being the chief difference between the sonority of the D♭ Aeolian and D♭ Dorian modes respectively, the mixture of the two gives this section a feel different from the rest of the song and from both NWOEHM and death metal. This is analogous to the Aeolian–Locrian mix seen in Ex. 24 between natural fifth and flat fifth. Borrowing Lilja’s (2009: 130–42) method of analysing mixed modal chord progressions, the progression might be labelled as shown in Ex. 26 to better illustrate the modal mixture. The Dor–III and Dor–v labels are here used to indicate the B♭ borrowed from the D♭ Dorian mode. While the B♭ note is not a part of the primary triad (F♭–A♭–C♭ for chord III and A♭–C♭–E♭ for chord v), it is used to create an F♭$^{\#4}$ and an A♭sus2 chord, respectively, following the pattern outlined above in Ex. 21. Neither of these chords are diatonic to the main mode of D♭ Aeolian, while both contain the ♭$\hat{6}$ (B♭) distinctive of the D♭ Dorian mode. This pitch is not enough to displace the Aeolian modality but the labelling shown illustrates how using the Dorian ♭$\hat{6}$ in place of the Aeolian ♭♭$\hat{6}$ provides a unique sonority and a variation to the tonic-triad progression, especially since the pitches in question are prominently placed in the upper voice and are the only changing pitches between each chord.

My final example of the triad progression in melodic death metal, which also illustrates the clearest sense of quasi-tonality that results from this practice, is taken from ‘Moonshield’. The musical material in the verse section is gradually developed to outline the tonic triad, beginning with the opening bars shown in Ex. 27. The acoustic guitar parts establish a trajectory between the Fm and E♭ triads. This is

Example 28. Expanded harmonies in ‘Moonshield’ (1996) [1:08–1:11]



the main movement in this section: from i–VII–i in F Aeolian (defined here by the prominent $\hat{\flat 7}$). At the same time, the bass guitar melody implies a chord progression of Fm–Cm–E♭, before falling back to the tonic of Fm. This bass melody is integral to interpreting the chord progression, as it prefigures the guitar chord progression shown in Ex. 28.

The chord progression implied by the bass guitar melody in Ex. 27 is fully stated by the rhythm guitar and bass with the addition of an A♭ chord after each Fm chord. As with the previous triad progression examples, one could interpret this chord progression as an extended arpeggio, in this case the F Aeolian tonic triad of Fm^7: F–A♭–C–E♭. The entire progression does not, however, solely operate as a tonic function. The A♭ chord is somewhat less prominent aurally, occurring on the weaker beats of the bar and thus serving as an extension of the tonic function, but the movement to Cm^7 and E♭^{7} can be clearly heard as a movement away from the tonic function into a weak dominant function prior to the resolution. Such local effects are significant and are reinforced by the melodic material in the lead guitar part when it is introduced.

The entire progression and the melody, in contrast to the previous examples, are harmonised diatonically without the chromaticism that arises from the modal mixture seen in previous examples. One could harmonise the second and third bars of the lead guitar part, ignoring the rhythm guitar and bass parts, using just an E♭^{7} chord (rather than the Cm^7 that is used), recalling the movement from i–VII–i established at the beginning of the song. Given that v^7 and VII can equally fill a dominant function (though weaker than the traditional V^7) and III can equally fill a tonic function, the overall T–d–T function of the introductory bars is preserved along with a reasonably clear sense of tonality while remaining diatonic to the F Aeolian modality. This can be clearly seen in the Schenker graphs shown in Exs. 29 and 30.

The movement from tonic function rising to dominant function then falling to tonic function is present, though these reductions do not strictly conform to the *Urline* pattern of $\hat{3}$ – $\hat{2}$ – $\hat{1}$ (or similar) over the I–V–I *Bassbrechung*. The Aeolian VII, as noted earlier, serves a weak dominant function, typically as part of the Aeolian progression, a fact that is integral to the way this chord progression is constructed. These graphs demonstrate what is meant by quasi-tonality: while the use of harmony is not functional in the classical sense, there is a clear establishment of a pitch centre, a modality, and a harmonic hierarchy or function. This tonality is absolute: even the biggest movement away from the tonic function is to two statements of a weak dominant function that raise the tension without moving away from the general tonic function of this section.

