Introduction to Part-Writing

As we look ahead, we’re confronted with an ugly truth: there is a lot of music in the history of the world that is worth studying... much more than we can hope to cover in the span of a few semesters.

Since we can’t cover it all, we have to choose a specific musical language to study in depth.

Let’s start by narrowing things down to the Common Practice Period.

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<th>1800</th>
<th>1900</th>
<th>Early 20th Century</th>
<th>Contemporary</th>
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<td>Baroque</td>
<td>Classical</td>
<td>Romantic</td>
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The Common Practice Period is the music of the Baroque, Classical and Romantic Eras in Europe and America. The name comes from the fact that most composers used a common musical language during this time.

But there is a ton of Common Practice Period music... more than we can hope to cover. Is there a representative style we can sink our academic teeth into?

Four-voice chorale writing is a good style to study for several reasons:

- Chorales have a fast harmonic rhythm, allowing for a larger number of chords per exercise.
- A large percentage of Common Practice Period music can be easily reduced to four-voice counterpoint.
- The cantatas of J.S. Bach provide us with a tremendous amount of consistently-written four-voice chorales.

One of the changes to the Catholic Church proposed by Martin Luther was to allow members of the congregation to participate in the singing of the liturgy.

Of course, Luther was branded a heretic for his proposals, and began his own church in which to implement his ideas.

More than two hundred years later, J.S. Bach was appointed musical director at the St. Thomas Church in Leipzig, Germany and, in the spirit of Luther, wrote five years’ worth of liturgical music.

Each of these works, called cantatas, were built around a hymn melody harmonized in four parts for congregational singing.

By analyzing Bach’s cantatas, we can construct a set of “rules” for writing in four-voice common practice period musical style, allowing us to study it in depth.