CHAPTER 9

Voice Leading in Four-Part Chorale Writing

TOPICS	Four-Voice Texture	Pedal Bass $^6_4$	Soprano
	Chorale	Parallel P5ths	Alto
	Stylistic Practice	Parallel P8ths	Tenor
	Common Tone	Parallel Unisons	Bass
	Doubling	Crossed Voices	Close Position
	Cadential $^6_4$	Spacing	Open Position
	Passing Bass $^6_4$	Overlap	
	Arpeggiated Bass $^6_4$	Unequal Fifths	

IMPORTANT CONCEPTS

Beginning with this chapter and continuing through volume 1 and much of volume 2, we will place considerable emphasis on the voice-leading practices of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century composers. Four-part writing demonstrates in an uncomplicated fashion the principles that are the basis of compositions from this time period.

Four-Voice Texture

In *four-voice textures,* the interaction of harmony and melody and their equal importance become clear. The four individual melodic lines come together, generating a chord, while maintaining smooth melodic connections from pitch to pitch. We can observe clearly many of the voice-leading conventions that dominate common-practice-period tonal music in eighteenth-century four-voice compositions.

Figure 9.1

Genevan Psalter: Old 124th, mm. 1–4.

F: I   V   I   IV   I   V   vi   IV   V   I

The chord symbols show that each melody tone is harmonized with a triad in the key of F major.

The cadence is perfect authentic.

Notice the melodic contour of the bass voice. It consists mostly of leaps because the bass voice sings the root factor of each of the chords in the phrase. In four-voice textures the bass is usually a harmonic voice that is controlled more by the chords than by melodic considerations. (We will see later how the use of inversions can help smooth out the bass voice.) In contrast to the bass voice, the soprano, alto, and tenor voices move mostly in conjunct motion.

History

Chorale harmonizations reveal many of the basic idioms of four-part writing in the baroque style. The principles that govern chord progression and voice leading are inherent in chorales, and we can view these practices in their simplest forms without the confusion resulting from the study of large-scale works.

Chorales in the Music of Bach

The *chorale* was the congregational hymn in the German Protestant church at the time of J. S. Bach (1685–1750). Chorale melodies of the eighteenth century were derived from a variety of sources: (1) Latin hymns of the Catholic church, (2) pre-Reformation popular hymns, (3) popular songs of the period, and (4) some original hymn tunes composed by Protestant church musicians. Martin Luther (1483–1546), the founder of the German Protestant movement, was a strong believer in the value of congregational singing during church services. Thus, the chorales became the foundation of liturgical music in the Protestant church. J. S. Bach, who spent the majority of his life as a Protestant church musician, employed chorale melodies in many of his compositions. This body of music is generally regarded as the apex of artistic development of chorale-based liturgical music. Many of Bach's cantatas are climaxed by a four-part setting of a chorale tune. Thus, the chorale settings, which we will examine throughout this book, form an important part of the artistic output of Bach and are worthy models for study.

APPLICATIONS

The best way to understand the practices of eighteenth-century voice leading is to examine works by composers of the period. The following phrases from chorale harmonizations by J. S. Bach have furnished models of good voice leading to generations of students. The excerpts from these chorales in Figure 9.2 will be examined in detail to illustrate typical voice-leading practice. The numbers labeled "stylistic practices" will be explained following the initial presentation of the excerpts.

Figure 9.2

1. Bach: "Lobt Gott, ihr Christen, allzugleich" ("Praise God, Ye Christians, All Together"), BWV 376, mm. 1–2 (transposed).

2. Bach: "Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh' darein" ("Oh God, Look Down from Heaven"),
   BWV 2, mm. 1–2.

g:	V	i	vii°⁶	i⁶	i	V⁶	i	V
	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17

Stylistic practice: 1   7   6   5   6   6   1

3. Bach: "Wer weiss, wie nahe mir mein Ende" ("Who Knows How Near My End May
   Be"), BWV 166, mm. 1–3.

g:	i	i	V⁶	i	V	VI	ii°⁶	V	V
	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26

Stylistic practice: 5   6   6   1   4   8   8   5

4. Bach: "Der Tag, der ist so freudenreich" ("This Day Is So Joyful"), BWV 294,
   mm. 1–2 (modified).

G:	I	vi	IV	ii	I	IV	V	I
	27	28	29	30	31	32	33	34

Stylistic practice: 3   3   3   4   1   4   2

5. Bach: "Nun danket alle Gott" ("Now Let Us All Thank God"), BWV 386, mm. 1–2 (transposed).

Analysis of the Chorale Phrases

Although the 42 chords contained in the five phrases in Figure 9.2 do not by any means constitute a sample large enough for a thorough and valid study, they do illustrate some of the important and recurring patterns in voice leading that have become established procedures. A thorough analysis of the five phrases is well worth the effort.

