

Chords as Emotional Expression in Music: A Review of Concepts and Musical Experience

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Abstrak

Penelitian mengenai makna emosional akor dalam musik masih relatif terbatas, karena pembahasan emosi musikal selama ini lebih banyak berfokus pada perkembangan melodi, voice leading, harmoni, serta proses musikal yang bersifat temporal. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memperdalam pemahaman tentang pengalaman emosional dalam musik melalui fungsi ekspresif akor sebagaimana dialami dalam proses mendengarkan. Dengan menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif, sintesis literatur ini mengintegrasikan perspektif empiris dan teoretis yang berkaitan dengan akor, emosi, dan pengalaman mendengar. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman emosional muncul melalui peran struktural dan fungsional akor, baik ketika disajikan secara terisolasi maupun dalam progresi akor. Pengalaman tersebut dibentuk oleh berbagai variabel, termasuk konfigurasi dan progresi akor, tekstur atau warna bunyi, ukuran interval, serta keterlibatan pendengar. Literatur yang ditelaah juga menunjukkan bahwa respons emosional terhadap akor muncul melalui kombinasi proses kognitif serta pengalaman emosional dan tubuh, bukan semata-mata dari fitur struktural musik. Penelitian ini mengajak pengembangan perspektif yang lebih luas terhadap akor sebagai entitas musikal yang bersifat ekspresif secara emosional dan menegaskan perlunya penelitian lanjutan, khususnya terkait dimensi emosional dan kontekstual akor dalam berbagai ranah musikal.

Kata Kunci: akor; emosi musikal; pengalaman musikal; timbre.

Abstract

There has been relatively little research on the emotional import of chords in music, as discussions of musical emotion have largely focused on melodic development, voice leading, harmony, and temporal musical processes. This study seeks to better understand emotional experience in music through the expressive functions of chords as they are perceived in listening. Using a qualitative approach, the synthesis of literature integrates empirical and theoretical perspectives on chords, emotion, and listening experience. The findings reveal that emotional experiences emerge through the structural and functional roles of chords, both in isolation and within chord progressions. These experiences are shaped by multiple variables, including chordal configuration, progression, texture or tone, intervallic size, and listener engagement. The reviewed literature further indicates that emotional responses to chords arise from a combination of cognitive processes and emotional and bodily experience, rather than from structural features alone. This study invites broader perspectives on chords as emotionally expressive entities and highlights the need for further research, particularly on the emotional and contextual dimensions of chords across musical domains.

Keywords: chords; musical emotion; musical experience; timbre.

Introduction

Chords occupy a central position in musical discourse as configurations of sound that shape texture, atmosphere, and expressive nuance (Brown et al., 2023; Rohrmeier, 2020). Beyond their structural role, chords contribute to the emotional character of musical works by influencing how music is perceived and interpreted by listeners (Labbé et al., 2021; Smit et al., 2020). Across musical traditions, chords have been associated with expressive qualities such as tension and release, stability and instability, and affective coloration that emerges through musical context (Kawase, 2024; Lahdelma & Eerola, 2020). As such, chords are closely linked to broader questions of musical meaning and emotional experience.

Existing scholarship on chords has predominantly developed within theoretical and analytical traditions that focus on tonal structure, harmonic function, and syntactical organization (Cheung et al., 2024; Schiavio et al., 2021). While these approaches provide important insights into harmonic systems, they tend to treat emotional expression as secondary, rather than as an experiential outcome shaped through listening and performance contexts (Day et al., 2020; Eerola et al., 2025). In contrast, research in music psychology emphasizes the role of listener cognition, perception, and experience in shaping emotional responses to music, highlighting that emotional meaning extends beyond structural analysis (Tsai, 2024; Yang et al., 2023).

From a musicological and aesthetic perspective, music is increasingly understood as an interpretive practice rather than a fixed structure (Dowlen et al., 2024; Lines, 2022). In this view, chords are not merely theoretical constructs but are enacted within specific musical contexts, where their expressive meaning depends on performance, temporal placement, and listener interpretation. This perspective foregrounds the importance of experience and context in understanding emotional expression in music.

Despite these developments, research on the emotional significance of chords remains limited and fragmented across disciplines. Existing studies often focus on isolated parameters such as consonance, interval structure, or specific musical cases, without integrating broader experiential and interpretive dimensions (Bongiovanni et al., 2024; Navarro-Cáceres et al., 2020). As a result, there is still a lack of conceptual synthesis that explains how chords function as expressive elements within emotional musical experience.

Recent studies have begun to emphasize the roles of perception, embodiment, and interpretation in musical emotion, suggesting that chords may function as context-dependent expressive formations rather than purely structural units (Abdalthai et al., 2024; Wall et al., 2020). However, these perspectives remain insufficiently integrated into a unified understanding of chords within emotional experience.

