

Thoughts on *Eleanor Rigby*

Although you'd never know it from listening to the song, the "correct" analysis of *Eleanor Rigby* depends upon the position of the observer and what that observer thinks is strange about the tune.

Part A: *E Aeolian*

The A part is solidly in the key of E minor. Why don't we say it is in the key of G major? One sharp defines that key. But remember that E minor, the sixth tone of the G major scale is the "relative" minor of G major.

Trust your ears for the answer. The A part sounds minor. Nothing major about it. Look at the final melody tone. It's an "E" not a "G". So, yield to the natural temptation and call it like it sounds. This section is in E minor. Or, if you prefer, it is in E-Aeolian. That's the mode on the 6th tone of the G scale.

Part B: *Is it E Aeolian or E Dorian?*

The harmonic center of Part B is disputable in theory but not to the ear. Neither the melody nor the chords are confusing. But the analysis of the B section fits easily into two different views.

Version 1: It's E-Dorian

The B part is really in the key of E-Dorian. That would be a key signature of D major (two sharps) with a scale running E F# G A B C# D E. This analysis fits well because the A chord (A C# E) occurs naturally on this scale. The harmonic structure is mostly right too. The E minor chord moves to a B minor chord and then retrogresses through an A major chord back to the E minor chord. Good root movement. It works.

But then that C major chord and the C natural melody tone appear. C *NATURAL*. That C natural is out of the key signature. So, for those two beats (which occur twice in the B section) the piece moves into the key of E minor (E- Aeolian and the relative minor to G major. Both keys have only one sharp).

Version 2: No it's not! This is still E minor.

The B part is really in the key of E minor. That is a key signature of G major (one sharp) with a scale running E F # G A B C D E.

This analysis works until the second and third measure when the C# and the A chord appear. We explain that by waving our hands rapidly and saying that this phrase is a brief modulation out of E minor and into the key of D major (two sharps) Or, better still, we flap our arms harder and say that measures two and three modulate into the key of B minor (B Aeolian mode and relative minor of the key of D). In Measure four the piece modulates back to E minor.

Note that the analysis turns on how you fit the unexpected tone into the theory. Version 1 is based on the C natural melody tone and its attendant C major chord being anomalies, that is, lying outside of the key. Version 2 is based on seeing the C# tone in the melody and its attendant A major chord as the anomalies. Again these tones and chords not part of the core tonal center. Very much like modern physics, the “correct” answer depends upon the position of the observer.

Part C

Part C is clearly in the key of E minor or E Aeolian. Note that the A minor chord that leads this section is the relative minor of C. So, it bears the same relationship with E minor (iv to i) as does the C chord with G major (IV to I)

Does the “controversy” about the harmonic basis for the B part matter? Not to our ears! It is truly an academic exercise.

If this piece was a component of a work written for the concert hall, the musical FORM of the larger work might answer the harmonic analysis question for us. There are rules about how modulations occur in large musical structures, like symphonies. But, hey, this is a pop music tune! So, we are left to our own on this one.

Most musicians I have heard discussing *Eleanor Rigby* describe it as a “Dorian” tune. As we’ve seen that can be true for the B section. E-Dorian sounds so authoritative. There is real gravitas in those words and you instantly think the speaker is very knowledgeable. I don’t think describing *Eleanor Rigby* as an E-Dorian melody reaches the level of a good pick-up line in a bar. But still, declaiming *Eleanor Rigby* as an E-Dorian melody sounds impressive.

For my part, I like version 2 best with the two measure modulation to B minor. It’s clearer to me. I don’t feel a modulation (change of key) when the B section begins. It feels like a smooth, natural continuation of the A section. I don’t sense a key change. There is nothing abrupt at all in the expected flow of the music. I see no reason to assert that a key change takes place between part A and part B. So, I think calling the B Section an E-Dorian melody is contrived. Doing so describes a change that never happened. Although that analysis is theoretically correct, it does not explain what I hear when I listen to the song.

I DO feel a dramatic change in the middle of the 2nd measure in the B section when that A major chord sounds. So, the concept that the entire tune of *Eleanor Rigby* is in E minor (that is, E-Aeolian) with a brief modulation into the key of B minor (that is, B-Aeolian) during the B section is appealing to me. That’s the way I experience the song.

But, in the end, does it really matter? Not one whit to the ear.