Rather than examining the phrases on a chord-by-chord basis, we can save time by searching through adjacent triads for voice-leading patterns that are repeated regularly. Also, a better understanding results if we search in an organized manner—by classification of root movement.

Stylistic Practices

A *stylistic practice* is a common method for part writing a particular progression. For example, stylistic practices 1 and 2 below refer to chords whose roots are a P5th or P4th apart. There are no fewer than eight examples of stylistic practice 1 in the five phrases. They connect the following root position chords: 3–4, 6–7, 10–11, 16–17, 21–22, 31–32, 38–39, and 41–42.

Figure 9.3

Bach: Excerpts Illustrating Stylistic Practice 1.

Two examples of stylistic practice 2 can be observed in the five phrases. They occur between chord numbers 8–9 and 33–34.

Figure 9.4

Bach: Excerpts Illustrating Stylistic Practice 2.

Root Position

When both chords are in root position, and the two roots lie a perfect 5th or 4th apart:

1. Keep the *common tone* (the tone shared by both triads) and move the remaining two upper voices stepwise to the chord tones of the next triad. If handled correctly, the roots of the chords will be *doubled*.
2. If you cannot keep the common tone, especially when the soprano voice descends scale degrees $\hat{2}$ to $\hat{1}$, move all three upper voices in similar motion to the nearest chord tone. If handled correctly, the roots will be doubled.

Figure 9.5

1. Keep common tone; move other voices by step to nearest chord tone.

2. Do not keep common tone; move all three upper voices in similar motion to nearest chord tone.

The excerpts contain three examples of chord roots that lie a third apart. These connect the chords in Figure 9.2 numbered 27–28, 28–29, and 29–30.

Figure 9.6

Bach: Excerpts Illustrating Stylistic Practice 3.

All adhere to the stylistic practice that is followed when roots lie a third (major or minor) apart:

3. Keep both common tones and move the remaining upper voice stepwise. If handled properly, the roots of the two chords will be doubled.

Figure 9.7

Keep both common tones.

For adjacent chord roots that lie a major or minor second apart, four examples, all following stylistic practice 4 explained in the following paragraph, can be cited. These occur in Figure 9.2 between chords 7–8, 22–23, 30–31, and 32–33.

Figure 9.8

Bach: Excerpts Illustrating Stylistic Practice 4.

When roots lie a second apart:

4. Move the three upper voices in contrary motion to the bass, making sure that each voice moves to the nearest chord tone of the next chord. If handled correctly, the roots of the two chords will be doubled. An exception is the progression V to vi or VI. In this case, double the third factor of the vi or VI triad. Only two upper voices will move in opposite direction to the bass.

Figure 9.9

Exception:

g: iv   V

g: V   VI

Upper voices in contrary
motion to bass.

Double third of VI triad.

Often in the five chorale phrases, two adjacent chords are the same (example: I followed by another I). The second chord is simply a continuation of the first, and the two are not considered a chord progression. Much flexibility is available to you and only two general warnings are necessary. In the five chorale phrases in Figure 9.2, there are 11 examples of repeated triads: 2–3, 4–5, 5–6, 13–14, 18–19, 25–26, 35–36, 36–37, 37–38, 39–40, and 40–41.

Figure 9.10

Bach: Excerpts Illustrating Stylistic Practice 5.

When chords are repeated:

5. Maintain proper doubling and range of voices, and keep the usual order of voices (soprano, alto, tenor, and bass). Otherwise, you are quite free to exchange chord factors among voices. Sometimes a change of position takes place (example: I to I^6).
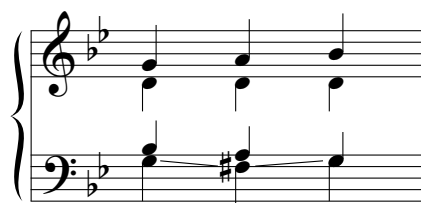
First-Inversion Triads

First-Inversion Triads for Smooth Bass Melodies

First-inversion triads are used for a number of purposes, including to smooth bass lines and to provide melodic motion in repeated chords.

Triads in root position establish stability in the chorale and are considered anchor positions, but if all chorales or hymns were composed only of root positions, bass lines would be disjointed. Stepwise movement would be possible only with adjacent chords that are a step apart (IV to V, V to vi, etc.). One of the reasons first inversions are employed is to provide smooth bass lines with a musical balance of steps and skips.

Figure 9.11

Bach: "Wer weiss, wie nahe mir mein Ende" ("Who Knows How Near My End May Be"), BWV 166, m. 1.

