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An Intersection of Counterpoint and Harmony

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I would like to begin by isolating a particular problem that has frequently arisen in my tonal or Baroque counterpoint class. Following the composition of diatonic first-species counterpoint to a given chorale cantus, I then relax the usual Fuxian restraints by permitting the occasional use of note-against-note chordal dissonance, adhering to the general soprano-bass guidelines in the chorale chapter of the Salzer-Schachter *Counterpoint in Composition*[1] and in the Bach's own settings of chorale tunes. At the same time, applied dominants are introduced to expand the harmonic vocabulary and provide either transient tonicizations within the phrase or full-fledged modulations at the cadence. Nevertheless, I find that students are frequently reluctant to abandon their former diatonic settings---settings that may limit the melodic possibilities of the counterpointing voice. They tend to overlook the technique of scale-degree reinterpretation, whereby scale steps of the original key may function as different degrees in related transient tonicizations. Nor are students always aware of latent sequential possibilities existing in the cantus part that may be realized in the other voice. The application of these procedures opens up new and different melodic vistas in the counterpointing voice that were not formerly feasible in strict diatonic settings. Some examples of these techniques, which are part and parcel of Baroque chorale harmonizations, are illustrated in Example 1. The first phrase of the cantus tune *O Haupt voll Blut* (in the upper voice) is accompanied by a note-against-note setting in the bass; figured bass symbols denote the implied harmonies. As we inject various
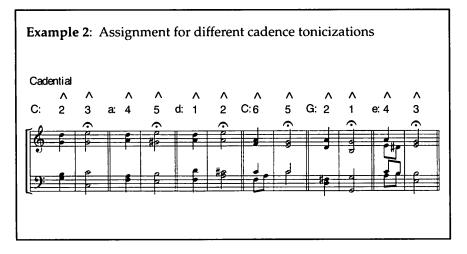
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[1] Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter, *Counterpoint in Composition* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969), pp. 245-328.

Example 1: Settings of the opening phrase of *O Haupt voll Blut*

tonicizations or harmonic sequential patterns, the bass voice begins to assume radically different melodic shapes. While some of the outer-voice settings are Bach's, others are original.

This familiar chorale is a Phrygian tune. Bach usually set it in a basic center of either A minor or C major. His first two settings (Examples 1A and B) are founded in the latter. While the next two (Examples 1C and D) momentarily tonicize ii, Example 1E tonicizes both IV and ii. In Example 1F the opening and concluding Phrygian cadence suggest A minor, despite a transient movement to C. Finally, the cadence in Example 1G implies D minor!

An assignment that I have found pedagogically useful in this regard is outlined below. Given the final two diatonic notes of a melodic phrase (Example 2), students are asked to reset them as

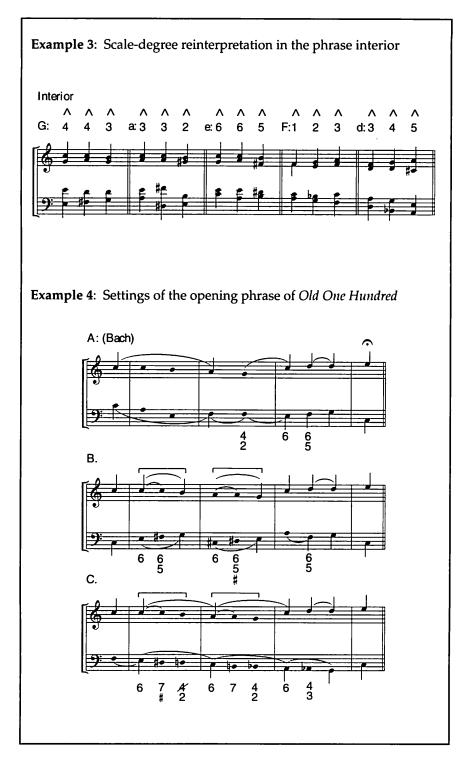**Example 2:** Assignment for different cadence tonicizations

standard cadence formulas in other closely-related keys, thereby establishing different tonal destinations of the phrase.

