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## Modernizing the Minuet Composition Project

BY NANCY ROGERS

Elizabeth West Marvin's numerous scholarly publications range from music cognition to the history of music theory to post-tonal analysis, and I have long admired not only the diversity of her research but also her ability to bring different topics together in interesting ways. It is insufficient simply to describe Betsy's work as interdisciplinary: she asks creative questions and draws upon the full range of her knowledge and musicianship to answer them. Not surprisingly, her pedagogical approach displays the same broad-minded orientation. Readers familiar with the *Musician's Guide* series (which Betsy created with collaborators Jane Piper Clendinning and Joel Phillips) know her preference for integrating listening and written skills, her ability to weave performance and history into the discourse, and her knack for including eclectic popular musical examples in addition to common-practice repertoire.

As anyone who knows her can attest, another key to Betsy's pedagogical success is her delightful personality. Betsy is a friendly, likable, down-to-Earth person with a good sense of humor. She is open to other people's ideas and interests: students who pursue research outside the mainstream of music theory or who focus on music beyond the canon often cite Betsy's encouragement as a turning point in their lives. I feel very privileged to have worked with Betsy, and I know that my own modest professional successes stem in no small part from her inspiration, wisdom, and support.

I offer this article as a tribute to Betsy Marvin, hoping that it reflects some of her diverse scholarly interests, her practical orientation, and her utter lack of musical snobbery.

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A style-based composition project is an appealing option for core undergraduate music theory classes. Students are provided with the opportunity to showcase their ever-increasing knowledge of harmony, voiceleading, meter, phrase structure, and form while addressing skills such as motivic development and the generation of musical momentum — important creative factors that tend to be neglected by more mundane assignments. Not only does the project provide a meaningful way to engage with some elusive elements

of musical style, but students who struggle to manage seemingly independent musical elements in order to fashion a coherent composition will also emerge with a deeper understanding of previously abstract concepts and how they interact.

Among music theory curricula that include a composition component, the most common project is a galant-style minuet. This tradition may be traced back to Joseph Riepel's engaging dialogue-style treatise *Fundamentals of Musical Composition (Anfangsgründe zur musikalischen Setzkunst, 1752–1765)*, in which the student volunteers to demonstrate his musical skills for the master by composing a minuet. Indeed, the student over-confidently declares this task among the easiest in the world, boasting that he could instantly write a dozen minuets in a row. This offhand remark, of course, contributes to the humor when we later see striking peculiarities such as his thirteen-measure second reprise.

Notice that the student's boast — however unwarranted it turns out to be — also hints at an essential element of Riepel's treatise: the conversation between the student and the master (and the lesson absorbed by the reader) fundamentally depends both on the student's (and reader's) intimate familiarity with the specific genre as well as the student's (and reader's) more general internalized knowledge of musical patterns. Furthermore, although the student's artistic taste is criticized, it appears likely — given various references to speed and to placing appropriate diminutions in context — that he is comfortable improvising. Indeed, this would have been a fundamental skill in the eighteenth century, and it is unlikely that Riepel would have sharply distinguished improvisation from composition, particularly since he was relying on the minuet's ability to trigger reflex-like responses.<sup>1</sup>

To a budding eighteenth-century musician, the minuet was an ideal point of departure: because its conventions were extremely familiar, composition teachers could easily address issues of style and taste. Today's music students, however, are considerably less acquainted with galant minuets: they cannot compose — let alone improvise — in this style without fairly detailed explicit

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<sup>1</sup>Contradicting the conventional wisdom of modern-day musicians, Steve Larson points out that improvisation arguably requires more conscious calculation and knowledge of musical conventions than does composition. See his article "Composition versus Improvisation?" *Journal of Music Theory* 49, no. 2 (2005), 241–273.

instructions.<sup>2</sup> In my opinion, this greatly diminishes the value of a minuet composition assignment from almost any educational angle. Is the project's objective a demonstration of the student's musical knowledge? Unfortunately, the compositional output probably indicates the quality of the teacher's instructions at least as reliably as it reflects the student's stylistic capabilities. Is the goal instead simply to provide a creative outlet? Fulfilling an itemized list of requirements may strike some students as analogous to paint-by-the-numbers artwork. Whatever our priorities, surely such a project will be immeasurably more valuable if students themselves can establish the compositional framework and meaningfully evaluate the results.<sup>3</sup>

In the spirit of Riepel's treatise, I find familiarity of style and reliance on musical intuition highly desirable for a modern-day composition project. I also believe that Riepel was wise to focus on a ubiquitous genre. My composition project therefore relies on one of the few remaining popular genres that employ conservative common-practice harmony: the college fight song chorus.<sup>4</sup> Fight songs seem almost inescapable for Americans: even people who have never followed college sports, who never participated in

<sup>2</sup>Providing excellent models is also helpful, of course, but students who are completely unfamiliar with a compositional style can't easily extract important features on their own. A certain level of expertise is required to distinguish compositional hallmarks from incidental details.

<sup>3</sup>Clearly I disagree with Stefan Eckert, who finds stylistic unfamiliarity advantageous. Eckert claims that historical distance allows students to disregard their musical preferences, and that striving to recreate a style from the past frees students from textbook descriptions of what sounds good. I contend that students lacking stylistic instincts will almost necessarily become *more* reliant on their textbooks and instructors. (See Eckert, Stefan, "So, You Want to Write a Minuet?" *Music Theory Online* 11, no. 2 [2005], paragraph 3.)

<sup>4</sup>I must stress from the outset that fight songs employ the same harmonic language and formal structures that we encounter in common-practice compositions. Phrases typically begin with tonic expansion and predictably include a pre-dominant → dominant → tonic progression at the final cadence, for instance. The V-IV successions,  $\flat$ VII chords, and abrupt modulations frequently encountered in other popular styles do not arise in fight songs. Furthermore, fight songs employ traditional voiceleading and motivic treatment. In short, a unit devoted to fight songs will not undermine a class's study of more serious music, and the principles learned will apply directly to common-practice music.

a high school pep rally, and who claim not to know any fight songs whatsoever will probably recognize — often to their great surprise — especially famous examples such as “The Notre Dame Victory March” and “Hail to the Victors.”

