

Authentic Bach Chorales?

Part II

When a student is asked to write a chorale harmonisation ‘in the manner of J. S. Bach’, what exactly should this mean?

It seems currently to mean choosing chords, from which parts are created, perhaps bass first then alto+tenor, and finishing with the bugbear of checking for the exasperating consecutive perfect fifths and octaves. Does the work of one of your better students actually sound like one of Bach’s examples? – usually not often, I suspect. The complexities of matching chords and counterpoint are paralleled by the advice that is found in many authorities, which seems to me to treat the style statistically rather than stylistically – as in “Bach ‘rarely’/‘sometimes’/‘occasionally’/‘often’¹⁰ does so-and-so” – while requiring students to learn by rote certain harmonic formulae. This does not amount to something that can truly be described as ‘composition’, even though it is called a ‘technique of composition’. This aspect of our understanding of Bach’s music needs serious reconsideration.

The transcription of the original four-voiced music onto two staves has disguised much of the contrapuntal nature of Bach’s writing. And in promoting Bach’s harmonies as stemming from rigidly defined chord-shapes, the student is automatically hemmed in by constraints that were not of Bach’s own world or technique. What is needed is the recognition that, for Bach, the harmony of his music proceeds from its counterpoint and not the other way round. This might have been clearer to musicians of his time than it is to us today because they would be used to hearing a chorale in its context as part of the uninterrupted flow of the movements of a cantata, so that the contrapuntal style of the more complex movements would be clearly still evident in these shorter but not necessarily less intricate movements.

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Some years ago, I collated various phrases from across Bach’s chorales, aiming to build a repertoire of musical examples that started by simply using just Primary Triads and gradually progressed through functionally related progressions of connected chords (following the circle of fifths) to arrive at the more complex mix that typifies a Bach chorale. I was surprised that this was even possible, yet there are many phrases that are based on just the three principal harmonies, such as this one:

But one problem remained. Any method of choosing chords to build a harmonisation such as the one above makes no reference to the contours of the voices, especially the inner ones, merely considering the snapshot of vertical texture for each chord. The bass can be considered as a duet with the melody – as in the examples from Schemelli’s *Musicalisches Gesang-Buch* (included in Riemenschneider’s edition) – and its shape can be more individually managed. But how are the individual lines of the inner voices to be given their own character?

The first solution along my path toward the method I want to promote was to allow the duet between melody and bass its own freedom by keeping the choosing of chords in reserve. With a bass line making a suitable connection to the melody purely in terms of consonant harmonic intervals, it then became clear that the chords that could now be chosen were much more limited in their options and in fact a unique solution was often dictated by the melody-bass duet itself; thus the harmony developed organically from the freely-composed bass line rather than the other way round.

The next problem concerned the shaping of the inner voices to create the chosen harmonies. Here I separated the procedure into two independent strands – first to add notes to complete each harmony, and then to add notes to complete each voice. This became analogous to the way in which the texture of a piece of cloth is woven, partly horizontally and partly vertically, each important in its own right as well as holding the other in place.

Yet this did not fully solve the over-riding problem that besets any harmonisation – how to avoid the forbidden consecutive perfect fifths and octaves. In focusing on chords, attention is diverted from the intervals themselves, so that these problems are not noticed at the time of their creation, and correcting them later on becomes a headache in itself. The solution I have arrived at is to turn the focus away from the too-rigid functionality of chords when labelled as ‘I’, ‘II’, etc., and instead take as the basis of chord construction the harmonic intervals themselves. One simple and pleasing result of this is that what were seven different chords when considered by function became just two by shape: root position and first inversion. And this opened up a straightforward and clear avenue to the range of skills needed to make a successful harmonisation in Bach’s style.