Therefore, this study reviews the emotional expressions of chords in music literature, with particular attention to conceptual frameworks and scholarly discussions surrounding musical experience. The review aims to examine how chords function as expressive elements in shaping emotional meaning, drawing perspectives

from musicology, music psychology, and music philosophy. In doing so, the study offers a conceptual synthesis that positions chords as experiential and emotionally meaningful formations, extending beyond structurally oriented approaches to musical analysis.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative literature review design to examine how chords are understood as expressive elements in musical emotion. A literature review enables the study to engage with conceptual, theoretical, and empirical works across disciplines, allowing for the identification of patterns, convergences, and conceptual distinctions within the literature (Lee & Chang, 2025; Sembiring & Maulana, 2025). The review focuses on significant conceptual contributions rather than exhaustive coverage, with particular attention given to literature addressing the intersection of chords, emotion, expression, and musical experience within music theory, music psychology, and aesthetics.

The data sources consist of peer-reviewed journal articles, academic books, and scholarly chapters relevant to chords, musical emotion, and expressive meaning. These sources were obtained from established academic databases, including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar. The literature was identified using combinations of keywords such as chords, musical emotion, emotional expression, and musical experience to ensure both breadth and relevance. The selection of sources was based on thematic relevance, prioritizing works that present theoretical discussions, conceptual models, or analyses of emotional responses to chords or related musical structures. Studies focusing solely on acoustic properties without interpretive or experiential perspectives were excluded to maintain conceptual coherence (Wunseh, 2023).

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic approach. The selected sources were examined to identify recurring concepts, interpretive perspectives, and theoretical positions concerning chords and emotion. These were then compared across studies to determine patterns and differences and subsequently synthesized into broader thematic categories that explain how chords function as expressive elements in emotional musical experience.

Results and Discussion

Chords as Primary Emotional Stimuli

The studies reviewed indicate that emotional perception of chords can occur even when chords are presented in isolation, without melodic or progressive context. Rather than functioning solely as subordinate elements within larger musical structures, chords can be understood as perceptual entities capable of evoking immediate affective responses. Empirical evidence shows that listeners, regardless of musical training, are able to perceive emotional qualities in chords in terms of valence, tension, and affect (Cho et al., 2017).

Further research demonstrates that the vertical structure of chords carries emotionally salient information that remains relatively consistent across listeners. Emotional responses to chords are therefore not entirely dependent on extended musical narratives or temporal development (Kukreti, 2015; Nussbaum et al., 2024). Similarly, studies on major and minor triads show that these chord types maintain stable emotional associations even in the absence of contextual cues, suggesting that emotional perception is not exclusively derived from musical progression (Bakker & Martin, 2014).

From these findings, it can be argued that chords should not be understood merely as structural components within harmonic systems, but as independent affective units that contribute directly to emotional experience. This perspective shifts the understanding of musical emotion from a purely linear model, which prioritizes melodic and temporal development, towards a recognition of simultaneity as a source of emotional meaning. For instance, a single sustained minor chord played in isolation can evoke a sense of tension or melancholy without requiring further harmonic movement.

Therefore, chords function as primary emotional stimuli that operate alongside, rather than beneath, other musical elements such as melody and form. Emotional responses in music may arise not only from dynamic progression but also from static sonic configurations, reinforcing the role of chords as immediate carriers of affective meaning (Asano et al., 2022; Bongiovanni et al., 2024; Lahdelma & Eerola, 2016).

Chord Progressions and Emotional Dynamics

Beyond isolated chords, the literature shows that emotional experience in music is strongly influenced by relationships between chords within a progression. Studies on chord sequences indicate that emotional responses depend not only on the qualities of individual chords, but also on their order and relational structure (Roy, 2023).

Further evidence suggests that the emotional qualities commonly associated with major and minor chords are not fixed but can be modified depending on harmonic context. The moderating effects of chord progressions demonstrate that the same chord may evoke different emotional meanings when placed within different progressions, indicating that chords function relationally rather than as independent emotional units (J. Zhang et al., 2025). Research on harmonic cadences provides additional insight into how specific patterns evoke emotional responses related to tension, release, and closure. These responses are closely linked to cognitive processes of expectation and resolution, suggesting that emotional meaning emerges through the listener's anticipation of harmonic movement (Smit et al., 2020). These theoretical models support the understanding of musical emotion as an experience shaped by cognitive expectancy processes (Bouwer et al., 2020; Cappotto et al., 2022; Carpentier et al., 2020).