Students (collectively, if not individually) realize that many conventional characteristics of fight songs are inherently desirable for practical reasons. For instance, fight songs must be constructed in consistent eight-beat segments because marching band members are taught to cover five yards in eight steps. A three- or five-measure phrase is not merely an anomaly: it is a blatant and unacceptable stylistic error. Knowing the typical context of a fight song performance and its social purpose also makes the benefits of a limited vocal range, simple rhythms, and relatively uniform note values self-evident: such features will help a crowd of non-musicians successfully sing in unison. For similar reasons, an effective fight song should also be instantly recognizable and easy to memorize. In a word, it must be “catchy.” This almost invariably means that it will be saturated with an obvious motive.

The familiarity of the fight song provides distinct pedagogical advantages. Perhaps most importantly, students who intuitively grasp the social role of a fight song are far less likely to perceive the genre’s stylistic constraints as arbitrary “rules.” It is also considerably easier to emphasize features that give the music popular appeal rather than perpetually dwelling on errors to be avoided. In an unfamiliar style, unfortunately, we tend to focus on the negative simply because mistakes are easier than nuances to explain. I also find that there is less need for some kinds of negative feedback because students tend to exercise appropriate restraint. For instance, even the earliest fight song drafts are rarely plagued by a burst of sixteenth-notes within a passage of half-notes, whereas I formerly found similar oddities with surprising frequency in minuet projects.

Naturally, a composition project will be more effective if it is approached methodically. I suggest a combination of written analytical assignments and in-class improvisational exercises that serve five essential goals:

- Familiarize students with a collection of outstanding fight song choruses
- Draw attention to their typical surface-level characteristics
- Illuminate their underlying musical structures
- Identify stylistic norms in a variety of parameters (e.g., form, harmony, and figuration)
- Confirm (or perhaps reveal) listener expectations and discern features that trigger them

The fight song composition project requires in-depth knowledge of phrase structure and at least limited familiarity with chromatic harmony. Because I have the good fortune of teaching an honors class, I am able to reach this point in the second semester at Florida State University, but most students would probably be more comfortable with the project during their third semester, after having gained more experience with chromatic harmony. The project is written in three phases, although I welcome additional revised drafts, so many students receive feedback four or five times before submitting their final version. The three required installments are as follows:

- A melody with a written list of the typical characteristics that it exemplifies
- A melody with a simple representation of the underlying harmony in keyboard style and a stylistically elaborated bass line that reflects the harmonic plan and works well with the melody (see Example 1)
- A melody with accompaniment that resembles a condensed score (see Example 2)

The final version is performed at our last class meeting: students sight sing the melody while I typically play the accompaniment on piano.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Knowing from the outset that their peers will sight read these melodies in class probably encourages appropriate compositional restraint, and performances almost always go smoothly. Students are invited to perform their own fight songs instrumentally, either live or recorded, but the vast majority opt for the default of voice and piano.

The image shows a musical score for four measures. The top staff (treble clef) contains the melody: a whole note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, and a whole note B4. The second and third staves (grand staff) show the underlying harmony with chords and melodic lines. The fourth staff (bass clef) shows a stylistic bass line with a whole note G3, a quarter note A3, a quarter note B3, a quarter note C4, and a whole note B3.

Example 1. Melody from the “Notre Dame Victory March” chorus, measures 1–4, shown with underlying harmony (staves 2 and 3) and stylistic bass line (staff 4)

The image shows a musical score for four measures. The top staff (treble clef) contains the melody: a whole note G4, a quarter note A4, a quarter note B4, a quarter note C5, and a whole note B4. The second and third staves (grand staff) show accompaniment resembling a condensed score, with chords and melodic lines. The fourth staff (bass clef) shows a stylistic bass line with a whole note G3, a quarter note A3, a quarter note B3, a quarter note C4, and a whole note B3.

Example 2. Melody from the “Notre Dame Victory March” chorus, measures 1–4, shown with accompaniment resembling a condensed score

The three compositional installments are turned in within a span of only a few weeks, but the broader groundwork is laid months earlier with relevant homework and class activities. The first step, of course, is to choose a collection of fight song choruses that will serve as a miniature anthology. As a starting point, I

suggest choruses from the fight songs of the University of Notre Dame, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, the Ohio State University, Northwestern University, the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Idaho, and the University of Vermont (the melodies of which are provided in Examples 3–10). Although there are numerous effective fight songs, I chose these because they are particularly beloved, they represent a reasonable stylistic diversity within the genre, and all are in the public domain. Accompaniment has been omitted for the sake of space efficiency and because there are so many different possibilities. Furthermore, the harmonic implications of these melodies are sufficiently strong that written accompaniment is unnecessary for the purposes of this article; recorded band arrangements available online will immediately clarify any ambiguities.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Readers interested in perusing a large assortment of fight songs should consult William E. Studwell and Bruce R. Schueneman's published collections of college fight songs (complete references are provided in the bibliography). Despite an unfortunate number of errors in the printed music, these two volumes contain a wide variety of excellent fight song melodies with piano accompaniment.



The image displays a musical score for the chorus of "Notre Dame Victory March" in G major, 2/4 time. The score is presented in a single system with eight staves, each beginning with a circled measure number: 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, and 29. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The melody consists of quarter and eighth notes, with some measures containing rests. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the eighth staff.