The same procedure of scale-step reinterpretation may also be applied to melodic fragments that occur within the phrase, as illustrated in Example 3. This technique is especially valuable in effecting modulations during two-voice canons at the octave, such as Bach's C-minor Two-Part Invention.
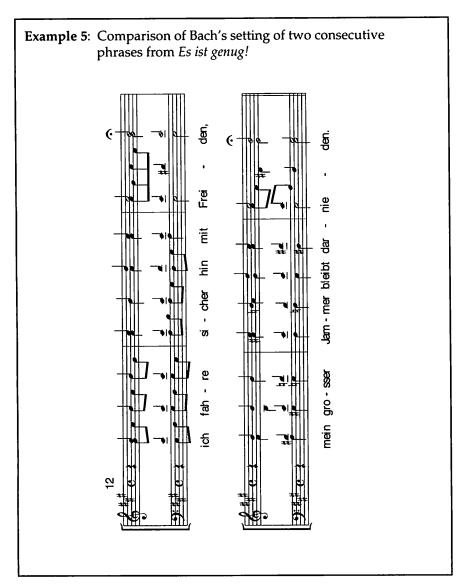
The setting in Example 4A is Bach's diatonic treatment of the opening phrase of the *Old One Hundred* (or *Herr Gott, dich loben alle wir*). The second setting (Example 4B) takes advantage of the sequential nature of the cantus ($\hat{8}$-$\hat{7}$ and $\hat{6}$-$\hat{5}$) by successively tonicizing V and iii.

Example 3: Scale-degree reinterpretation in the phrase interior

Interior

G: 4̂ 4̂ 3̂   a: 3̂ 3̂ 2̂   e: 6̂ 6̂ 5̂   F: 1̂ 2̂ 3̂   d: 3̂ 4̂ 5̂

Example 4: Settings of the opening phrase of *Old One Hundred*

A: (Bach)

B.

C.

The final example (Example 4C) illustrates a more exotic chromatic version that tonicizes a different third motion: vi to IV.

At this point the instructor might wish to introduce the relation between the text of a chorale phrase and its appropriate harmonization. A familiar instance of Bach's sensitivity to the association of text and music is quoted in Example 5. In these two consecutive phrases from *Es ist genug!*, the melody is identical, but its settings are about as different as one could imagine.

Example 5: Comparison of Bach's setting of two consecutive phrases from *Es ist genug!*

I would be the first to admit that the above procedures do not represent anything new. Rather, the problem lies in getting students to recognize and incorporate the myriad harmonic and melodic possibilities that result from their employment. Although the next logical assignment would involve the composition of a bona fide, two-voice chorale prelude, these same principles can prove valuable in the study of free counterpoint, such as the writing of suite movements.

The techniques listed above in note-against-note contrapuntal settings have direct application to the topic of melody harmonization, a traditional and frequent assignment in most freshman/sophomore theory classes. While the majority of harmony texts routinely include such assignments, few provide the student with step-by-step guidelines that systematically outline how to harmonize melodic phrases. I would suggest the following scenario, as detailed in Figure 1. Each point is accompanied by two settings of the same tune that illustrate the successive topics under discussion.
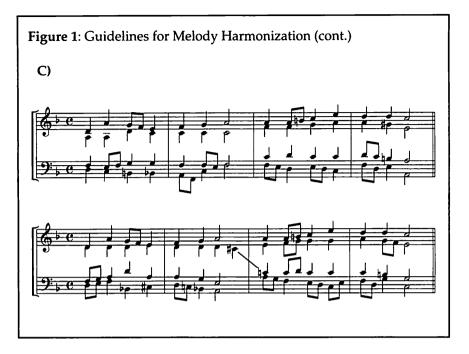
Guidelines for Melody Harmonization

1. First examine the given tune and use the opening and two closing scale degrees to determine the supporting harmonies of the initial note and cadence formula. Then sketch in their likely bass notes. (If the phrase suggests a modulation, the new key center and its cadence must be plotted in a similar manner.) This tonal framing of the phrase will normally feature root-position chords to provide the necessary tonal stability. As a result, the harmonic intervals between the two voices tend to employ a high concentration of perfect octaves and fifths. This procedure may be likened to the "telephone poles" (or stable tonal points) between which we will subsequently string "the wires" of the phrase interior (refer to Figure 1A).

2. In the middle of the phrase try to maintain a sense of functional harmonic progression while simultaneously working out a good melodic line in the bass. (It is assumed that some prior discussion has been devoted to the characteristics of "good" melodic writing

Figure 1: Guidelines for Melody Harmonization

A)

B)

Figure 1: Guidelines for Melody Harmonization (cont.)

C)

and normative harmonic function.) Two points must be kept in mind. The melodic movement between the voices should feature a good mix of similar, contrary, and (to a less extent) oblique motion in order to maximize the individual linear characteristics of the outer parts. In addition, the intervallic relations between soprano and bass should feature the imperfect consonances (thirds and sixths), with an occasional dissonance that implies a correctly treated seventh chord. Try to avoid the use of structural perfect intervals here (especially octaves), as they tend to suggest a sense of cadential closure that conflicts with the harmonic/melodic flow typical within the phrase interior. The octave is best restricted to passing chords that occur between voice exchanges; they usually appear in weaker metric positions. The possibilities of transient tonicizations or harmonic sequences are still applicable (refer to Figure 1B).

