The Basics of Four-Part Chorale Style

We begin the study of harmony with a four-voiced texture called chorale style. Two goals define this style: independence of voices and definition of tonality.

To create music in chorale style, we must control both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the texture. Voice leading controls the relationship between voices. Rules of thumb concerning doubling and chord voicing shape the vertical disposition of the voices. A variant of chorale style called keyboard style alters both voice-leading and voicing rules to make practical performance by two hands at a keyboard.

THE FOUR VOICES

The study of harmony usually begins with a study of chorale style. Although strictly limited in scope, chorale style does provide basic training in the principles that govern a polyphonic (that is, many voiced) texture. Those principles, along with the techniques associated with them, are called voice leading.

Disposition of the Four Voices

Each part of a four-part texture is called a voice. The name and ranges of these voices are derived from the four standardized singing ranges: soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. You notate the four voices on a grand staff.

* arrows point to doubled pitch classes
With the exception noted below (see "Keyboard Style"), the four voices operate within restricted ranges, as shown in example 5-2.

We place the soprano and alto on the treble staff with the soprano on top. All soprano stems ascend. All alto stems descend. This makes the two voices visually distinct. We place the tenor and bass on the bass staff. All tenor stems ascend, and all bass stems descend.

**Range of the Four Voices**

With the exception noted below (see "Keyboard Style"), the four voices operate within restricted ranges, as shown in example 5-2.

![Ex. 5-2--Ranges of the Four Voices](image)

**Rhythm**

In chorale style, all four voices move in *rhythmic unison*, that is, *each voice moves at the same time as every other voice*. A succession of four-voice chords results.

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**CHORD CONSTRUCTION**

We use scale-degree triads to form the chords that result from the movement of the four voices.

**Complete Triads**

The bulk of a four-part texture consists of complete triads. Given a consonant, root-position triad, however, *you may omit the fifth* if this results in smoother voice leading. *You may not omit the third.*
Appendix L discusses the so-called horn fifths, which are a common exception to this last rule and are found in instrumental music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Spacing

The distance between adjacent voices may not exceed an octave, except between tenor and bass.

OPEN POSITION

Disposing the voices evenly across the staff creates a chord in open position.

CLOSED POSITION

Disposing the voices so that the upper three are as close together as possible creates a chord in closed position.

Doubling

Given the three pitch classes of a triad distributed among four voices, we must give one pitch class to two different voices. When two voices have the same pitch class we say that they are doubling each other (see example 5-1).

RULES FOR DOUBLING

The primary rule for doubling is simple: Double the most stable notes of the triad. We apply this rule by considering the following alternatives in order:

- **Doubled Root.** Double the root of the triad, when possible.
- **Doubled Fifth.** Double the fifth of the triad if this is warranted by some voice leading consideration.
- **Doubled Third.** Double the third only for the most compelling voice leading reasons.

Remember: In a V or vii, never double 7\(^\flat\). The leading tone is far too unstable to be doubled. It demands a resolution to 1\(^\flat\), which, if supplied in both voices, would lead to (forbidden) parallel octaves (see "Forbidden Parallel Motions," below).

ALTERNATIVES TO DOUBLING

- **Tripled Root.** If the fifth is omitted from the triad, and if that triad is in root position, you may triple the root, that is, place the root in three of the four voices, one of which is the bass. The remaining voice will, of course, have the third. As rule, composers reserve the tripled root for the end of a composition or, less often, for the end of a phrase.
• Seventh Chords. In a later chapter we will discuss chords called seventh chords. Seventh chords contain four distinct pitch classes and therefore do not require doubling.

Example 5-1, above, illustrates these principles of doubling.

Keyboard Style

For performance on a keyboard instrument, we can use a variant of chorale style called keyboard style. In keyboard style, the upper three voices remain in closed position. At the same time, we notate all three (soprano, alto, and tenor) on the treble staff. As a result, a musician can perform all three upper voices with the right hand, leaving the bass to the left. The extreme closed position of the upper three voices—a position caused by the size of the hand—often places the tenor voice higher than we would normally find in chorale style.

Ex. 5-3—Example 5-1 in Keyboard Style

VOICE LEADING

To create a four-voice texture in chorale or keyboard style, you must learn how to control each voice, as well as the relationship between the voices. The principles and techniques involved in this control are referred to as voice leading. From the student's point of view, voice leading has two main goals: to establish and maintain the independence of the voices, and to establish and maintain a clear sense of tonality.

Soprano and Bass

The soprano and bass, or outer voices, define the chorale texture. The inner voices (alto and tenor), serve a supporting role. We must control the relation between the outer voices (see "Simultaneous Motion," below) precisely. Soprano and bass must not only be strong in themselves, but the relationship between them must be strong as well.

Function of the Individual Voice
Each voice forms a melody. The melodies in the outer voices are prominent, those of the inner voices supportive. These melodies move primarily by step, or conjunct motion. They move only occasionally by skip, or disjunct motion.