This is not a new practice in the wider history of metal but it is a marked departure from the general practices that can be observed in many death metal bands. Many bands certainly have both riff-based sections and chord-based sections in a single song. It is, however, comparatively rare at this point in the development of metal and its subgenres for a band to almost entirely eschew riffs in favour of chord progressions. I posit that this development arises from the emphasis that these bands put on full melodic lines harmonised in thirds and the resultant quasi-tonal effects. Riff-based songwriting, where riffs are formed by multiple notes that often have non-harmonic

functions, does not suit this style of harmonising as well as a chord progression does because a single riff can imply multiple harmonies or be functionally constrained to a single chord or harmonic function. If a complex riff is played alongside a harmonised melodic line with all parts drenched in heavy distortion, musical detail is lost and unintelligible dissonance results. The riff itself (or its melodic elements) would, in these cases, typically be harmonised in thirds, with any power chords or pedal tones present remaining without their thirds (cf. Ex. 12). Abandoning riffs in favour of chord progressions that support a melody results from prioritising denser melodic writing and contributes to melodic death metal's cleaner, less distorted production style compared with death metal (Hillier 2018; Smialek 2015).

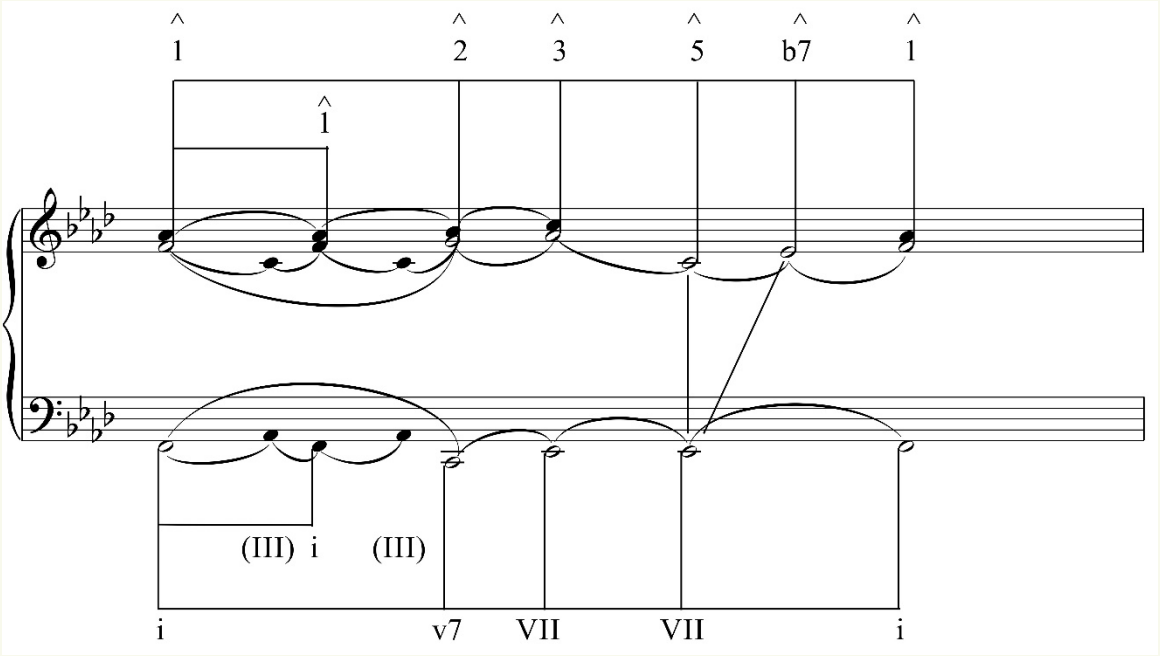
This melodic songwriting style is, as noted earlier, especially associated with In Flames. It is significant because this style would become the dominant approach to songwriting within melodic death metal. Many of the later bands to emerge in the genre were imitators of In Flames' style of writing (Ekeroth 2008: 268–9; Mudrian 2004: 247). *The Jester Race* (1996) thus represents a point in development of this style, because it features both riff-based compositions and songs beginning with riff-based sections that move into more progression-based sections once a melody is introduced. The change can also be observed in the excepts chosen in this paper: broadly speaking, the examples from At The Gates are clearly riff-based and most closely resemble conventional death metal. The examples from In Flames and Dark Tranquillity, however, broadly conform to the practice of melodic lines supported by chord progressions, though there are exceptions. As their careers developed, both In Flames and Dark Tranquillity gradually reversed the dominance of riff-based songwriting in favour of progression-based practices observed in these songs. Following Smialek's example by connecting musical observations to the historical context of their development reveals a potential reason for this. He notes that melodic death metal evolved in Gothenburg in a struggling market for death metal, suggesting that the accessibility offered by a more melodic form of the genre might be a solution to waning sales (Smialek 2015: 195–7, 232). This period was indeed characterised by rapid change: many of the original Gothenburg bands, such as Eucharist, Ceremonial Oath and At The Gates, had disbanded by the end of the 1990s. Members from At The Gates formed a thrash metal band called The Haunted. Members of other bands either joined larger bands that were already active, or simply stopped engaging with the scene. Dark Tranquillity and In Flames were the only two bands of this initial scene to survive and achieve financial success. Dark Tranquillity's future musical development notably involved a marked resemblance to In Flames' approach to songwriting rather than its earlier style as seen on *The Gallery* (1995). Thus, many of the next generation of melodic death metal bands to develop out of Sweden (e.g. Soilwork, Arch Enemy, and Sonic Syndicate) were heavily influenced by In Flames' approach to melodic death metal.