From these findings, it can be argued that chord progressions function as temporal frameworks that organize emotional experience rather than merely

connecting harmonic units. Emotional meaning develops through the interplay between anticipation and resolution, where listeners continuously interpret changes in harmonic direction. For example, a dominant–tonic resolution may generate a sense of closure and relief, whereas unresolved progressions may sustain tension and uncertainty. Thus, emotional expression in music is not solely embedded in individual chords, but is constructed through their relational and temporal unfolding, positioning chord progressions as central mechanisms in shaping emotional dynamics.

Timbre and Interval in Emotional Intensification

The review highlights the role of timbre and intervallic structure in shaping the emotional perception of chords. Research shows that variations in timbre can significantly alter the emotional meaning of the same chord, either by intensifying, diminishing, or transforming its affective character (Armitage et al., 2025). This indicates that emotional perception in music is not solely determined by harmonic structure but is also strongly influenced by the qualitative characteristics of sound itself.

Neurophysiological studies further demonstrate that different timbral qualities evoke distinct neural responses during emotional processing. These findings suggest that emotional responses to chords are not merely interpretive, but are grounded in measurable physiological processes, reinforcing the embodied nature of musical emotion (Ignacio et al., 2021; W. Zhang et al., 2019).

In addition to timbre, intervallic structure plays a crucial role in shaping emotional meaning. Research on minor second intervals reveal strong associations with perceptions of tension and sadness, which are also observed in non-musical auditory contexts (Kawase, 2024; Zeloni & Pavani, 2022). This suggests that certain emotional responses to chords may be linked to fundamental auditory sensitivities rather than purely cultural constructs. From these findings, it can be argued that emotional expression in chords emerges through the interaction between harmonic structure and sonic characteristics.

For instance, a dissonant chord performed with a soft timbre may be perceived as less intense than the same chord articulated with a sharp or distorted timbre, illustrating how emotional meaning is dynamically shaped by sound quality. Therefore, timbre and interval should not be treated as secondary elements, but as integral components in the construction of emotional meaning. Chords must be understood within their full sensory and perceptual context, where structural and acoustic dimensions interact to shape emotional experience (Correia et al., 2022; Nussbaum et al., 2024).

Cognitive, Affective, and Bodily Integration in Chord Experience

The literature demonstrates that emotional responses to chords involve the integration of cognitive appraisal, affective reaction, and bodily experience. Psychological perspectives emphasize that musical emotion arises from the interaction between musical stimuli, mental processing, and subjective

interpretation, rather than from structural elements alone (Micallef Grimaud & Eerola, 2022).

Empirical studies show that chord structures and progressions can evoke measurable bodily responses, such as tension, release, or physiological arousal, particularly in moments of harmonic instability or resolution (Daikoku et al., 2024). These findings indicate that musical emotions operate as a psychosomatic phenomenon in which perception, cognition, and bodily experience are inseparably linked. Computational approaches further demonstrate that emotional patterns in chord sequences can be systematically identified and modelled, suggesting that emotional responses exhibit structural regularities while remaining open to interpretive variation (Hu et al., 2022). This highlights the dual nature of musical emotion as both structured and experiential.

From this perspective, it can be argued that chords function within a dynamic system in which emotional meaning emerges through the interaction between sound, cognition, and the body. Emotional responses are not fixed properties of chord structures but are shaped through the listener's engagement with musical context. For example, the same harmonic progression may evoke different emotional responses depending on the listener's prior experience or cultural background.

Finally, conceptual perspectives emphasize the reciprocal relationship between chords and emotion, where chords both evoke emotional responses and are interpreted through the listener's existing emotional state (Willimek & Willimek, 2017). Taken together, these findings position chords as multidimensional expressive elements shaped by the integration of cognitive, affective, and bodily processes. Chords are therefore not passive structural units, but active mediators of emotional experience within music (Cho et al., 2017).

Conclusion

This review demonstrates that chords function as expressive musical elements capable of evoking emotional responses both independently and within broader harmonic structures. The synthesis indicates that while chords may not possess a singular harmonic function, emotional responses emerge through the interaction between chordal structure, relational progression, texture, timbre, intervallic content, and listener experience. Consistent evidence suggests that chords can act as strong emotional stimulus, while chord progressions organize emotional responses through processes of expectation and resolution. Emotional interpretation is further shaped by timbral and sensory qualities as well as bodily engagement, highlighting a multisensory cognitive–affective framework in which the body plays a central role in musical experience. These findings support the view that chords should be understood as mediators of emotional experience rather than as theoretically neutral constructs. Accordingly, future research is encouraged to move beyond structurally bound approaches and to adopt perceptual, embodied, contextual, cross-cultural, and interdisciplinary perspectives that integrate music theory, psychology, and neuroscience to better explain how emotional meaning is attributed to chords across diverse musical styles and listening contexts.

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