

Introduction to Part II

The complexities of Bach's manner of chorale harmonisation are created by all the dissonances that are incorporated into the triadic harmonies. Some of these have already been introduced in Part I. But another dissonance that Bach used persistently is the **suspension**, and this is explored here in Part II and further in Part III.

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A 'suspension' is something that is 'held'. In musical terms, a suspension is a note from one harmony that is 'held on' into the next harmony (the note may be repeated or sustained) in order to make a dissonance against one of the notes in that second harmony.

Suspensions are not an invention of the Baroque style. They evolved as part of the development of triadic harmony during the three centuries or more before Bach's eighteenth-century compositions. Here is an example from the first choral phrase of the Credo movement in Palestrina's *Missa Brevis* of 1570:

Pa - trem om-ni-po-ten - tem, fac-to-rem cae - li et ter - rae,
S
A Pa - trem om-ni-po-ten - tem, fac-to-rem cae - li et ter - rae,

All the harmonic intervals between the two voices are consonant except for one just before the end: as the voices approach the cadence, they clash for a beat when the lower one holds on to a note (the tonic) while the higher one steps down to its next note (the supertonic); then the higher voice waits for the lower one to step down too, before the two voices cadence harmoniously together at the end, with the lower voice's leading note rising to the tonic.

(At the end of the example above, the Tenor voice enters, on middle C, under the Soprano's penultimate minim, creating a triadic context for the Alto's suspension. The particular type of harmony that is thus created – the '4–3' suspension – will be explored in Chapter 5.)

Bach knew and studied Palestrina's music, which is based on harmonic counterpoint between the voices. When more than two voices sound together, the triadic harmony that results relies on the lowest of these (which acts as a bass line) for its integrity. Consequently, bass lines have developed their own distinctive characteristics as a result both of supporting the harmonies and of supplying one of the voices in the contrapuntal texture.

Bach's chorale harmonisations follow the same principle as Palestrina's music: the four voices make contrapuntal harmony, the harmony being developed from the counterpoint which the bass line makes with the melody.

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Here is an example of how a cadential suspension can be formed. It is based on the harmonic pattern at the cadence which is to be practised in Chapter 4, which forms a cycle of fifths. First, a straightforward example as it might have been harmonised in Chapter 2 is given; then Bach's own harmonisation follows, in which the Alto has been adapted so that what was a half-beat passing-note tonic is now a full-beat suspended tonic.

IIb Va Ia

BWV297(a)

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The suspension pattern introduced here in Part II of this Course maintains a consistent shape (with a small variation for Exercise 6d); it is the harmony around it that varies, according to the shapes of the bass line and of the melody.

- The note which is suspended is always the tonic of the key at the Perfect Cadence
- The suspension pattern may already be in the Soprano's melody, but it is more usually incorporated into the Alto or sometimes into the Tenor
- Because it results from the voice concerned repeating or holding on to a note from the previous beat's chord, that note (the tonic) will also be part of the harmony on the previous beat, and there its harmonic interval with the bass must consequently be a consonant one – this note is called the **preparation**
- The dissonance produced by the suspension should fall on one of the stronger beats of the bar, i.e. on beat 1 or beat 3 in common time; to preserve the crotchet-pace of this cadential harmonic progression, in triple time the dissonance will usually fall on beat 2

Part II — The cadential suspension

- The suspended note always resolves, on the beat following the dissonance, to the note below (i.e. the leading note) which will be part of the Perfect Cadence's dominant chord – this is called the **resolution**

A simple pattern to remember for the last four beats of a phrase is as follows:

Preparation (P) – Suspension (S) – Resolution (R) – Final Chord

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Because all the phrases which have been chosen for these exercises need this three-note suspension pattern, for most of the exercises in Part II it will be helpful to start by writing the pattern's three notes into the three penultimate beats (unless it is already present in the melody) before beginning Step 1 of the harmonisation method. Then write in the appropriate Bass notes for the last three beats (in an initial version without half-beat elaborations) of the harmonic pattern being practised. Once a suitable Bass has then been elaborated to complete Step 1, making sure that it harmonises properly with the suspension pattern's notes (especially its preparation) as well as with those of the melody, the remaining Steps are followed as before.

The three-note suspension pattern (**P–S–R**) finishes with the leading note. While the leading note's tendency is to rise to the tonic, at Perfect Cadences Bach allows the voice concerned to jump to another note if that pitch would otherwise be missing from the chord: so leave the final beat in this voice empty for the moment until the rest of the chord's harmonic texture is completed in the later Steps.

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In Chapters 4 and 5, the suspension often produces the sort of dissonance with the melody that is illustrated in the example from Palestrina's *Missa Brevis* above. For the harmonisations in Chapter 4, this dissonance is often described as a 'seventh', but its interval with the Bass is actually a *fifth* – the interval of a 'seventh' is a conceptual one, relating not to the bass line but to the root of the harmony on that beat (since a 'seventh' will often be found *below* its root).

In Chapters 5 and 6, the suspension also makes a harmonic *fourth* with the Bass. While this is usually classed as dissonant (and in Chapter 5 the suspension clashes directly with another note in the harmony above the Bass, just as it did in Chapter 4), in Exercise 6 it is referred to as a 'consonant fourth' for reasons which will be explained.

Whereas in Part I each of the two principal cadences was explored (and examples of other, less common, cadences were provided as well), in Part II the focus is entirely on the Perfect Cadence in the various extended forms of it which incorporate a suspension. Thus this is a stylistic development of the work introduced in Chapter 2. When completing the Bass for Step 1, pay particular attention to the harmony for the preparation which must be consonant.