Conclusions

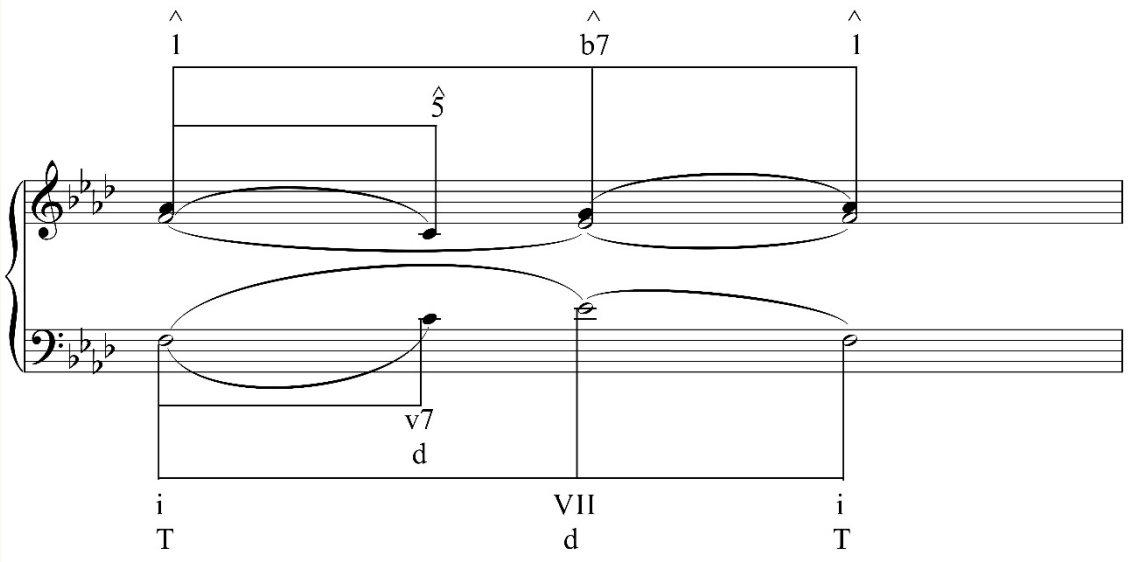
This paper has identified consistent musical features of melodic death metal. The new detail provided by this study demonstrates the harmonic practices present in early melodic death metal and the development of practices taken from its parent genres. As such, it illustrates how melodic death metal bands developed out of a state of stylistic flux into a discrete genre with codified practices. All three songs demonstrate an adaption of existing NWOEHM and death metal practices into the new context of melodic death metal. The new practices used to achieve a sense of quasi-tonality have also been identified as a key element of melodic death metal's musical style.

