

Harmony in the Style of Bach

Rules and Guidelines for Writing Four-Part Harmony in the Style of Bach.

INTRODUCTION

The study of Bach's Harmony has, along with 16th., Century vocal polyphony, long provided the basis for understanding Classical Music in all of the World's leading Conservatoires. Beethoven's studies of Bach's Chorales are well documented.

The following notes are only intended to provide an introductory overview, and students are encouraged to study the Chorales alongside these notes in order to gain a thorough understanding of the subject.

Harmonizing Chorales in the style of Bach is difficult! It takes a long time to become proficient. The effort is worthwhile and very rewarding.

These notes are somewhat different from those which can be garnered from traditional Harmony Textbooks, in that they not only tell you what you can and cannot do, but also tell you what you should and should not do. Merely "following the rules" is NOT ENOUGH! You must learn how to exercise your own creative judgement just as Bach would have done.- Quite a challenge!

Note well therefore, that my use of the words must, must not, and should are very important.

Finally, in the course of the various examinations you will be sitting, you will be required to demonstrate your knowledge of particular chord progressions. Whilst these may not be particularly desirable in the context of Bach, you must do them IF YOU WANT TO PASS.

EVERY THING YOU WRITE MUST BE EXPLICABLE ACCORDING TO THE FOLLOWING

RULES AND GUIDELINES

CHORDS AND CADENCES

Cadences ~ Perfect V ~1 (V11~1) You should use these cadences most of the time

Imperfect anything ~V Ratio Perfect 75% ~ Imperfect 25%

(usually 1, 11, 1V~V)

Plagal 1V ~1 Used very rarely

Interrupted V ~V1 Used very rarely.

A cadence must be used at the end of every phrase

The penultimate chord may be a seventh. The last chord in a phrase must not be a seventh.

Cadences should be in root position. The penultimate chord can be a first inversion. The last chord in a phrase must be in root position.

Chords ~ Never use chord 111. Chords 1, 11, 1V, V, V1 and V11 are allowed, as are 11/7, V/7, and VII/7.

Chord 1V/7 is allowed, but is best avoided.

Every chord should contain every note. If in difficulty you may omit the 5th.

Never omit the 3rd.

Never double the leading note.

Double the root or the 5th. Ratio 90% ~10%.

Never double the major 3rd. (A few special conditions allow an exception to this rule)

Avoid doubling the minor 3rd until you are sure of where this is allowed.

Chords must be used in root position and 1st inversion.

2nd inversions are allowed only in the following progressions: 1c~V~1. (Perfect Cadence)

1 ~Vc~1b.

1b~Vc~1.

1V~1c~1Vb.

1Vb~1c~1V.

The first is known as a Cadential 6/4, and is a very good progression.

The others are known as Passing 6/4s and are usually avoided by Bach.

N.B. These are very important examination progressions and should be used when an opportunity presents itself .

Seventh chords are 4 note chords and any inversion is permissible, but you should not use the 2nd inversion.

RULES OF PROGRESSION

Consecutive Perfect 5ths and Octaves are forbidden between two parts when they are moving in parallel.(N.B. This does not apply to static parts)

Never use the same chord over a bar line except as an upbeat(anacrusis) at the start of a phrase.

The leading note must go to tonic except at a Perfect Cadence where it can drop directly to the 5th.This resolution may be carried over to another part.

7ths must resolve downwards by step.

Where there is conflict between applying the leading note and 7th rules, the resolution of the 7th must prevail.

Never make a melodic leap of an augmented interval.

Diminished intervals are allowed providing that it is resolved inwards.

Avoid the major 6th as an upward leap.

GUIDELINES FOR GOOD HARMONIC PROGRESSIONS

Use Primary Chords as much as possible. Ratio 1~40%.V(VII)~30%, IV~15%, II~10% and VI~5%.

(11~V~1 is a very good progression for a Perfect Cadence, and is better than 1V~V~1)

For strong progressions you should try to aim for root movements of a 5th,i.e.1~V~1~

1V~1~V~11~V~1 etc.

Try to keep the bass part moving in contrary motion to the upper parts as much as possible.

Keep the inner parts (alto and tenor) static.

Keep the tenor part high.

Keep all parts moving smoothly. Avoid successive leaps in the same direction.

Try to keep the top parts within the range of a 10th.

Chords should move at a regular pace.(Harmonic Rhythm)and every note that falls on a beat should be harmonised.

MODULATION

You should modulate freely and without inhibition. In Bach's music interest is obtained through modulation.

You must only modulate to closely related keys i.e. those which are no more than one sharp or one flat away from the home key.(home key +5)

The whole Chorale must begin and end in the same key .All the other phrases can be ended in any of the related keys.

You may modulate several times in the same phrase.

You may modulate without any preparation and at will ,but must demonstrate that a modulation has occurred.(The progression V~1 in the new key is all you need!)

Advice ~ In text books, modulation is dealt with in a frequently contradictory manner.

It seems to be very difficult. This however is not the case. In the style of Bach the much written about "Pivot Chord" does not exist. This simple fact lies behind the confusion that this topic causes. "Pivot Chords" do exist in later musical styles as a means of modulating to the more remote keys smoothly, but that is another story!

INESSENTIAL NOTES

There are three types of Inessential Note: The passing note ,the auxiliary note and the suspension.

Passing Notes ~ They can occur: off the beat ascending and descending.
on the beat descending.

Two successive passing notes can occur in the bass part descending only.

Auxiliary Notes~ Upper and lower can only occur off the beat.

N.B. Passing notes and auxiliary notes can give rise to consecutive 5ths and octaves, but cannot save you from consecutive 5ths and octaves.

Suspensions ~ Must resolve downwards by step.

Advice~ The 4-3 suspension is the strongest and most striking, as it resolves onto a note that is not currently sounding.

9-8 suspensions can sound good, the 6-5 is the least likely to work well

Try to look for a good close clash when you use a suspension. They usually work best in the inner parts, though Bach makes them sound good in any part.

TIERCE DE PICARDY

In the minor key, end on the major chord. This can happen in other phrases as well.

CONCLUSION

Use The Bach Chorales as your text book, but be warned , at one time or another, he will have broken every single rule and guideline which I have outlined above! HE IS ALLOWED. YOU ARE NOT!