3. Once the two-voice contrapuntal framework of the phrase is worked out, it is usually a simple matter to supply the inner voices with traditional "partwriting" procedures. Generally speaking, if the outer voices provide a good self-sufficient framework, the fill-

ing-in of the alto and tenor will proceed with minimal difficulty; the converse is often true. Appropriate melodic dissonances may be inserted to complete the setting.
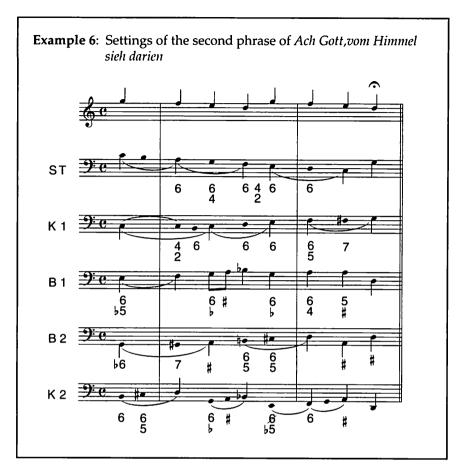
Granted, the chorale tunes employed here were specifically chosen because of their inherent fast harmonic rhythm, allowing a maximum amount of information within the most compact time span. With folk-like tunes, their slower rate of chord change suggests a freer handling of texture, which could result in a simple piano accompaniment (refer to Figure 1C). Nevertheless, the underlying one-to-one contrapuntal relation between soprano and bass remains in effect.

In summary, five harmonizations of the second phrase of the famous Phrygian chorale *Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh darien* appear in Example 6. These different settings have been transposed to a common key center. The first (Example 6A) represents a completely diatonic "student" setting. In the initial treatment (K1), Kirnberger chooses to retain the C-major context but varies the approach to the half cadence (Example 6B). Bach's pair of harmonizations (Examples 6C and D) reinterpret the phrase in terms of D minor; the second of these is quite imaginative in its quasi-chromatic ascent to the root-position tonic. Finally, Kirnberger manages to work in an ingenious little passing motive (bracketed in the example) within the center of D minor (Example 6E).

The setting of a complete tune or chorale phrase entails longer-range tonal planning. The student should strive for a variety of cadential types and possible tonicizations. The pre-harmonization sketch of Ravencroft's "Bristol" hymn tune incorporates a series of cadences that outline a convincing progression of descending 5th relations: vi - ii - V - I.

In retrospect, the above discussion illustrates an interesting intersection of counterpoint and harmony. The composition of a note-against-note cantus setting and the soprano/bass duet in melody harmonizations share many features in common. Both, I feel, can profit by the use of transient tonicizations and embedded sequential patterns as a means of enlarging the scope of different melodic shapes in the counterpointing voice.

I will conclude with a few personal remarks on the question of "strict" versus "stylistic" counterpoint. The former, based originally on the principles of Fux and their subsequent deployment

Example 6: Settings of the second phrase of *Ach Gott,vom Himmel sieh darien*

in Schenker's *Counterpoint*,[2] provides the underlying contrapuntal foundation necessary for further reductive analysis. Couched in more general terms, these principles may be applied to a variety of stylistic contexts, although Schenker's elaborative examples in Volume 1 naturally show a preference for the common-practice period. Stylistic counterpoint, on the other hand, assumes an immediate application of polyphonic techniques to a particular style system, usually the music of the Late Renaissance or Baroque. In this respect, it not only lays out the contrapuntal procedures of each era, but also provides the student with an overview of their compositional norms in general. While traditional history-survey classes on these periods

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[2]Heinrich Schenker, *Counterpoint* Vol 1, translated by John Rothgeb and Jürgen Thym (New York: Schirmer Books, 1987).

concentrate on genres, schools of composition, individual composers, and social/historical backgrounds, the skills emphasized in stylistic counterpoint courses allow the students to get their hands "dirty" by attempting to simulate the actual music. Having survived the rigors of composing an opening point of imitation based a preexistent source, they have a far greater appreciation of how paraphrase masses or vorimitation chorale preludes work. Therefore, I feel that this approach meets the more immediate needs of the students.

Example 7: Pre-harmonization sketch of "Bristol"

Example 7: continued...

Example 7: continued...