This paper also complements the existing musicological analyses of melodic death metal, as illustrated by some discrepancies between Smialek's detailed analysis of form and harmony in melodic death metal (Smialek 2015: 195–234) and my own. Smialek's analyses reflect an extremely diatonic version of melodic death metal that has more fully embraced the NWOEHM influence and diminished that taken from death metal. The examples in this paper analyse early examples of melodic death metal that predate the naming of the genre and the codifications of its practices into distinct forms. It is significant that, while this paper notes that chromaticism and dissonance are still widely used at this time, the analyses of In Flames' music bear a strong resemblance to Smialek's descriptors of melodic death metal, given that this represents the main style of melodic death metal that would go on to widespread success outside of Gothenburg in the late 1990s and 2000s. This paper also expands the understanding of harmony in metal (beyond specific information on harmony in melodic death metal) by illustrating its use in melodic death metal. While the use of the term, 'functional harmony', can be contentious when used by musicologists not studying Western art music, this paper illustrates a sense in which harmony that could be called 'functional'. Melodic death metal, while it does not conform to the conventions of the common-practice period, displays a keen sense of internal logic, with a clearly established sense of tonality, modality and an internally consistent hierarchy of pitches. This tonality, though it is only quasi-tonal in the conventional sense, points to the potential for highly organised and functional harmonic systems occurring in metal music. Further

Example 29. ‘Moonshield’ middleground reduction



Example 30. ‘Moonshield’ background reduction



research could expand upon this idea of quasi-tonality, illustrating a sense of unique harmonic function in metal as has been observed in other genres of rock music (Nobile 2016; Doll 2017).

It is therefore a problem that existing scholarship on metal largely neglects melodic death metal, since At the Gates and In Flames were significant in the development of the American Metalcore scene in the 2000s through their influence on bands such as The Black Dahlia Murder, Killswitch Engage, and Poison the Well (Smialek 2015; Christe 2003: 373). There is, however, a perception amongst some of the Swedish bands that these later American bands were not familiar with the wider Swedish scene, but only with the music of certain bands that had toured in the United States (Ekeroth 2008: 268–9). Understanding this process of international influence requires a sound

knowledge of the genre in its earlier form, as described in this article. This has implications for understanding the development of other bands within the Gothenburg scene (such as Eucharist and Ceremonial Oath) as well as contemporaries outside of Gothenburg (such as Carcass and Amorphis). The analysis presented in this paper, whilst not overly concerned with the historical development of the genre, underpins the musical discussion of the formation of the genre, which is an essential first step in a historical understanding. Further analysis is now needed to examine the historical significance of the genre as it evolved and influenced others.

ENDNOTES

1. Lilja (2009: 40) argues that specifying British marginalises many European bands outside of the U.K. that were equally vital to the metal's development and uses NWOEHM to emphasise the general European nature of this movement. Because non-British bands are especially relevant to the development of metal in Gothenburg, I use NWOEHM throughout this paper.

2. Though one could understand The Gothenburg Sound and early melodic death metal as being interchangeable terms, this paper draws exclusively on musical examples from Gothenburg bands due to their historical importance to the genre. International examples of melodic death metal (Carcass, Amorphis) exist during this period, yet narratives around the genre are overwhelmingly situated around the Gothenburg bands.

3. These three of the Gothenburg bands are generally considered the most significant, but this paper will also reference other bands from the area (e.g. Eucharist, Ceremonial Oath) who were involved in developing melodic death metal where relevant. British band Carcass' album *Heartwork* (1993) is furthermore often regarded as an early example of melodic death metal but not contextualised within the development of a discrete scene and subgenre in the same way as the bands that this paper focuses on. *Heartwork*'s reception amongst metal fans after its release suggests that it was initially seen as no more than a significantly more melodic album released by Carcass that was retroactively labelled as melodic death metal once the Gothenburg bands developed and codified the subgenre. There is no significant connection between Carcass and the Gothenburg metal scene beyond the inclusion of Swedish guitarist Michael Amott (who later founded the melodic death metal band, Arch Enemy) in Carcass during this time,.