**CONJUNCT MOTION**

When an individual voice moves by seconds, it moves conjunctly. The seconds may be consonant or dissonant.

- **Consonant Seconds.** A voice may move by any number of consecutive major or minor seconds.
- **Dissonant Seconds.** But a voice may not move by an augmented second. As we saw in Chapter 3, augmented seconds are ambiguous, unstable, and, therefore,

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permitted:  
m2  m2  aug. 2

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Dissonant.

Ex. 5-4--Conjunct Motion

**DISJUNCT MOTION**

When an individual voice moves by an interval greater than a second, it moves disjunctly or by skip. (Some theorists call a skip a "leap." For our purposes, "skip" and "leap" are the same.)

- **Consonant Skips.** A voice may skip any consonant interval not larger than an octave.
- **Dissonant Skips.** Disjunct motion by a dissonant interval is possible, but strictly controlled. A voice may skip up a minor seventh if there is some compelling voice leading reason to do so, and if it then moves down by consonant step. A voice may skip down a diminished fifth if there is some compelling voice leading reason to do so, and if it then moves up by a consonant step.
- **Successive Skips.** Since conjunct motion should be the norm, you should try to avoid successive skips. When used, successive skips work best if small and in opposite directions (example 5-5a). Still, you may use successive skips in the same direction if the combined skips do not exceed an octave, or if the combined skips do not outline a dissonant interval (example 5-5b). Commonly, successive skips outline (or arpeggiate) a triad (examples 5-5c and 5-5d) and a step in the
opposite direction follows the second skip.

Ex. 5-5--Successive Skips

- Approaching and Leaving Skips. As a rule, it is best to approach and leave any skip by step in a direction opposite to that skip. If this is impractical, you should at least follow the skip with a step in the same direction. The larger (or more dissonant) the skip, the more strictly this rule applies.

Ex. 5-6--Disjunct Motion

Simultaneous Motion

We can distinguish among four possible relationships between a pair of voices. Voice leading considerations grade these from weak to strong as follows: parallel motion, similar motion, oblique motion, and contrary motion.

PARALLEL MOTION

When two voices move in the same direction by the same interval, they move in parallel motion. Parallel motion is the weakest relative motion.

Ex. 5-7--Parallel Motion
You should *avoid parallel motion between outer voices*. Voices that move in parallel lose a degree of independence. Parallel motion between inner voices or between an inner voice and an outer voice is fine, providing the parallel interval is not from the list of forbidden parallels.

Parallel motion in perfect unisons, octaves or fifths between any two voices is forbidden (see "Forbidden Parallels," below).

**SIMILAR MOTION**

When two voices move in the same direction but *not* by the same interval, they move in similar motion. Similar motion is slightly stronger than parallel motion.

![Ex. 5-8--Similar Motion](image)

Avoid *similar motion between outer voices when moving into a perfect consonance* (see "Hidden Parallels," below). Similar motion between inner voices or between an outer voice and an inner voice is fine.

**OBLIQUE MOTION**

When one voice moves while the other stays on the same note, *oblique motion* results.

![Ex. 5-9--Oblique Motion](image)

Oblique motion has the advantage of emphasizing the independence of the voices involved. For this reason, oblique motion is relatively strong. The moving voice, however, takes precedence over the stationary one. Thus, to emphasize both the independence and the equality of each voice, we look to *contrary motion*.

**CONTRARY MOTION**

When two voices move in opposite directions, *contrary motion* results.
Contrary motion is the strongest type of motion, since the two voices remain both equal and separate. Motion between outer voices should be primarily contrary.

FORBIDDEN PARALLEL MOTIONS

When voices move in parallel, one voice seems to track the other. The two sound less like equal voices than one voice imitated or doubled by another. When the interval that separates the two voices is a perfect consonance, the parallel voices fuse, losing any remaining sense of independence. Thus, tradition forbids the use of the three stronger perfect consonances—the unison, the fifth, and the octave—in parallel motion.

In the Bach Chorales, parallel perfect fourths appear in the upper three voices with regularity and in every conceivable configuration. Despite this, some theory texts (for example, Piston’s *Harmony*), allow parallel fourths only when parallel thirds occur beneath them. Bach breaks this "rule" as often as he keeps it.

- **Forbidden Parallel Unisons.** A pair of voices may move into or out of a unison, *but not by parallel motion*.

Parallel motion by the unison destroys all independence of voices. When moving in parallel by the unison, two voices merge into a single series of pitches.
• **Forbidden Parallel Octaves.** Motion by parallel octaves creates the sense, not of two voices, but of one voice doubled at the octave. Since this destroys the independence of the "doubling" voice, we must avoid parallel octaves completely.

