

## *Strategies for Harmonizing a Chorale Melody*

As we have already learned, we can experience most of the issues regarding harmonization and part writing from working with the four-part chorale style. Although this style is limited in many ways, learning to work with four parts in a chorale texture can offer us the basic tools to work in most other settings: in three parts, with melody/accompaniment textures, in larger instrumental and vocal textures, etc. In many regards, we can view the chorale as a reduction of many other textures.

Note that the figured basses that you've worked with offer two important pieces of the information that are left unstated in harmonizing a melody: 1) most obviously, the bass line to follow, and 2) suitable chord choices to be used. To harmonize a melody, we need to make these choices for ourselves based exclusively on the melody that is presented.

However, we can learn much about how a melody will be harmonized simply by singing and aurally analyzing it; many times certain chord choices will suggest themselves, for example the tonic-dominant-tonic model that harmonizes a stepwise descent of 3-2-1. As you harmonize chorales try to avoid the bad habit of writing one chord at a time from left to right; you will get much more musical results if you approach the texture as the interaction soprano-bass counterpoint with alto and tenor lines added to create the greatest melodic interest and full harmonies. After some preliminary aural analysis, try the following strategy for arriving at a full harmonization of a chorale melody.

1. Plan out the harmonic cadences (places of closure) according to the melodic cadences present in the melody and sketch in bass notes that correspond to these cadences. This is easily done by taking stock of where the melody pauses or concludes—often on longer notes

2. Map out a preliminary bass line:

Use imperfect consonances primarily, (thirds, sixths) and, where parallels do not occur, the perfect consonances of the fifth and octave. At this point, avoid the use of fourths with the bass; fourths require second inversion chords which are treated in specific ways and used in specific contexts. Once these are learned, use fourths accordingly.

3. Sketch out harmonies based on the new soprano/bass framework, making sure that the chords you choose present a harmonic *progression*—i.e., make sure that the harmonic logic of the passage has a goal, direction, and that it logically supports the melody. As a general guide, here are a few options that present such a progression:

- progressions corresponding to the circle of fifths—the fundamental harmonic progression in tonal music. These involve roots that move up a fourth or down a fifth
- progressions that descend by thirds from scale degree 1 (*do, la, fa, re, ti sol*)
- most progressions that ascend by steps (with the exception of ii - iii)

4. Complete the part writing while singing the notes as you write

This will be quite simple having created a workable context for the four parts. However, realize that even after all of this work, you might get into a problem for which your bass or anticipated harmonization won't work. If this happens, start by using a different chord for the problematic situation. If no other harmonic choice works, change your bass note and use a different harmony.