

Bach Conservatory Seminar I  
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Harmony vs. Polyphony in Bach Suites

In most classical and romantic repertoire harmonic functions are more or less explicit, easily visible as a vertical chord or arranged horizontally within the alberti bass of similar arpeggiated patterns. Contrasting with these relatively homophonic textures, are polyphonic or contrapuntal textures of the baroque where all parts compete equally for the listeners attention as a consequence of each having a distinct melodic profile. This melodic profile generally requires predominantly stepwise motion and stepwise motion requires that one of the notes is not a chordal tone: As a result extreme dissonance can result:

Example 1

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff features a melodic line with a prominent eighth-note pattern and a long, sweeping slur. The bottom staff provides a counterpoint with a similar eighth-note rhythmic pattern. The two parts interact to create a complex polyphonic texture. The score concludes with a double bar line and the number '25' in the bottom right corner.

X Y

Question: What is unusual about the progression of chord X to chord Y?

We will leave aside the question of how one accounts for this and other similarly thorny dissonances according to the rules of formal counterpoint (insofar as this is possible!). Our focus here is not on the techniques for composing coherent contrapuntal structures but rather the ability to visualize (both by eye and ear) the harmony implicit in contrapuntal structure. While this can be quite difficult to decipher, it is intuitively clear that a harmonic basis can be heard underlying the surface embellishments.

In contrast to Bach fugues, the keyboard dance suites of Bach present relative few difficulties for identifying the underlying functional harmonies. Here, one often finds patterns which recall the alberti patterns which would come to predominate during the classical period in that they arpeggiate the predominant harmonies with few non-harmonic tones:

Example 2.

Bourrée I.



Exercise 1: In the example above, please identify all relevant functional harmonies by figures.

Somewhat more typical of Bach's style are relatively conjunct accompaniments resulting from the stepwise filling in of chord tones. Non-harmonic tones which "pass" between the skips of the harmony are, as previously discussed, known as passing tones and these are frequent. Also frequent is the neighbor note which, as mentioned previously, results from a departure from and a return to the same chord tone, either above (the upper neighbor) or below (the lower neighbor). Both of these types are generally categorized as either weak or strong depending whether they appear in metrically accented positions.

Exercise 2: In the example below, please provide the following information.

- 1) Identify all functional harmonies.
- 2) Circle all harmonic dissonances
- 3) Identify any which can be construed as passing tones (PT) or neighbor notes (NN).





The other contrapuntal embellishments mentioned previously (the appoggiatura, the suspension the anticipation, and, least commonly, the escape tone) do occur, though relatively infrequently in the Bach Suites. You should be able to analyze most as either chord tones of functional harmonies (i.e. consonances) as passing tones or neighbor notes without too much difficulty.

Exercise 3: For the following Minuet (from the d minor French Suite)



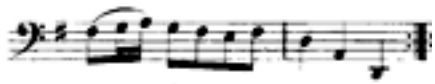
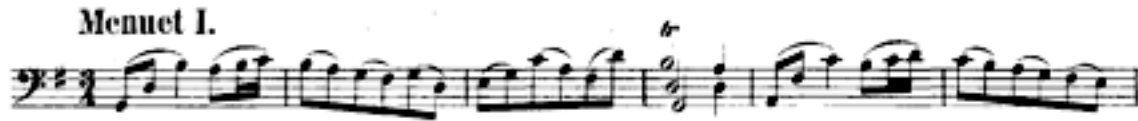
Please identify

- 1) All relevant functional harmonies by figures
- 2) Circle all non-harmonic tones.
- 3) Identify all dissonances which cannot be construed as passing tones or neighbor tones and describe how they appear to be justified.
- 4) Return to example 2 and provide an account for the dissonances not previously accounted for.

While the thickest contrapuntal textures can at times obscure the underlying harmony those works having the least amount of contrapuntal activity (at least superficially) can be equally challenging, if not more so. Most notably, the solo violin and cello suites of Bach clearly map out functional harmonic progressions. That a single line manages to

create the illusion of harmony is, of course, a remarkable compositional feat. That this is the case should be apparent to those of you who have performed these works.

Exercise 4: For the following Bach minuet:



- 1) Identify the relevant functional harmonies which seem to be present.
- 2) Identify and categorize all non harmonic tones.