Music 11, 7/20/06

Texture: Homophony and Polyphony

Homophony: 1 distinct tune + background harmony (like an accompaniment).

In a piece of music with a homophonic texture, the harmonies often unfold over time. That is to say that the members of a triad, for example, may not be lined-up all the time, or articulated simultaneously. Think of "Heart and Soul," in which the accompaniment has a "bouncy/skippy" rhythm—the bass notes and the others that make the harmonies as they pass are not struck at the same time.

Polyphony: more than one "melodic" line running together. (In other words,) Several tunes going along at the same time.

In a polyphonic texture, there is often a very straightforward sense of harmonic logic, but this is the result of the simultaneous melodies. Multiple lines, in their coordination, express harmony.

Even a single melodic line can imply harmony. In fact, melodies are often constructed so that harmony can be sensed. This is achieved by "outlining" triads melodically. Having notes that belong to the harmony fall on strong beats and those that do not fit into the harmony on weak beats, the triad can be sensed. Bach does this a lot—he "melodicizes" triads (harmonies).

Inversions

The root-position triad is the most stable. Why? Because the perfect fifth formed with the lowest-sounding note is more reposeful than when the bass forms a more "distant" note (remember the overtone series). Ending a phrase on a root-position triad is more satisfying than otherwise.

Why would one want a less stable sounding chord (or an inversion)? Color. Drama. To inspire a sense of further motion.

Figured Bass

There are two types of notation that we commonly use to represent chords:
1. Roman Numeral: tells that scale degree the chord is *rooted* on. A V chord has ^5 as its *root*. Note: the root of the chord is not always the lowest-sounding pitch in a chord. This does not matter in terms of the Roman Numeral. No matter "where" the root is sounding in a chord, it is still the *root*.
2. Arabic Numeral: tells what member of the chord is in the lowest sounding position (or, in other words, what inversion, if any, the chord is in). (Actually, the Arabic numerals tell what intervals above the bass note the other pitches form, but let's keep it simple, OK?)

If the figured bass has the following numbers, they are in specific inversions:

6 1^{st} inversion triad
6,4 2^{nd} inversion triad

6,5 1^{st} inversion seventh chord
4,3 2^{nd} inversion seventh chord
4,2 3^{rd} inversion seventh chord

no figures = the harmony is in root position (the root of the harmony is in the bass).

To be more technical, we could use more Arabic numerals to indicate the presence of *all* the chord members for any given bass note, but common practice has led us to a kind of shorthand. For now, the above list should be memorized. In future lessons on functional harmony, these numbers might take on a more meaningful definition…

Seventh Chords

Seventh chords have four members: root, third, fifth and seventh.

Even a major triad, which can sound extremely stable and "happy" will become highly volatile when a seventh is added on top of it. This is because a new note in a chord makes new intervals with all the notes that are already there—and the seventh forms some very unstable intervals, or *dissonances*.

A major triad with a minor seventh is commonly known as a *dominant seventh* chord. It is by far the most common in tonal music, and is even native to the major scale when built on ^5 (which is why it is called *dominant* sevcnth). Because of the unique dissonance present in the dominant seventh chord, it must connect to its neighbors in context in specific ways. Its dissonance must *resolve* efficiently.

There are two main intervals in the dominant seventh harmony that make it very dissonant, and in need of resolution:
1. The minor seventh, formed between the root and the seventh is highly unstable.
2. The diminished fifth (d5) formed between the third of the chord and the seventh is even more unstable than the seventh.

To release the tension built up in the dominant seventh chord, "lead" the following voices to particular resolutions:

The seventh of the dominant seventh chord should resolve *down* by semitone. This is ^4 moving to ^3, one of the two semitones native to the major scale.
The third of the dominant seventh chord should resolve *up* by semitone. This is ^7 moving to ^1, the *other* of the two semitones native to the major scale.

The root of the dominant seventh chord should leap *up or down* to the root of the next harmony. This is ^5 moving to ^1.

Thus, the dominant seventh chord finds its perfect resolution in the tonic triad: V7—I.

We will practice connecting chords in this way, but you must understand the following:

1. The intervals in the dominant seventh harmony that make it highly unstable involve those scale degrees that give the major diatonic scale its natural dynamism.
2. That the dynamism native to the major diatonic scale (the naturally occurring semitones) and that inherent in the relationships between overtones and their fundamental can motivate tension-resolution as harmonies progress over time in music.