Example 3. "Notre Dame Victory March" chorus, University of Notre Dame; music composed in 1908 by graduate Michael J. Shea

Recording: [http://www.mmbolding.com/bowls/Music\\_Notre\\_Dame\\_Fight\\_Song.htm](http://www.mmbolding.com/bowls/Music_Notre_Dame_Fight_Song.htm)

Example 4. "The Victors" chorus, University of Michigan; music composed in 1898 by student Louis Elbel

Recording: <http://www.umich.edu/~mgoblue/sounds/victors.au>

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9

13

17

21

25

29

Example 5. "On, Wisconsin" chorus, University of Wisconsin at Madison; music composed in 1909 by William Thomas Purdy

Recording: <http://archives.library.wisc.edu/uw-archives/exhibits/onwisconsin/bandperformances.html>

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of "Across the Field". The score is written on a single treble clef staff in 2/4 time, with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The music consists of 30 measures, with measure numbers 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, and 29 circled at the beginning of their respective lines. The notation includes quarter notes, eighth notes, and a half note, with some notes beamed together. Measure 13 contains three rests marked with an 'x'. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 30.

Example 6. "Across the Field" chorus, Ohio State University; music composed in 1915 by student William A. Dougherty, Jr.

Recording: [http://www.scarletandgray.info/osu/songs/across\\_the\\_field.html](http://www.scarletandgray.info/osu/songs/across_the_field.html)

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of "Go U Northwestern" in 2/4 time, written in the key of B-flat major. The score is presented in a single system with eight staves, each beginning with a circled measure number: 1, 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, and 29. The notation includes quarter notes, eighth notes, and half notes, with various phrasing slurs and accents. Measure 13 contains rests marked with 'x'. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 29.

Example 7. "Go U Northwestern" chorus, Northwestern University; music composed in 1914 by graduate Theodore C. Van Etten

Recording: <http://www.nusports.com/trads/nw-songs.html>

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of "Fight for California". The score is written on a single treble clef staff with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a 6/8 time signature. The music consists of eight measures, each beginning with a circled measure number: 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, and 29. The notation includes various note values such as quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests and ties. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the eighth measure.

Example 8. "Fight for California" chorus, University of California at Berkeley; music drawn from the trio of the "Lights Out March," composed in 1905 or 1906 by Earl Elleson McCoy

Recording: <http://calband.berkeley.edu/media/cal-songs/#Fight%20for%20California>

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13

17

21

25

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Example 9. "Go, Vandals, Go" chorus, University of Idaho; music composed in 1930 by student J. M. "Morey" O'Donnell

Recording: <http://www.uiweb.uidaho.edu/marchingband/sub/songs/govandals.html>

The image displays a musical score for the chorus of "Vermont Victorious" in 2/4 time. The score is presented on a single treble clef staff with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The music is divided into measures, with circled measure numbers (4, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29) indicating the start of new phrases. The notation includes quarter notes, eighth notes, and half notes, with various phrasing slurs and accents. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 30.

Example 10. "Vermont Victorious" chorus, University of Vermont; composed in 1918 by students A. F. Furman, H. P. Sharples, and L. F. Killick

Recording: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yc\\_kIAuDSsI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yc_kIAuDSsI)



Early homework assignments are primarily designed to familiarize students with the music and steer them toward noticing some broad trends. Sample questions appear below.

- What is the prevailing hypermeter of these fight songs?  
Between the staves, number the measures to convey your hypermetric analysis. Are there any hypermetric disruptions? Did this match your expectations?
- Label all cadences on the scores, specifically identifying each by type. If any cadences strike you as unusual, explain your interpretation.

The hypermeter is, of course, relentless quadruple (generally adding up to units of eight beats), and in a follow-up class discussion students who have participated in a marching band will be able to explain the practical necessity of eight-beat groupings. One can also expect widespread agreement that fight song choruses are typically bisected by a conspicuous half cadence arriving in measures 15 or 16. Beyond this strong trend, the cadence question becomes considerably more difficult and can yield some interesting discussion. For instance, many students will be lured into identifying an authentic cadence in measure 7 of “On, Wisconsin” — but, of course, this is impossible because the first eight measures never leave the tonic triad. Other potential cadence points are more open to interpretation. Is there an authentic cadence in measure 3 of “Fight for California”? Although this is harmonically plausible, the V<sup>7</sup>-I motion is undermined in several ways: the melody’s chromatic motion is not typically cadential, measure 3 seems distinctly early for a cadence at a lively tempo, and by measure 16 we can retrospectively recognize measures 1–4 as the first segment of a sentence structure. Relatively few students will hear a cadence this early in “Fight for California,” but the more important issue is

whether they can explain why not. In general, we may notice that measure 4 often forms some type of dividing point in a fight song, but only at the subphrase (not phrase) level.

The eight-measure level is more likely to spark debate. Is there a plagal cadence in measure 7 of “Vermont Victorious” or in measure 7 of “Go U Northwestern”? While either is possible, we tend not to interpret IV-I as a cadential motion unless it occurs at the end of a work (or at least the end of a significant section), and we might therefore prefer to interpret these passages as subphrases. In any case, it is worth observing that IV-I motions are common in fight songs, and they may occur at fairly prominent boundaries. In most fight songs, measures 17–24 are essentially identical to measures 1–8 (and questions about cadences around measure 8 will therefore apply around measure 24), but it is worth examining the exceptions. “Across the Field,” which initiates a strongly contrasting passage at its midpoint, arrives in measure 24 on a tonicized dominant that could constitute a half cadence. However, measure 25 sounds more like a continuation than the beginning of a new phrase, suggesting that measure 24 is only a subphrase division. Both “On, Wisconsin” and “Go U Northwestern” arrive prominently on V/vi in measure 23, and while students may disagree whether these are genuine cadences or just smaller-scale dividing points, it is important to recognize that an abrupt shift to the relative minor around the three-quarter mark is common in fight song choruses.<sup>7</sup>

Students will reliably volunteer that material from the beginning of the fight song chorus usually recurs at the midpoint, but they should also be prompted to explore whether any generalizations are possible for the exceptions to this general rule. When measures 17–24 differ significantly from 1–8, the change seems designed to set up a particularly high melodic note: “Across the Field” matches its

