

# 1 – Melodic Principles

The study of counterpoint is fundamentally concerned with melody. Most music theorists define counterpoint as the art of combining two or more melodic lines, but if one is going to either comprehend or create counterpoint with more than one melodic line - a good place to start is in understanding a single melodic line. The following melodic principles are not unique to music of the Baroque era which is the focus of this study of counterpoint. Much tonal music, both in the classical world as well as popular music styles, adheres to these same principles.

## STEP PROGRESSION

One characteristic that a number of fine melodies share is a perceptible *step progression*. This refers to an ascending or descending sequence of non-consecutive pitches that forms the “skeleton” of the melody. The melody seen in example 1-1 has an overall descending *contour* that is driven by the easily perceived descending step progression, which is marked by the scale degree numbers above the music.

Ex. 1-1 G. F. Handel: “Sonata op.1 No. 6, Allegro”



Not every note in the original melody is a part of this background step progression, and if they were it would be too predictable to be interesting. It is the blend of the structural notes with the merely ornamental notes that lends both direction and charm to a lot of good melodies.

## GAP FILL PRINCIPLE

Another important concept in melodic writing is the importance of filling melodic “gaps.” A gap is simply a leap either up or down. After a sizable melodic skip (or gap) the ear wants to hear the gap filled in. This seems particularly true when the leap is ascending. In Handel’s theme there are a number of leaps, and after each one the melody changes direction and fills in some of the notes that were skipped over by the preceding leap. In some cases the gaps are filled by step-wise motion in the opposite direction (e.g., number 5 – 4), and in others the leap is filled in by a leap in the opposite direction (e.g., number 7 – 6). In bar 1 of this theme there are two ascending leaps in succession, when this happens the leaps should always outline a triad, as this G-D-G sequence does. It is this octave gap from G to G that generates the remainder of the melody, which fundamentally serves to fill in the steps between the low G to the high G by gradually wafting back to the low G again in bar 4. *After a leap in one direction the melodic line should change direction, the larger the leap, the more critical this principle becomes.*

## TENDENCY TONES

Another phenomenon that is found in ex. 1-1 is *tendency tones*. Certain scale degrees are less stable than others. The best known being the aptly named “leading tone.” The 7<sup>th</sup> scale degree is only a half-step below the tonic and has an undeniable tendency to resolve up to the

tonic. Like gravity, the tones in a tonic triad exert a gravitational pull on notes close to them. This is especially true when the notes are only a half-step apart. You can see in ex. 1-1 that the F# resolves to G across the barline. Another tendency tone, particularly in minor keys, is scale degree 6, which needs to resolve down to scale degree 5. This is clearly felt in bar 2 where the Eb falls down to D. Scale degree 4 is another tendency tone, although less so in a minor key in which 4 is a whole step above 3. The C's in bar 3 have a latent tension in them until they fall down into scale degree 3 in bar 4. In major keys these intervals change, and scale degree 4 in a major key has a much more powerful drive to resolve down to 3, as there is only a half step between 4 and 3 in minor keys. *Tendency tones are notes that are not part of the tonic triad which need to resolve to scale degrees 1, 3 or 5. Those cases that involve a half-step distance are the most potent tendency tones.*

Ex. 1-2 – J.S. Bach: “Concerto for Two Violins, I. Allegro”

The image shows two staves of musical notation. The first staff contains five notes with scale degrees 1, 8, 7, b7, and 6 written above them. Below the staff are four chord symbols: Dmi: i, V7, V7/iv, and IV. The second staff contains six notes with scale degrees b6, 5, 4, 3, 2, and 1 written above them. Below the staff are six chord symbols: iiø7, V6, iv, i, V, and i.

The theme found in example 1-2 contains a very similar step-progression to that found in Example 1-1. One key feature that is found in this theme that is typical of much 18<sup>th</sup> century music is the way in which a chord progression is clearly outlined by the melody. Although there are a number of skips in this phrase each leap is from a chord tone to another chord tone. These skips clearly outline the harmonies with a new chord on each strong beat. Near the end the harmonic rhythm increases to one chord per beat.