4. All timings given in this paper correspond to the version of each song found on the albums listed in the discography section of this paper. All transcriptions of these songs used in this paper are made by the author. Where a harmonised melodic line is played on two guitars in a given recording, this has been shown as a single divisi line in two voices for ease of reading. The examples used in this paper also do not differentiate between lead guitar and rhythm guitar (or similar roles) as these roles are not clearly delineated in melodic death metal. Any melodic or lead guitar material is often harmonised by both guitars and any rhythmic material is doubled by both guitars. Preference is typically given, when played live, to melodic material being harmonised with the bass maintaining the harmonic role or playing the riff. I have therefore elected to describe both guitars by the term 'electric guitar' in my transcriptions and will discuss their role as it changes in each excerpt. Non-harmonic tones have been indicated, where relevant, with a black box around certain pitches though the specific type of non-harmonic tone has not been noted unless it is relevant to the example in question.

5. The Aeolian progression, though very common and idiomatic of NWOEHM, has its roots in earlier heavy metal such as Black Sabbath and other popular music groups such as Thin Lizzy and The Beatles, all of whom have utilised modal harmonies in their songwriting. This progression is called, at times, the 'Aeolian Cadence' (e.g. Lilja 2009), referring to its use as a cadential progression in pre-Baroque European modal music. I will generally refer to it as an Aeolian progression unless it is clearly a cadential phrase because most of the examples provided in this instance do not technically use this progression as a cadential phrase.

6. The reader must highlight all the text on the page with their cursor to view Jesper Stromblad's responses when accessing this web page.

7. The name, 'melodic death metal', might suggest that the melodic aspects of the music are more significant than the harmonic aspects, but this is not the case. Many of the influences shown in this paper that are rooted in death metal and NWOEHM display the same embedded melodic and harmonic elements in the riff writing as other metal genres, making a focus on the harmonic elements more effective in understanding how the music is constructed. Where, in the new practices identified in this paper, there are melodic elements supported by a chord progression, an approach based on harmonic analysis remains helpful because the melodic elements are dependent on (and, occasionally, are still embedded within) the underlying chord progressions.

8. The example in this paper will use Roman numeral notation at times to describe both power chord dyads and implied root position harmony where a third is not present. In the musicology of heavy metal that influences this article, power chords are conventionally understood to imply harmonic function even though they are not strictly triads (Lilja 2009: 53–61). Lilja (2004; 2009) goes as far as to suggest that all distorted power chords have the aural effect of major chords. It is worth noting that this effect influences other harmonic analyses of metal music, though I have reservations about the extent to which this aural effect influences harmonic analysis (discussed later). Where the use of dyads is highlighted in the analysis, lead sheet chord symbols are also included in the examples and power chord dyads are indicated as I^5 (or similar).

9. Riemannian analysis refers to an analytical method that divides all chords into three main harmonic functions that describe their relationship to the tonic: Tonic (T/t), Dominant (D/d) and Subdominant (S/s). A strong function is typically indicated with a capital letter and a weak function is indicated with a lower-case letter. For a more thorough explanation of Riemannian analysis, especially as it pertains to metal music, see Lilja (2009: 72–91).

10. My other work on melodic death metal (Hillier, 2018) draws more heavily on Smialek's use of paratextual analysis alongside musicological analysis in discussing genre in metal. The current paper does not consider paratextual elements in detail but they are nonetheless important to the development of melodic death metal as a genre and this study of the harmonic content of the genre should be understood alongside my work analysing other musical and extra-musical elements.

11. Note that Lilja does not indicate the quality of chords using upper and lower case Roman numerals as is conventional in music analysis, but rather only uses upper-case numerals to indicate that these Roman numerals correspond to a certain pitch class rather than indicating the mode of the chord (Lilja 2009: 56–61). Walser also notes the prominence of this chord progression within heavy metal and identifies it closely with the Aeolian mode (Walser 1993: 47–8, 80). While the progression appears in major key rock music as ♭VI–♭VII–I, all examples of melodic death metal discussed in this paper are in the minor key or mode, so I have not indicated the flatted VI and VII chords as they are diatonic to their relevant keys.

12. Harmonising in diatonic thirds can complicate the underlying harmony, as elaborated later. The F♮ labelled as 'NHT' in Ex. 1 does not fit cleanly within any conventional category of non-harmonic tone but does not fit well with the underlying harmony either. Its brevity in the bar, position on a weak beat, the fact that it arises solely from the harmonised line rather than the main melody, and Lilja's distortion effect on power chords all lead me to consider this note as a non-harmonic tone and thus I have labelled it as 'NHT' in lieu of a more specific label.