<sup>7</sup>This feature may almost certainly be traced back to popular American marches of the late nineteenth century. Consider, for example, John Philip Sousa’s “The Stars and Stripes Forever” (1896), with its prominent arrival on V/vi in measure 12 as well as an imperfect authentic cadence in the relative minor in measure 59 (three-quarters of the way through the trio). Incidentally, when V/vi appears in a fight song around the three-quarter point, the chord is likely to be back-relating and will not generally resolve to vi, as would be expected in another context. The V/vi label (as opposed to III#) is still warranted despite this lack of resolution because the chord’s approach is quite formulaic for a half cadence (often a Phrygian cadence) in the relative minor.

highest note thus far in measure 24 and proceeds to the highest note of the entire melody in measure 25, “On, Wisconsin” matches its highest note thus far in measures 23–24 and it reaches a step higher in measure 25 (the highest note of the entire melody will arrive in measure 28), and “Go U Northwestern” matches its highest note thus far in measures 23–24 (the highest note of the entire melody will arrive in measure 28). The locations of melodic peaks are not similarly predictable when measures 1–8 and 17–24 correspond closely.

After discussing cadence interpretations and the features that make them more (or less) plausible, I recommend assigning a follow-up question such as one of the following:

- Diagram the phrase structure of each fight song. Remember that a good diagram should include
  - arches to represent the number of phrases
  - the number of measures in each phrase
  - an additional level of arches depicting how phrases group together
  - brackets to depict prominent subphrases, if they exist
  - cadence types
  - letters signifying whether thematic material is identical, similar, or contrasting (*a*, *a'*, *b*, etc.)

Also identify the phrase structure using any appropriate vocabulary.

- We have touched upon several striking similarities in phrase structure among these fight songs, and you have probably noticed several others. Enumerate as many of these corresponding characteristics as possible.

In addition to confirming that students have absorbed the information addressed in class, such an assignment will demonstrate their level of consistency in making interpretive decisions, and it

may also provide an opportunity for them to present independent observations.

Large-scale form and phrase structure are perhaps the most apparent formulaic aspect of fight song choruses, but there are also numerous shared smaller-scale musical characteristics to which we should draw our students' attention. A representative set of questions addressing underlying voiceleading appears below.

- Make a melodic reduction of the following three passages:<sup>8</sup>
  - "On, Wisconsin," measures 1–8
  - "The Victors," measures 1–9
  - "Across the Field," measures 1–16
- Consider your reductions for all three excerpts. In what obvious way(s) does "Across the Field" differ from the previous two? In what less obvious way(s) is it similar?
- Of the eight fight songs in our class collection, which, in your opinion, begins most similarly to "On Wisconsin"? Which begins most similarly to "The Victors"? Explain.<sup>9</sup>

As in any reductive analysis assignment, mistakes are bound to arise, but it is relatively easy to guide students into noticing a tendency for fight songs to open with an elaborated arpeggiation of the tonic triad or with elaborated stepwise motion between members of the tonic triad.<sup>10</sup>

Many fight songs employ prominently repeated motives, and

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<sup>8</sup>These reductions are not intended to be particularly difficult, but I know from experience that many students mistakenly are influenced too much by meter and too little by harmony. In "On, Wisconsin," for instance, many students will incorrectly interpret the E in measure 2 and the A in measure 4 as structural because they fall on strong beats. Similarly, in "The Victors" they tend to identify the A in measure 4 and the B in measure 8 as structural. Such analyses provide a good opportunity to review double neighbor tones and accented passing tones.

<sup>9</sup>Although the preceding tasks in this assignment predispose students to focus on underlying melodic structure (which is indeed my primary concern), these general questions about similarity are deliberately open-ended so that students feel free to address a variety of features. Certainly other instructors might prefer a more specific wording.

<sup>10</sup>Needless to say, such patterns are also widespread in other musical literature, but fight songs provide an opportunity to discuss features of common-practice art music in a style that may be more accessible to many students, which may eventually help students recognize these features better in other repertoire.

so this is another feature that students should consider before composing on their own. A representative set of questions addressing motives appears below.

- What would you consider the primary motive of “On, Wisconsin”? Write it down and identify its important characteristics.
- On the score, mark all straightforward appearances of this motive.
- Now take another look at the score and mark two less obvious appearances of this motive. The motive might be elaborated, inverted, stretched out, or otherwise transformed in some way. Explain what features are retained, enabling you to hear this musical relationship despite the alteration(s).

The double-neighbor motive in measures 1–2 of “On, Wisconsin” is fairly distinctive, and students are likely to recognize its variation in measures 8–9. We might contemplate what motivated the composer to use chromatic neighbors (rather than diatonic neighbors) in these locations.

For some fight songs, the same questions could be repeated verbatim. For instance, in “Fight for Vermont” students are likely to equate the gesture connecting E-G in measures 0–1 with the gesture connecting C-G in measures 4–7. The changes of contour and rhythm and the use of leaps are overshadowed by several clear similarities: unmistakable underlying stepwise motion connects members of the tonic triad with a rhythm that starts mid-measure and moves from short notes to a longer note. (The student’s explanation, of course, is just as important as recognizing the relationship.) For other fight songs, such as the “Notre Dame Victory March,” I prefer to ask students to identify a primary motive and a secondary motive in order to address both the conspicuous lower neighbors and the underlying passing motion. One could also simply ask a wide-open question such as “List a variety of specific musical features that unify this fight song.”

The last analytical exercise that I ask students to undertake before they compose is making a detailed list of the shared (or at least common) characteristics of the fight songs we have discussed. Students are explicitly encouraged to include multiple parameters, such as phrase structure, form, rhythm, underlying voiceleading patterns, and harmony. I compile these lists into the class’s collective “recipe” for a successful fight song, which I then distribute. Although I frequently clarify a student’s wording and increase the use of technical vocabulary, there are very few content

omissions that I need to fill in. Figure 1 shows the observations of this year's class.