In the melody in ex. 1-2 there are a few spots where two leaps follow one another in the same direction (e.g., bar 1, beats 3 & 4; and bar 3, beats 1 & 2), which seems to be ignoring the gap fill principle. This sometimes happens, but only when the leaps outline a triad or seventh chord as it does in this melody. Notice too that the melodic interval leading to each strong beat (beats 1 and 3 in common time) is usually a step-wise connection. In general leaps occur during a chord's duration, but when the harmony changes the connections are by step.

The melody in Ex. 1-2 also has a *range* of just over an octave, from the highest note, D to the lowest note C#. Despite some notable exceptions most melodies have a range of about an octave, due no doubt to the natural range of the human voice.

Example 1-3 is another Bach theme, this one a fugue subject in a major key. It too has a clear step progression, but this one ascends. It haltingly makes its way up to scale degree 5 in bar 4 and then descends rather quickly back to the leading tone. This fugue subject is also a good lesson in tendency tones in major keys, in particular the way that Bach seems to pause the rhythmic flow on scale degree 4 (in bar 2) and again on scale degree 6 (in bar 3). This has the

effect of heightening the tension associated with these two tendency tones, both of which resolve down by step on the following downbeats.

Ex. 1-3 J. S. Bach: W.T.C Book 1, Fugue 15

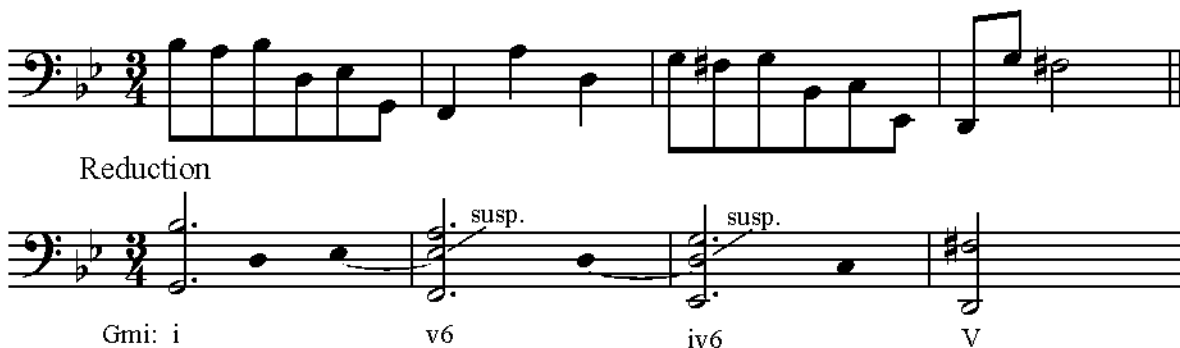


Most effective melodies will have a sense of *climax*, which often is simply the highest note in the melody. Usually these climactic pitches are reached by a step progression. In ex. 1-1 and ex. 1-2 the climax is found near the beginning of the phrase and the rest of the melody completes the descent from this high point. In example 1-3 the climax occurs closer to the end. To be most effective the high point should be sounded only once, since repeating the high point seems to create the desire to hear the next higher pitch.

### COMPOUND MELODY

A common trait of many 18<sup>th</sup> century melodies is known as *compound melody*. This refers to a single melodic line which suggests the presence of two or more simpler melodic strands within it. J.S. Bach's Menuet II from his "First Suite for Cello" is an especially striking example of compound melody.

Ex. 1-4 J.S. Bach: "First Suite for Solo Cello, Menuet 2"



Bach's original music is seen in the upper staff, and is remarkable for its range and for the number of leaps it contains, many of which are in the same direction and seem to contradict the "gap fill" principle. Clearly this melody would be very hard to sing. However, it is not hard to understand the sense of this passage – it consists of three melodic strands, each of which is very step-wise within itself. Compound melody of this sort is a common feature of much of the music of Bach and Handel. The lowest strand is the bass line, G, F, Eb, D and the highest strand contains the lower neighboring tone figure and moves in parallel tenths with the bass line. The middle part is more independent and oscillates above and below D and suggests a pair of suspensions. The staff beneath the cello part is a notational reduction of the phrase that reveals the three strands of the melody and their step-wise connections. A harmonic analysis is also provided.

This phrase uses a harmonic progression that is heard time and again in Baroque music, and in fact is still heard in current popular music. The use of the minor dominant chord is often

considered a mistake in theory class, but it is very often used to connect a minor tonic chord in root position to a major dominant chord in root position. In these cases the v6 chord is followed by a iv6 or VI chord in root position to harmonize scale degree 6. The minor dominant chord is virtually always used in first inversion in Baroque music.

