

Music 11, 7/31/06

A chord progression is a series of chord that move purposefully from one to the next, with an eventual arrival at a cadence.

Knowing this, we can begin to realize that harmonic progressions have a logic—a practice of musical composition that extends hundreds of years that emphasizes this idea. Music exists in time, and requires an audible (“sense-able”) dynamism in order to take “shape.”

So—let’s think about a basic compositional task. Suppose we have a nice melody, and are asked to harmonize it so that it may be sung by a choir or orchestrated for some instrument ensemble. How can we provide a convincing harmonic setting for this melody that will both satisfy the dynamic relationships inherent to the scale/key *and* be interesting?

In harmonizing a melody, it is important to think ahead. Placing a harmony that is too unstable right at the beginning, and requires immediate resolution, might undermine the phrase structure implied by the melody. Likewise, if we do not place a tense harmony at the apparent moment of relative repose in the melody, the listener might miss it.

Harmonizing a melody is like a great Shakespeare revenge plot. How? It requires much thinking ahead—strategizing. And, the first stages will lead to events that must be carried through, or the entire “plot” fails. We must anticipate the consequences of decisions, and be ready to make small changes along the way in order to make things “interesting.”

Thus, we can begin with what we *know* must happen. (1) harmonize the cadence. It will probably be some kind of V—I. Then, (2) look to the beginning. Can we establish the key right away with a tonic harmony? If yes, great.

Filling in the rest of the harmonies is more difficult, but we can make use of all the triads since we know some of their characteristics. For example, we can place a ii or IV chord (dominant preparation harmony) before the cadence. Also, we can find a midpoint where we might be able to place another tonic harmony.

If we had more time in the class, we would learn certain formulae that would help us on this task. For example, certain short combinations of harmonies can at the same time continue overall motion toward the eventual cadence and continue to “sway” between stability and instability. Inversions can be a good way to do this.

Unfortunately, we have reached a relatively stable part of the class—a good place to stop introducing new material, even though there are many doors left open in beginning music theory. This of this week as a kind of imperfect authentic cadence (or better yet, a half cadence). As we wrap up the content of this class, I encourage everyone to review the

course notes online. Also, review your tests. These are the best study guides for the final exam.