Figure 1. A collective "recipe" for a stylistic fight song

Basic overall characteristics

- Major key with a fairly easy key signature (up to three sharps or flats)
- Moderately fast tempo
- Usually a duple meter; never a triple meter
- Usually a simple meter
- Very regular quadruple hypermeter
- Rhythmic values tend to be fairly uniform, usually ranging from an eighth-note to a half-note
- Short in length — typically 32 measures
- Regular, repetitive, and "catchy" enough to be easily memorized
- Strong and assertive character
- Often an introduction (possibly based on the end of the fight song chorus) is added in order to establish the key and tempo

*(Continued next page)*

(Figure 1 continued)

### Melodic characteristics

- Very likely to begin on  $\hat{3}$  or  $\hat{5}$ ; sometimes begins on  $\hat{1}$
- Melodic contour tends to emphasize rising gestures
- Repeating a single note quite a few times is not unusual
- Prominent use of a repeated motive (often with a distinctive rhythm in addition to a pitch pattern)
- Opening material often mapped from tonic onto dominant (typically moved up a step)
- Strong dividing point halfway through, with the two halves usually beginning the same way
- Plenty of stepwise motion; however, leaps between members of a prevailing chord are not unusual
  - Arpeggiation is likely to project the tonic, especially near the beginning
  - Arpeggiation may occur in the background rather than the foreground
  - Conversely, foreground leaps tend to overlay stepwise background motion
- Tends to begin by elaborating either a stepwise line connecting two members of the tonic triad or an arpeggiation of the tonic triad
  - If underlying motion is stepwise, a motive that leads I V may be mapped onto a version that leads V I
  - With an underlying arpeggiation, the opening motive may be repeated on different members of the tonic triad
- Most typical embellishments are neighboring tones and passing tones; chromatic lower neighbors and chromatic passing tones are quite common
- Melodic climax often occurs during the third quarter
- Rhythm tends to be rather repetitive (even at times when a melodic motive isn't being used)
- Syncopation is common, particularly patterns like  $\bullet \bullet \bullet$ ; even so, rhythm is not usually very complicated
- Forward-moving unsyncopated rhythms such as  $\bullet \bullet \bullet \bullet$  and dotted rhythms are also common
- Conclusion is most frequently  $\hat{3}-\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ , although  $\hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{7}-\hat{8}$  (often elaborated) is also common
- Always ends with a perfect authentic cadence (typically followed by a rest)

(Figure 1 continued)

#### Phrase/grouping structure

- Phrases likely to be eight or sixteen measures
- Sentence structure is common
  - In addition to typical sentences, sentence-like ratios may occur at levels that don't necessarily correspond to the phrase (see, for instance, "On, Wisconsin" measures 1–8 or "Across the Field" measures 1–4)
- The overall form has an obvious dividing point half-way through, and it often subdivides into even quarters; these units might be phrases or subphrases
  - The overall structure might be a parallel period
  - The overall structure might be a double period
  - The overall structure might be a single long phrase with very prominent subphrases
- Halfway through, there is probably a half cadence or sometimes an imperfect authentic cadence
- In the middle of the second half, there may be a cadence in some secondary key (likely vi)
- Always ends with a perfect authentic cadence

#### Harmony

- Considerable emphasis on tonic and dominant
- Often a pattern that expands the tonic is repeated/varied so that it expands the dominant
- Likely to begin with a fairly long tonic expansion
- Harmonic rhythm may be fairly slow (often four measure per chord) at the beginning

Students turn in the first draft of their fight song melodies along with a list of the criteria they satisfy, which ensures a reasonable level of care and thought. The sheet of collective observations is a useful reference when I provide feedback, particularly because the style guidelines stem from the students' own experience and not just abstract instructions received from me. I can praise good decisions while pointing out features that deviate from the norm (for instance, "I like the consistent motive and the 2+2+4 sentence structure, but you aren't expanding the tonic as expected").

You may be wondering whether providing students with a detailed list of fight song characteristics leads to a set of essentially



identical (and therefore uninteresting) compositions. This is a reasonable concern, but I have seen considerable variety from my class — perhaps in part because students hope their fight songs will stand out when performed on the last day of the semester. Substantiating my claim, three contrasting student projects appear in an appendix at the end of this article.<sup>11</sup> Naturally, there are many similarities among them (and among all of the compositions I received), but this appropriately mirrors the highly predictable structure of fight song choruses.

Thus far I have emphasized intellectual understanding, but developing corresponding aural skills is absolutely crucial. I find paired listening and improvisation exercises indispensable for building and refining style awareness. An improvised response reflects statistical learning, necessarily revealing the improviser's current knowledge of a musical style.<sup>12</sup> There is perhaps no more efficient assessment/feedback mechanism for the students or for the teacher. Improvisation encompasses an enormous range of activities, but in this article I use the term solely to refer to an immediate musical response to a musical prompt. For instance, having first established a key and tempo and simply instructed my students to "sing whatever should come next," I sing a pattern that could serve as the opening gesture of a fight song. Students react immediately, and I can almost elicit a unison response.<sup>13</sup> A sample prompt with both expected and unexpected responses appears in Example 11.

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<sup>11</sup> Composition projects and excerpts are reproduced in this article with the permission of the students who wrote them. I would like to thank these students (as well as others whose work could not be included for reasons of space) for their generosity.

<sup>12</sup> Schenker himself recognized a link between improvisation and composition; he lamented that the decline in improvisational abilities since Bach's time had negatively impacted composition. John Rink discusses Schenker's belief that both activities depend upon a musician's ability to realize and elaborate a harmonic plan in his article "Schenker and Improvisation," *Journal of Music Theory* 37, no. 1 (1993), 1–55.

<sup>13</sup> I don't mean to imply that students will invariably respond to any prompt in unison: it takes a carefully crafted prompt to produce this effect, given that many prompts have more than one suitable continuation. Sometimes I want to highlight the existence of multiple options. More often, though, my goal is to confirm the existence of some pattern or principle, and so I try to generate a unanimous instinctive reaction in order to underscore its importance.