13. The reason this passage is shown in D♭ Aeolian, rather than in C♯ Aeolian, is that this key is achieved by down-tuning the strings of the electric and bass guitars by a semitone (i.e. E♭–A♭–D♭–G♭–B♭–E♭), meaning that chord shapes on the guitar are preserved in a new key. Where a guitarist would play the fifth fret on the A string to sound a D♮ pitch now becomes a D♭ as shown in the transcription. The lower pitch, to my mind, lends itself therefore to a flattening of D rather than a raising of C.

14. See Hillier (2018: 7–12) for a more thorough discussion of instrumentation and the usage of melodic bass guitar sections as an influence from NWOEHM in early melodic death metal.

15. One might argue that the F♯ in the bass and rhythm guitar chords extends the function of chord v in first inversion for the rest of this bar. I disagree with this analysis: firstly, the VI–VII–I progression is ubiquitous in metal music, as well as within melodic death metal, whilst inverted chord v progressions are notably less common; and, secondly, if one were to look at the chord progression alone, temporarily excluding the melodic elements, there is no question about the VI–VII–i progression. It is only the D♯ in the first half of the bar that complicates the anaysis, and, as indicated in Ex. 6, this note takes on a role as a non-harmonic neighbour note in the latter half of the bar. Consequently, I understand this section to be a modified version of the Aeolian progression as noted in the main text.

16. One could label the chord progression as i–ii°6/4–III. I find this reading of the chord progression unconvincing for several reasons, primarily because this reading does not reflect what a listener *hears* when they listen to the piece. One does not hear a clear major sound out of the final chord in the progression, because the D has finished sounding before the F♯ is sounded, which then resolves directly back to i. Nor does one hear a clear diminished sound out of the second chord, largely because the tritone between G and C♯ is only briefly heard before immediately resolving to D.

17. 'Blinded By Fear' was deliberately written, notably, to be an opening song for the album *Slaughter of the Soul*, with the main riff being deliberately catchy and emblematic of an At The Gates riff (Ullaeus 2006). This may have influenced its more melodic nature.

18. The existence of progressions that function as T–S–d–T is far older and more widespread than NWOEHM, though NWOEHM remains the likely source of this influence in melodic death metal.

19. This could also be interpreted as one of the voices being raised or lowered by an octave, e.g. F and A♭ (low to high) changing to A♭ and F (low to high). In Flames often either harmonise a solo phrase or change the interval of harmonisation at the end of a musical phrase, which I interpret as an idiomatic stylistic choice of the band that emphasises the end of the phrase. Note, as well, that these final chords are being used as a pivot modulation into the next section in A♭ Ionian, shown in Ex. 15.

20. Smialek (2015: 233) asserts that the verse-chorus form is a key stylistic element of melodic death metal but there are exceptions from this period. 'Punish My Heaven' features a complicated structure that does not readily fit into conventional verse-chorus labels. Smialek observed that, as the genre developed, these complex forms gradually gave way to a conventional use of the verse-chorus form.

21. Lilja (2019) distinguishes between lighter modes and darker modes as a means of understanding their quality and character in metal music. The modes are, in order from lightest to darkest, Lydian, Ionian, Mixolydian, Dorian, Aeolian, Phrygian, Locrian, with darker modes generally having more flat notes compared to the major scale and lighter modes having more sharp notes (Lilja 2019: 358). While metal generally uses the darker

modes relative to other styles of popular music, extreme metal subgenres (including death metal) tend toward the especially dark modes such as the Phrygian and Locrian modes (Berger 1999).

22. See Lilja's (2009: 167–83) discussion of how the church modes are used in classic heavy metal and NWOEHM, and Berger's (1999: 215–41) discussion of modality and tonality in death metal for more information.

23. I have chosen to label this chord as ♭v owing to its relationship on the guitar to the previous ♮v chord. The ♭v chord is reached by sliding down a fret (and, by extension, a semitone) from the ♮v chord, giving the aural effect of flattening the fifth scale degree rather than raising the fourth scale degree.

24. I have kept the B Aeolian key signature in these examples, because of the dominance of this modality throughout the song and in both sections immediately before and after this example. This also serves to underscore these sections as chromaticisms against the tonality over the overall song and emphasises the use of dissonance within them.

