

# **THE LOVE OF FUNDAMENTALS IS THE ROOT OF ALL EVIL**

## **Alternatives to Harmonic Fundamentalism**

**Charles J. Smith**  
University at Buffalo

The greatest single obstacle to understanding chromatic harmony is our insistence on characterizing chords in terms of their fundamentals. Roman numerals give us the illusion that we're saying something significant about chromatic chords, but they conceal more than they reveal. The compulsion to analyze every harmonic entity in terms of a root constitutes a temptation and a snare, from which little understanding of chromaticism has ever or will ever come; it is a compulsion that makes reductionists of all who follow it.

How to solve this problem? We might well begin by recognizing some common chordal components of chromatic syntax that have gone largely unrecognized—if only because they are so difficult to characterize in terms of roots and fundamentals. A comprehensive investigation of chromatic syntax, a study that aims to discover the regularities of progression involving enharmonically complex chordal entities, is long overdue. It will be difficult, however, because we have been deeply conditioned to think of chords only in terms of roots. I claim that our investigations of chromatic harmony will be successful precisely to the degree that the investigators learn how to think about harmony without the crippling prejudice of Roman numerals.

The assumption that all chromatic chords are built upon fundamentals is wrong. Furthermore, it is viciously wrong, since it makes it almost impossible to comprehend the complex chromatic music of the late-19<sup>th</sup> and early-20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Our love of fundamentals may not literally be the root of all evil...but it is surely the root of many of our problems with chromatic harmony.