① This prompt...

⑤ almost invariably elicits this response...

⑤ but never either of these possible responses.

Example 11. An improvisation prompt with both expected and unexpected responses

Why does the expected response seem so right? Students will point out the consistent interval and rhythmic pattern (which automatically makes the material sound motivic), and they will also typically observe how the underlying rise from  $\hat{1}$ - $\hat{2}$  continues  $\hat{2}$ - $\hat{3}$ . Why does the first unexpected response (which answers  $\hat{1}$ - $\hat{2}$  with  $\hat{7}$ - $\hat{1}$ ) seem less suitable? Students usually say that it seems too soon to cadence — or, more generically, that it's too soon to get back to  $\hat{1}$ . This automatic and seemingly unimportant reaction is actually quite significant, because it illustrates the implicit knowledge that a fight song is likely to begin with a sentence, and sentences typically avoid a strong arrival on  $\hat{1}$  before the cadence.<sup>14</sup> Without

<sup>14</sup>This is not to say that  $\hat{1}$  *cannot* arrive before the cadence in a sentence. In fact, when a sentence begins with a motion from  $\hat{1}$  to  $\hat{7}$ , the next gesture is often a motion from  $\hat{7}$  back to  $\hat{1}$  (as in the third movement of Beethoven's Septet, Op. 20). In general, though, a strong motion to  $\hat{1}$  will be avoided. Consider, for instance, Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 3 (Op. 2, no. 3), in which the opening sentence's initial  $\hat{3}$ - $\hat{2}$  motion is answered by  $\hat{4}$ - $\hat{3}$

any priming on my part, students unconsciously assume that I am presenting a basic idea, and so they sing an appropriate variation of the basic idea, understanding that the cadence has not arrived. Many students find it more difficult to explain independently why the second unexpected response (which extends  $\hat{1}-\hat{2}$  with  $\hat{3}-\hat{4}$ ) doesn't sound quite right, but once someone — either a peer or the instructor — points out that this violates our expectation of a tonic expansion, the concept is fairly easy to grasp.

Responding to the four-measure prompt in Example 11 with another four measures is quite easy; continuing beyond measure 8 requires considerably more musical sophistication. Example 12 illustrates how a naïve student is likely to proceed, in contrast with a far more stylistic completion that an experienced musician might suggest. A beginner will probably maintain the pattern with essentially no alterations beyond moving it up another step. This response is completely rational but also utterly unstylistic. A more experienced musician will know intuitively that the 4+4 subphrases illustrated in Example 11 should lead to an eight-measure subphrase ending with a cadence. In other words, an expert musician will know how to complete the implied sentence structure.<sup>15</sup>

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rather than  $\hat{2}-\hat{1}$ ; “Across the Field” begins with a motion from  $\hat{1}$  to  $\hat{7}$  that continues down to  $\hat{5}$  rather than returning to  $\hat{1}$  at the song's midpoint, which would be quite atypical for a fight song.

<sup>15</sup> A half cadence such as the one depicted would be likely at this point of a fight song chorus, but an authentic cadence is also possible.

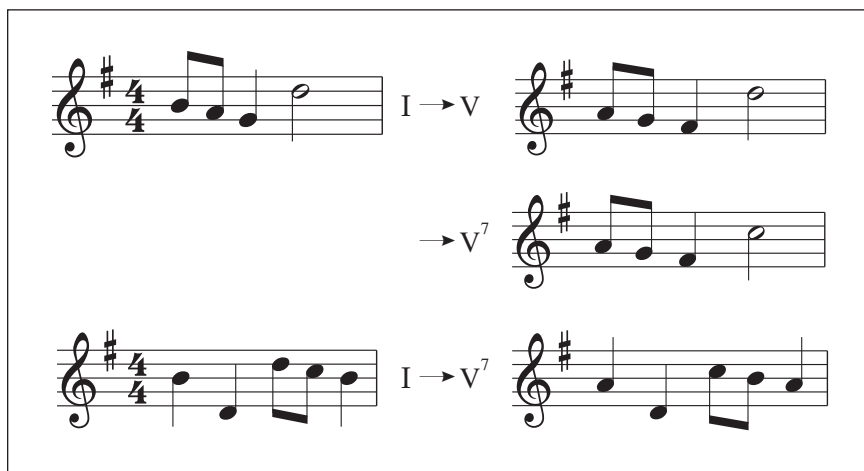
An inexperienced musician is likely to continue essentially the same four-measure pattern from Example 9.



An experienced musician will instead complete the sentence by continuing to a cadence in an eight-measure unit.




Example 12. A naïve and a sophisticated continuation of the phrase started in Example 11




Example 13. Tonic-to-dominant mapping of two short patterns

Adding leaps to a basic idea can make the task more challenging. In general, a pattern that uses leaps to outline the tonic triad tends to be mapped onto the dominant — that is, its contour and rhythm are preserved but its notes are shifted (usually by step) so that they project the dominant rather than the tonic, as illustrated in Example 13. Notice that this process may affect the size of a leap: Example 13 moves most notes down a step, but some leaps must be adjusted in order to project the desired chord. Example 14 shows a class prompt that includes leaps along with several possible student responses. In the top line, the basic pattern is stylistically varied by mapping the tonic prompt onto the dominant seventh chord, changing the fourth leaps to fifths in the process. While tonic-to-dominant mapping is particularly common, it is also acceptable to transform the basic pattern so that it continues to project the tonic triad — for instance, mapping a  $\hat{1}\text{-}\hat{5}\text{-}\hat{1}\text{-}\hat{3}$  arpeggiation onto a  $\hat{3}\text{-}\hat{1}\text{-}\hat{3}\text{-}\hat{5}$  arpeggiation (Example 14, second line), in which case the fourth leaps are appropriately changed to thirds. Inexperienced students are often tempted simply to move the basic idea consistently up a step (thus outlining the supertonic triad, as in Example 14's third line), which — although undeniably logical — is considerably less stylistic. This is precisely why exercises focused on the basic skill of mapping gestures from tonic to dominant (or from dominant to tonic) are tremendously helpful for any tonal composition project and also for future analytical activities in a broad range of musical styles.