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The triadic chords which we habitually teach our students originate in Jean Philippe Rameau’s *Treatise on Harmony* of 1722, which appeared just before Bach began composing his major series of church cantatas on his move to Leipzig in 1723. Shortly afterwards, Johann Joseph Fux’s

celebrated *Gradus ad Parnassum* was published¹¹ which derived basic compositional techniques from Palestrina's contrapuntal style. Bach's own training and style were formed by ideas he encountered at the start of the century and developed independently of Rameau's theory which is analytical more than compositional. And his son Carl Philipp Emanuel tells us that Sebastian did not warm to Fux's approach:

In composition he started his pupils right in with what was practical, and omitted all the *dry species* of counterpoint that are given in Fux and others.¹²

In fact, much of Bach's own harmony related closely to the practicalities of 'thorough bass' about which, only a few years later, he himself compiled a treatise for his students.¹³ It is to thorough/figured bass that we must turn to find the clues to developing a new and more flexible harmonic process which can also deal stylistically with counterpoint. While this will initially seem a somewhat foreign manner of working, there are a handful of simple clues that can get us right into the heart of the challenges presented by a typical A-level question.

The harmony on the first beat of the first bar of any piece of music is usually a root-position tonic chord (normally figured as '5' and '3'), but it is presented in figured-bass notation simply by nothing at all. This absence of notation is a form of short-hand intended to help the player of this musical part by omitting the least necessary instructions, leaving just the more complex harmonic shapes in view. This can be further interpreted as follows: any notated figures are there to tell the player how to alter the basic root-position triad for each bass note/beat.

Another short-hand of this notation is to persistently omit the '3', so that first-inversion chords are notated simply as '6'. All the other figures – '2'/'9', '4' and '7' – are dissonances and must be notated. Thus the short-hand system of figured bass tells us that consonant chords come in two kinds – both with '3', one with '5' (= 'root position') and the other with '6' (= 'first inversion'). And this is the basis of the musical system that Bach used throughout his life.

So, together with the perfectly consonant interval of the octave, we have the four consonant harmonic intervals related to the bass line out of which triadic harmony is built: '3', '5', '6' and '8'. In writing a bass line to accompany a soprano melody, these intervals form the basis of the connection between the two voices and create the template for the harmony that will result. Examples of this kind of musical 'duet' can be found in the 69 examples Bach made for Schemelli's *Gesang-Buch* – and, of course, they form the basis of all Bach's four-part harmonisations.

With a bass line in place, the student has simply to build the vertical texture by adding notes across each phrase to create each of these harmonic intervals in turn, keeping a close eye on the shapes of the inner voices as they develop and especially on the leading note. In this way, at every stage the student is actively composing by making decisions that are truly creative as well as suitably technical.

An advantageous corollary of working in this way with harmonic intervals is that each note can be checked to see whether it makes the forbidden consecutive fifths/octaves at the moment it is being written, so that it can be immediately replaced by a more suitable alternative if necessary. Leaving this checking process to the end of the harmonisation can result in a situation all too familiar to many students: that correcting one forbidden fifth can infuriatingly produce another in its stead.

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It might be argued that the purpose of undertaking Bach Chorales (or any similar topic) is to teach students about chords. Yes, of course. But ‘chords’ do not necessarily mean only ‘I’, ‘V’, etc. – a ‘G major chord’ is a ‘G major chord’ whether it also happens to be ‘I’, ‘V’ or anything else. Whether writing a Bach Chorale, a String Quartet, or any other harmony exercise involving different instruments or voices, the challenge is not simply to write suitable harmonies but to create appropriate harmonic textures, about which labels such as ‘I’ or ‘G major’ say nothing. To write music after the manner of Johann Sebastian Bach, it seems natural to look to the methods that he himself used. Here they are, as described by Carl Philipp Emanuel:

... first he added the basses to [the melodies] himself, and [his students] had to invent the alto and tenor. Then he taught them to devise the basses themselves.¹⁴

And, in the end, might that not be the best way?

Notes to Part II

- 10 see, for example, the *A2 Music Harmony Workbook* by Hugh Benham (Rhinegold education, 2009), p. 19 under ‘Doubling’
- 11 The book appeared in Vienna in 1725; it was written in Latin – a German translation was produced in Leipzig in 1742
- 12 *The New Bach Reader*, no. 395 p. 399
- 13 see *J. S. Bach’s Precepts and principles for playing the thorough-bass or accompanying in four parts (Leipzig, 1738): translation with facsimile, introduction, and explanatory notes* by Pamela L. Poulin (Clarendon Press, 1994)
- 14 as note 12 above