First-Inversion Triads to Provide Melodic Motion

Not only do first-inversion triads diminish the angularity of a bass line, but they may also add another ingredient not available to root positions—they provide an opportunity to incorporate melodic motion in the bass melody.

Figure 9.12

Bach: "Nun danket alle Gott" ("Now Let Us All Thank God"), BWV 386, m. 1 (transposed).

A number of other fundamental reasons exist for the use of first-inversion triads, but we will discuss them as we find them in music literature.

The five chorale phrases that Bach harmonized (Figure 9.2) contain nine first-inversion triads. Careful examination of all of these examples indicates that you must treat each first-inversion triad in relation to surrounding chords. Therefore, they do not form preferred patterns of voice leading as in the case of root-position triads. First-inversion involvement occurs in the following groups of chords: 1–3, 4–6, 11–14, 14–16, 19–21, 23–25, 36–38, 39–41.

Figure 9.13

Bach: Excerpts Illustrating Stylistic Practices 6, 7, and 8.

One general stylistic practice statement suffices for voice leading in first-inversion major and minor triads as they occur in chorales or hymns:

6. Double any triad factor that facilitates smooth voice leading. Favored notes are the soprano (found often) and bass (slightly less common). Never double the leading tone (seventh scale degree). Observe general recommendations regarding voice ranges, order of voices, and spacing.

The vii°6 Triad

The leading-tone triad is nearly always found in first inversion and progresses most often to the tonic. You should think of it as having a dominant function because the two (V and vii°6) have two pitches in common (in C major: G–B–D and B–D–F).

Voice leading for the vii°6 triad:

7. Double the third (bass note) or fifth factor. The bass note is preferred. Move all voices with as much stepwise movement as possible. Avoid melodic skips of a tritone.

Chord 12, shown in both Figures 9.2 and 9.14, represents typical voice leading for the vii°6 triad—the bass note (the third of the triad) is doubled.

Figure 9.14

Bach: "Ach Gott, vom Himmel sieh' darein" ("Oh God, Look Down from Heaven"), BWV 2, m. 1.

Doubled 3rd
(bass note)

g: i   vii°⁶   i⁶
    11   12   13

One final detail remains. Chord 24 of the five chorale phrases (Figure 9. 2) is a ii°⁶ triad that has not yet been discussed. Both vii°⁶ and ii°⁶ are diminished triads, but they do not function in a similar manner: vii°⁶ is related to dominant function and usually progresses to the tonic; ii°⁶ has pre-dominant function and precedes the dominant.

Voice leading for the ii°⁶ triad in minor keys:

8. Double the third (bass note) or the root, which will be in an upper voice. When approaching or leaving the ii°⁶ triad, make voice leading stepwise whenever possible and avoid melodic tritones.

Chord 24, shown in both Figures 9.2 and 9.15, represents typical voice leading for the ii°⁶ triad—the bass note (the third of the triad) is doubled.

Figure 9.15

Bach: "Wer weiss, wie nahe mir mein Ende" ("Who Knows How Near My End May Be"), BWV 166, m. 2.

Doubled 3rd
(bass note)

g: VI   ii°⁶   V⁶
    23   24   25

Second-Inversion Triads

You should use the second inversion of any triad with extreme caution because of its unstable nature. The chord contains the interval of a fourth and cannot be used in the functional way that typifies both root position and first-inversion triads. The second-inversion position of the tonic chord is common, but that of other triads is found only occasionally.

You should employ second-inversion triads ($^6_4$ chords) *only* in one of the following ways:

Cadential—The tonic $^6_4$ chord resolves to the V chord at the cadence. Used in this manner, the $^6_4$ chord is a decoration of the V chord. The bass note is doubled (Figure 9.16a).

Passing Bass—The bass note (5th factor) of the $^6_4$ acts as a passing tone. The passing bass may be found as a tonic $^6_4$ between the IV and IV^6 chords (Figure 9.16b) or as a dominant $^6_4$ between the I and I$^6_4$ chords (Figure 9.16c). The bass note is doubled.

Arpeggiated Bass—The bass note (5th factor) participates in an arpeggiation of the same chord (Figure 9.16d). This usage of $^6_4$ chords occurs occasionally with triads other than the tonic. The bass note is doubled.

Pedal Bass—Also known as *stationary bass* or neighboring tone chords, the bass note (5th factor) is preceded and followed by the same tone and is placed between two root positions of the same triad. This type also occurs occasionally with the IV$^6_4$ (Figure 9.16e) as well as the tonic (figure 9.16f). The bass note is doubled.