An experienced musician is likely to map the basic idea to the dominant.



A continued arpeggiation of the tonic is also plausible.



However, an interval-for-interval duplication is far less stylistic.



Example 14. Possible continuations of a basic idea that includes leaps

These instant-response improvisation activities are an excellent way to gauge students' current stylistic knowledge. They also become an exceedingly effective teaching tool when followed by class discussion. What makes one continuation superior to another? Which specific musical features give us subtle cues for what to expect next? Might we respond differently if we knew that the prompt heard came from the middle of a fight song rather than its beginning? Answering questions like these helps us tap into instincts and make them conscious — and yet at the same time this mindful practice gradually transforms deliberate decisions into automatic habits, eventually resulting in an effortless sense of style.

I also find it productive to turn the tables by asking students as part of a written homework assignment to craft their own prompts for an improvisation exercise. In addition to notating the prompt itself, they must indicate the response they expect and explain the features they have incorporated that should inspire this predicted continuation. A sample assignment appears below.

- Construct a two-measure basic idea that could serve as the opening of a musical sentence. The goal is to compose a basic idea that creates such strong expectations that your classmates will immediately sing the next two measures in unison when they hear it. (Yes, we are going to try this in class!)
- Write the next two measures that you believe would best follow your basic idea.
- Briefly explain your prediction: which features (at both the surface and underlying levels) will contribute to strong listener expectations?

The subsequent in-class trial of these improvisational prompts is instructive and quite engaging for students. My primary purpose in this assignment is to integrate the conscious knowledge students have developed through their written assignments with the instincts they display through improvisation. By designing their own improvisational prompts, students may, for instance, discover how to distinguish a motive that is well suited for underlying stepwise motion from one that is better suited for arpeggiation.<sup>16</sup> I

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<sup>16</sup>Identifying the musical elements that create specific expectations clearly enhances a student's analytical awareness. Such activities also provide an interesting opportunity to enrich the curriculum with facets of music cognition.

also use in-class improvisation to provide certain types of feedback on early drafts of the composition projects. For instance, when I feel that a student has established a strong expectation but has not fulfilled it, I write a brief note pointing this out and promising to test my hypothesis in class. Example 15 shows such a case from a student's first-draft melody. The motivic correspondence is good, but the overall motion from  $\hat{3}-\hat{2}$  in measures 1–4 seems to imply a corresponding motion from  $\hat{4}-\hat{3}$  (not  $\hat{4}-\hat{5}$ , as the student wrote). When I played measures 1–6 as a prompt (stopping at the // symbol shown in the example), the class unanimously sang the two-measure completion shown on the bottom line of the example. The student who wrote this example revised his melody accordingly with no further input from me; his second draft was much more successful.

A student's first-draft melody

When classmates heard measures 1–6 (up to the // sign), they unanimously continued as shown here.

Example 15. A student melody that created strong expectations but did not fulfill them

Conversely, when a student's melody establishes and fulfills expectations especially well, I may write a note of praise and confirm the appropriateness of the student's choices in class. Example 16 provides a relatively complex example. Notice that the student has created melodic implications on a variety of distinct levels. There is the two-measure motivic pattern of neighboring tones that recurs regularly, and this surface-level pattern elaborates an underlying upward arpeggiation ( $\hat{1}-\hat{3}-\hat{5}$  in measures 1–6 and  $\hat{2}-\hat{4}-\hat{6}$  in measures 9–14). Furthermore, a standard 2+2+4 subphrase

pattern creates a typical sentence structure in measures 1–8 and again in measures 9–16. Although logic might suggest that the long-range motion from  $\hat{1}-\hat{7}$  in the first phrase should be answered by  $\hat{2}-\hat{1}$  in the second phrase, stylistic knowledge of the fight song guided this student to avoid a perfect authentic cadence at this point (i.e., the middle) and instead lead to  $\hat{3}$ . Of course, the very typical use of  $\#2$  (the raised fifth of a V chord) in measure 14 helps make this  $\hat{3}$  sound like a suitable cadential point. Because this example is long and fairly complicated, I had to start with short units and steadily increase the prompt length, sometimes asking the class to sing another measure or two, and sometimes asking only for the next note. Throughout the process, there was widespread agreement that this melody was quite well crafted.

The image displays a musical score for a melody in 2/4 time, G minor. It is divided into four staves, each representing a different segment of the piece. The first staff shows measures 1 through 8. The second staff, marked with a circled '5', shows measures 9 through 12. The third staff, marked with a circled '9', shows measures 13 through 16. The fourth staff, marked with a circled '13', shows measures 17 through 20. The melody consists of eighth and quarter notes, with some measures containing beamed eighth notes. There are several instances of the raised fifth (F#) in the melody, notably in measures 4, 10, 14, and 18. The piece concludes with a final cadence in measure 20.

Example 16. A student melody that successfully created strong expectations and fulfilled them at a variety of musical levels

Clearly it is helpful for students to be familiar with concepts of small-scale form (especially phrase, sentence, period, and double period) before embarking on a fight song composition project, and fight song analysis could be an effective way to introduce some of these topics. Although fight song choruses are not harmonically complicated, an instructor will also want introduce a handful of



chromatic chords that appear regularly. Secondary dominant chords are not used as frequently in fight songs as they are in the Classical literature, but tonicizations (particularly of V, IV, and vi) are not rare. Also, the pre-dominant chord that occurs before a fight song's structural cadence is quite likely to include  $b\hat{6}$  in the bass. Sometimes this is just a touch of mode mixture (probably  $iv^6$ ), but often it is an augmented-sixth chord. The fight song genre's two most frequent and stylistically distinctive chromatic chords, though, are almost surely the common-tone diminished seventh chord and the augmented dominant chord. Each of these chords is a natural byproduct of the fight song chorus's ubiquitous tonic expansion combined with motivic chromatic lower neighbors. A  $\hat{5}-\#\hat{4}-\hat{5}$  melodic pattern is very likely to harmonize  $\#\hat{4}$  with a common-tone diminished seventh; V/V is distinctly less typical. A  $\hat{3}-\#\hat{2}-\hat{3}$  melodic pattern might harmonize  $\#\hat{2}$  with a common-tone diminished seventh chord or with an augmented dominant triad, likely in first inversion. The standard  $\hat{2}-\#\hat{2}-\hat{3}$  gesture that often marks a cadence or subphrase ending also uses an augmented dominant, of course — but this pattern is considerably easier for most students to grasp because they immediately recognize  $\#\hat{2}$  as a chromatic passing tone from a familiar diatonic dominant.