### OTHER PROBLEMS IN MELODIC WRITING

Good 18<sup>th</sup> century melodic writing avoids certain melodic intervals and limits other factors as well. Although exceptions can be found to the following points, they are nonetheless valid for your study of counterpoint.

*Avoid augmented melodic intervals.* This most often occurs in minor keys between scale degree 6 and 7, the leading tone. But it can also include other augmented intervals such as between 4 and 7 in a major key. On the other hand, the inversion of an augmented 2<sup>nd</sup> leap, the diminished 7<sup>th</sup>, is not forbidden, and is in fact almost a signature sound of Baroque music. Notice that after the leap of a diminished 7<sup>th</sup> the next note resolves by half-step in the opposite direction of the leap.

Ex. 1-5 – augmented and diminished melodic intervals

The image shows three musical phrases on a single staff. The first phrase, labeled 'Poor Aug. 2nd', shows an augmented second interval between two notes. The second phrase, labeled 'Poor Aug. 4th', shows an augmented fourth interval between two notes. The third phrase, labeled 'Good Dim. 7th', shows a diminished seventh interval between two notes, with a half-step resolution in the opposite direction of the leap.

*Use more stepwise note successions than leaps.* Most melodies consist of about 75% stepwise connections from one note to the next, and the remaining 25% are leaps used in the manner discussed in this chapter.

*Interval Restrictions:* In general leaps up to a perfect 5<sup>th</sup> are fine unless they are augmented intervals. But other considerations include:

- a) don't use leaps greater than an octave in either direction;
- b) avoid leaps of major 7ths in either direction;
- c) minor 7<sup>th</sup> leaps should be used only in ascending leaps, rarely in descending motion;

*Avoid melodies with too narrow a range.* If a melody is too limited in range it will not achieve a sense of climax, and will probably grow tedious from repeating the same few notes.

*Rhythmic Considerations:*

a) most good melodies have a limited number of different rhythmic values and this 'recycling' of rhythmic patterns lends unity to most melodies. Example 1-3 is a good example of this. There are really only two rhythmic figures, one an eighth followed by 4 sixteenth notes and the other four eighths followed by a quarter. These two rhythmic figures are 'recycled' throughout the entire composition. In fact the rhythm found in bars 3 and 4 is an *augmented retrograde* of the rhythm heard twice in bar one. The term *retrograde* means that it is played in reverse order, and the term *augmented* means that the rhythmic values are doubled.

b) Rhythmic ‘forward motion’ is achieved by having smaller rhythmic values on weak beats leading into strong beats, which will often have longer rhythmic values. Notice how much better the rhythmic forward motion of Ex. 6a is compared to Ex. 6b below. 6b is poor because it seems to keep halting, most noticeably on beats 2 and 4. Also, the rhythm in bar two of 6b is unusual, being the reverse form of a very common rhythmic figure – no doubt uncommon because it reverses the more natural pattern of two short notes after a longer note.

Ex. 1-6 - Rhythmic Forward Motion



To review some of the key points in this chapter the following melody has a number of problems in it that are enumerated below.

Ex. 1-7 - A terrible melody



- a) the ascending gap from notes 1 – 2 is not filled in by descending motion.
- b) there is an augmented 2<sup>nd</sup> from note 3 to 4.
- c) notes 5 to 6 are a descending leap of a seventh.
- d) note 15 is a leading tone, but it never resolves up to the tonic
- e) note 16 is the 4<sup>th</sup> scale degree which also doesn't resolve down to scale degree 3.
- f) notes 15 to 16 is an augmented 4<sup>th</sup> leap
- g) notes 15 – 17 are consecutive leaps in the same direction which don't outline a triad.
- h) the highest note 'C' is sounded 3 times, defeating the sense of a climax.
- i) the harmonic background is not clear
- j) all of the leaps across barlines inhibits the connection of the line in these places.
- k) the rhythmic forward motion is hindered by the presence of slower rhythmic values on the weak beats in many places, especially on the last beat of each measure.

Note: The diminished 5<sup>th</sup> leap from notes 6 to 7 is fine since the Ab resolves by step in a contrary direction to the preceding leap.