Part-Writing: The Vertical Rules

To best understand how common practice period composers wrote music, we are going to learn how to write music using their musical style.

So the patterns we see in their music, the things they consistently did or didn’t do, are going to become “rules” for us in our writing.

It’s wrong to think these were “rules” for the composers... they were just writing what sounded good to them.

Nor should we treat these as rules for writing music in general... each style of writing has its own set of patterns, and thus its own “rulebook.” As a composer, you get to write your own rules for your own style!

We’re going to start with the vertical rules... that is, the rules that pertain to building a single chord in four-voice harmony.

First, the distance between soprano and alto and between alto and tenor must be an octave or less.

The tenor and bass can be as far apart as you want!

Second, the voices must be kept in their proper order; for example, the tenor shouldn’t be higher than the alto. (Bach did this now and then, but it was only when he wanted to incorporate some special melodic shapes.)

Third, since we have four voices and only three notes in a triad, one of the notes should be doubled. For triads in root position, we typically double the root of the chord unless forced (by other rules) to do otherwise.

Lastly, each voice should stay in its range. These are conservative ranges for modern singers, but remember that Bach’s chorales were really written for amateurs: the common people who attended church in Leipzig!

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