Setting aside composition projects for a moment, fight songs might be an ideal vehicle to introduce several of these chords because they are so stylistic. Many curricula cover augmented-six chords, for example, around the same time as sonata form. This is perfectly reasonable, given how often composers employ augmented-sixth chords to strengthen the modulation to the secondary key in a sonata form. However, wouldn't it be easier for students to encounter augmented-sixth chords for the first time in much shorter works that rarely modulate? Similarly, fight songs present a compact and relatively simple framework for common-tone diminished sevenths and altered dominants. Neither chord is especially difficult to understand, but they may seem intimidating when situated within the music of Brahms or Chopin.<sup>17</sup>

I believe that the fight song chorus is an ideal genre to address many features of common-practice art music precisely because it

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<sup>17</sup>There are very short Classical and Romantic compositions that include these chords, but the ones that incorporate them into an otherwise simple context are exceptional, whereas this combination is routine in fight songs. An instructor drawing upon fight songs can easily provide multiple in-class examples while still reserving some for exams.

condenses them into a miniature and inviting package. As I have suggested previously in this article, fight songs provide excellent opportunities to discuss underlying voiceleading, motives, tonic expansion, tonic-to-dominant mapping, various chromatic chords, the broad notion of embellishment (including passing and neighboring chords), sentence structure, period and double period, and the concept of what constitutes a phrase. Incidentally, although my composition project does not require students to read Riepel's treatise, most of the suggestions for a minuet provided by the master are quite applicable to a fight song. For instance, he is shocked to see a thirteen-measure unit and remarks that there should always be an even number of measures. The master suspects that peculiarities in the overall form stem from the student's ignorance of how smaller units (including one- and two-measure subphrases) are used. He cautions that a composition sounds incoherent if the second half doesn't resemble the first half. He recommends a rising and falling contour (although we should note that a sizable minority of fight songs ends  $\hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{7}-\hat{8}$ ), and also exhorts the student to reserve long notes for phrase endings.

The fight song is not regarded as a high art form — but neither was the minuet during Riepel's time. Riepel found the minuet a useful vehicle because it was short, familiar, and could be used to explain broad compositional principles that applied to more respected genres. In the words of Riepel's master:

It is certainly no great glory to compose minuets, but on the other hand it is very exacting. For a *minuet*, as far as its working-out is concerned, *is nothing other than a concerto, an aria, or a symphony*. You'll see this clearly in a few days. So we'll tend to begin in a wholly small and insignificant fashion, but with the aim of achieving from that something greater and more praiseworthy.<sup>18</sup>  
[Riepel's italics]

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<sup>18</sup> Allanbrook, Wye J. (trans.), "Joseph Riepel: From: Fundamentals of Musical Composition," *Source Readings in Music History*, revised edition, edited by Leo Treitler (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 750.

## APPENDICES

Fight song choruses composed by three students exhibit reasonable — but not excessive — similarity.

The image displays four systems of musical notation, each representing a different fight song chorus. Each system includes a vocal line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff). The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is common time (C). The systems are numbered 1, 5, 9, and 13. The piano accompaniment features a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and quarter notes in the left hand, with some chordal textures. The vocal lines are simple, consisting of quarter and half notes.

Appendix A

The image displays a musical score for a piece titled 'Modernizing the Minuet' by Rogers. The score is presented in a three-system format, with measures 17, 21, 25, and 29 marked at the beginning of each system. The music is written for a piano, with a treble clef and a bass clef. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 3/4. The score consists of a single melodic line in the treble clef and a piano accompaniment in the bass clef. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line and chords in the right hand. The melodic line consists of quarter and eighth notes, with some rests. The score ends with a double bar line and a repeat sign at the end of measure 32.

Appendix A (continued)

The image displays a musical score for Appendix B, consisting of three systems of music. Each system is written for three staves: a treble clef staff, a grand piano staff (treble and bass clefs), and a bass clef staff. The music is in a common time signature (C) and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The first system begins with a treble staff melody of quarter notes, a piano accompaniment of chords with eighth-note patterns, and a bass staff with a simple line of notes. The second system, marked with a circled '5', continues the melody and accompaniment. The third system, marked with a circled '9', shows further development of the musical ideas. The fourth system, marked with a circled '13', concludes the piece with a final cadence in the piano and bass staves.

Appendix B

The image displays a musical score for a Minuet, consisting of four systems of music. Each system is numbered at the beginning: 17, 21, 25, and 29. The score is written for a single melodic line (treble clef) and a piano accompaniment (grand staff with treble and bass clefs). The key signature is one flat (B-flat major or D minor), and the time signature is 3/4. The piano accompaniment features a consistent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes with chords. The melodic line consists of eighth and quarter notes. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of measure 29.

Appendix B (continued)

The image displays a musical score for Appendix C, consisting of four systems of music. Each system is written in 6/8 time and includes a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The piano accompaniment is split across a grand staff with treble and bass clefs. The systems are marked with circled numbers 5, 9, and 13, indicating specific measures or phrases. The notation includes various rhythmic values such as eighth and sixteenth notes, rests, and chords. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Appendix C

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