![Ex. 5-12--Forbidden Parallel Octaves](image)

• **Forbidden Parallel Perfect Fifths.** Like octaves, fifths in parallel convey the sense of a single voice doubled, and therefore parallel perfect fifths should be completely avoided (see example 5-13a). Two voices may move in parallel from a perfect fifth to a *diminished* fifth *if* the notes of the diminished fifth resolve (see example 5-13b). *Remember:* Diminished intervals resolve inward.

![Ex. 5-13--Forbidden Parallel Fifths](image)

These rules apply to two voices moving in parallel motion. Given two consecutive chords of a four-voice texture, each will usually contain a perfect octave and fifth. This is not a problem unless the repeated interval occurs between the same two voices *and* the voices move in parallel.
Ex. 5-14--Permitted Successive Fifths

Successive fifths that result from repeated notes pose no problem. In example 5-14a, the first fifth is between alto and bass, the second between alto and soprano. These fifths are not parallel fifths because they are not between the same two voices. Therefore, they are permitted. In example 5-14b, the first and second fifth are between the same two voices (alto and bass) but they do not move. This is not parallel motion but repetition. These repeated fifths are permitted.

- **Hidden Parallel Octaves.** If, in the outer voices, we approach an octave by similar motion we create hidden octaves. These implicit octaves weaken the independence of our two most important voices. For this reason, avoid such voice leading, except when the soprano moves by step. A direct step in the upper voice destroys the implicit parallels that otherwise might result.

Ex. 5-15--Hidden Parallel Octaves

**Voice Crossing and Overlap**

Parallel motion is not the only challenge to the independence of voices. Registral confusion can lead to an equally serious loss of independence.

- **Voice Crossing.** As a rule, adjacent voices should not cross. That is, the alto should not be higher than the soprano, nor the tenor higher than the alto, nor the bass higher than the tenor. When adjacent voices switch position, a voice crossing results. In chorale-style literature, composers occasionally cross voices (and this, most often, in the inner voices). As a student, however, you will do best to avoid voice crossings, especially voice crossings that involve an outer voice. Most theory texts forbid voice crossings. **Voice crossings do not correct forbidden parallels.**
Ex. 5-16--Voice Crossings

- **Voice Overlap.** When the lower of two adjacent voices moves to a pitch higher than the previous pitch in the upper voice, we have a *voice overlap*. Voice overlaps occur regularly in the Bach Chorales. Many theory texts, however, forbid them. Since voice overlaps easily lead to a confusion of voices, and since they are usually unnecessary, you will do best to avoid them. *In keyboard style, however, voice overlaps are both unavoidable and appropriate.*

Ex. 5-17--Voice Overlaps

**General Guidelines for Composing Inner Voices**

In *realizing*—that is, fleshing out—a four-voice texture, you should concern yourselves primarily with the outer voices. If you create strong voice leading between soprano and bass, you will run into few problems realizing the inner voices.

**GENERAL VOICING GUIDELINES**

Whether to place a chord in open or closed position is a question of *voicing*. As a rule, you should keep the inner voices high. This leads both to a clearer sound and more easily realized part writing. Leave your voices room to maneuver, however. Continuous closed voicings force frequent voice overlaps and crossings. So, you are best off mixing closed with open voicings, favoring—all things being equal—the voicing that puts the inner voices higher. *(In keyboard style, however, closed positions dominates, since overlaps are unprolematic.)*
GUIDELINES FOR COMPOSING THE INDIVIDUAL VOICE

Broad rules regulate the composition of individual upper voices. (As we will see in the next chapter, the bass is a special case.) Govern your specific decisions by the following rules of thumb:

**Rule:** When possible, repeat a note from one harmony to the next. If repetition is impossible, move by step. If you can neither repeat a note nor move by step, only then should you move by skip.

**Rule:** If you must skip, skip by the smallest (consonant) interval possible.

Only when the above options fail should you consider a large or dissonant skip. If you follow these guidelines *in the order given*, you will find that skips are seldom necessary and that note repetition and conjunct motion are the norm within the upper voices.

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**Summary**

The four voices of chorale style are soprano, alto, tenor, and bass. Except in keyboard style, adhere to their conventional ranges.

In creating music in chorale style, use complete triads. (If you omit any triad note, it should be the fifth.) Double (or—if omitting the fifth—triple) the root of the triad. Double the fifth only for some compelling voice leading reason. Avoid doubling the third of a triad except in very special contexts (described in Chapter 7). Do not double the leading tone ($7^\flat$) in a V or vii.

Avoid parallel perfect unisons, fifths, and octaves completely. You may use parallel perfect fourths as long as they do not involve the bass. (If you are working from Piston’s *Harmony*, however, parallel fourths must always be accompanied by parallel thirds in a lower voice.) Avoid voice crossings and voice overlaps. When possible, move by step.

Concern yourself primarily with the outer voices—the soprano and the bass. Maintain the independence of each and keep the relationship between them strong.