Figure 9.16

Cadential: Passing Bass: Arpeggiated Bass: Pedal Bass:

C: ii^6 (I$^6_4$) V I   IV (I$^6_4$) IV^6 I (V$^6_4$) I^6 I $^{(6)}$ $^{(6_4)}$ I (IV$^6_4$) I   V (I$^6_4$) V

Summary of Stylistic Practices for $^6_4$ Chords

9. a. Except under unusual circumstances, double the bass note (5th of the chord).
    b. Approach and depart from $^6_4$ chords with as few skips as possible.
    c. Only in the arpeggiated $^6_4$ chord is the bass note approached or left by skip.
    d. Use only the four types of $^6_4$ chords described in this chapter: cadential, passing bass, arpeggiated bass, and pedal bass.

Exceptions to Stylistic Practices

As long as you follow stylistic practices 1 through 9, you need not worry about the following guidelines. But occasionally, voice-leading conditions make it impossible to apply stylistic practices. So, although stylistic practices are the norm, they must not be considered unbreakable laws. When you cannot complete a phrase with conventional part writing, you will need further guidelines to prevent you from making unstylistic or unmusical mistakes.

Unstylistic Departures

Inviolate

There are no exceptions to these practices under any conditions:

1. Avoid *parallel perfect octaves* (P8ths), *parallel perfect fifths* (P5ths), and *parallel unisons* (P1s). Successive perfect intervals containing the same pitches are not considered parallel.
2. Never double the leading tone of the scale.
3. Do not write pitches outside the range of a particular voice. Keep all four voices within their ranges at all times.
4. Avoid the melodic augmented second (A2) and fourth (A4) in all voices.

Figure 9.17 shows examples of the inviolate unstylistic departures.

Figure 9.17

| 1. Parallel perfect 5ths | (Same pitches OK) | 2. Doubled leading tone | 3. Tenor and alto out of range | 4. Melodic augmented 2nd |

OK

G: I V G: I I G: V I G: vi g: V VI

Occasionally Broken

Observe these practices carefully unless particular situations permit no other alternative:

5. Avoid *crossing voices.* Keep voices in proper order (from highest to lowest): soprano, alto, tenor, bass. On rare occasions, crossing of voices is justified if it improves voice leading.
6. *Spacing* between adjacent voices should not exceed an octave in the three upper voices. The spacing between bass and tenor voices can be of any reasonable interval (never greater than two octaves).
7. Do not *overlap* two adjacent voices more than a whole step. An overlap occurs between two chords when one voice moves above or below the previous pitch of an adjacent voice. You may employ overlaps of a half or whole step if it improves voice leading.
8. Do not move in the same direction to perfect intervals in the two outer voices (soprano and bass). Some theorists think that such motion, especially in outer voices, creates the effect of parallel perfect intervals.
9. *Unequal fifths,* P5ths to d5ths or vice versa, are found in chorale harmonizations and may be used sparingly. The progression vii°⁶ to I, under certain circumstances, requires the use of unequal fifths.
10. Melodic augmented seconds and fourths are almost never found in choral literature of the eighteenth century.
    a. The melodic descending d5th appears sometimes in bass voices, but rarely in the soprano.
    b. The d4th is a diatonic interval in the harmonic minor scale (from the third down to seventh scale degrees) and may be written in isolated situations.
11. The leading tone should progress upward to the tonic when it is in an outer voice (soprano or bass).

Figure 9.18 shows examples of the preceding occasionally broken unstylistic departures.

Figure 9.18

| 5. Voices out of order | 6. Spacing alto–soprano | 7. Overlap soprano–alto | 8. Hidden parallels in outer voices |

G: I G: V G: vi I⁶ G: I⁶ vi

9. Unequal 5ths alto–soprano 10. Diminished 5th skip in bass Diminished 4th skip in tenor 11. Leading tone in outer voice

g: vii°⁶   i⁶   g: iv   V⁶   g: i⁶   V   G: V⁶   I

Voice Ranges

In chorale writing, the voices are divided into four general categories: *soprano, alto, tenor,* and *bass.* In Figure 9.19, whole notes indicate the best usable ranges. Black notes represent pitch ranges that should be used sparingly.

Figure 9.19

Bass: Tenor: Alto: Soprano:

Voice Spacing

The voice spacing of individual chords in four-voice textures is said to be either close or open. Chords in *close position* have less than an octave between the soprano and tenor (Figure 9.20a), whereas chords in open position have an octave or more between the soprano and tenor (Figure 9.20b).

Figure 9.20

a. Close position: b. Open position:

G: I   G: I

Soprano and tenor   Soprano and tenor
less than octave apart   octave or more apart

You can find a summary of stylistic practices and voice-leading guidelines in Appendix A.