25. One could also interpret ♭v as the diatonic pitch and ♮v as the chromaticism, owing to the stronger metric position and longer duration of the ♭v chord, or interpret both pitches as having a flexible, structural role. I am inclined to interpret this passage as Aeolian, given the prominence of the Aeolian modality throughout this song (and melodic death metal more generally) and the importance of tonic triad progressions in melodic death metal.

26. DeClerq and Temperly's (2011) corpus study of rock riffs illustrates that subdominant function chords (especially chord IV) can operate in a secondary function (similarly to conventional secondary dominant chords) in rock and its derived styles. Biamonte (2012) and Lilja (2019) suggest that the prominence of subdominant chord functions as a means of resolution extends to heavy metal music and NWOEHM.

27. An almost identical progression is seen in the section immediately preceding this excerpt shown in Ex. 11, which conforms to the linear progression.

28. Much is made of the tritone in metal music by analysts, where it is understood as anything from a deliberately used dissonance (Lilja 2009: 58, 142–3) to a structural note as part of a modal section, typically Locrian (Berger 1999: 227–9; Lilja 2009: 170–1).

29. Lilja considers this aural effect so significant that he analyses all power chords as major triads (in the absence of any additional notes that would influence a reading of the harmony). While I do not think that the aural effect is so significant that one must understand power chords to function as major chords, Lilja demonstrates that musicians in rock and metal are aware of the aural effects of distortion and the implications that this may have for harmony (Lilja, 2009: 114). I argue, consequently, that melodic death metal bands may have chosen to avoid this aural effect, as outlined in this paragraph, even though I do not think that distortion always timplies that a power chord is aurally a major chord.

30. Exs. 7, 12, 19 and 22 demonstrate other instances from *Slaughter of the Soul* (1996) that establish a B Aeolian modality clearly, mostly because of the guitars and bass being tuned to B Standard (B–E–A–D–F♯–B low-high for guitar and B–E–A–D for bass). Example 17 demonstrates another notable departure from the main modality of the album, itself also a dissonant and chromatic passage.

31. The D♭m, A♭m and F♭ shapes result from the guitar being tuned down a semitone from standard tuning. The analogous shapes in standard tuning would be Dm–Dsus2–Dsus4–Dm and so on for the other chord shapes.

32. Distorted minor triads are generally associated with black metal, but their use in 'Punish My Heaven' is not reflective of their use in black metal but achieves a more melodic effect by embedding them within a chord progression. See Mayhem's 'Freezing Moon' (1994) or Mgła's 'Exercises in Futility I' (2015) for more conventional examples of minor triads in black metal.

33. The mixture of modal harmony with conventional common-practice harmony, which I have described as quasi-tonal, could be seen as normal within Romantic era classical music where much modal harmony was utilised within a tonal framework. Combinations of modal and tonal harmonies can also be observed in modally influenced examples of late 20th century pop. Due to the relative lack of scholarship on metal harmony, it is difficult to assess how common or rare the combined use of modal and tonal are in metal. A fuller examination of this question is beyond the scope of the current article and presents an avenue for future research.

34. Note that the final resolution to A♭ is not included in the transcription shown in Ex. 23 because the bar immediately following bar 4 of Ex. 23 is almost identical to bar 1 of Ex. 23.

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates early examples of melodic death metal, a subgenre of metal that developed mainly in Gothenburg, Sweden, in the early- to mid-1990s. I examine how harmony is used in melodic death metal by undertaking a musical analysis of excerpts from three albums: *The Gallery* by Dark Tranquillity (1995), *Slaughter of the Soul* by At The Gates (1995), and *The Jester Race* by In Flames (1996). These analyses reveal a transformation of harmonic practices from melodic death metal's parent genres of New Wave of European Heavy Metal and Swedish death metal. Melodic death metal also develops its own unique harmonic practices that point to a need to consider this style as a discrete subgenre beyond its development as The Gothenburg Sound. This enables a discussion of how these practices defined melodic death metal during its formative years and develops an argument for the differentiation of melodic death metal from local death metal sounds on musicological grounds. This article complements existing studies of melodic death metal by investigating an earlier period in the genre's development than previous studies have observed and provides a foundation for further investigation into the development and proliferation of extreme metal subgenres.

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Keywords. music analysis, metal musicology, melodic death metal, Swedish death metal, New Wave of European Heavy Metal

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