

HARMONY AND COMPOSITION

IT falls to my lot as a reviewer of new books and music for several musical periodicals to see many of the new publications, English and American, which purport to explain to the student the principles of harmony. As these books seem often to have but the remotest connection with music, I have for some time had it in my mind to write a book on harmony which would start from quite different premises. The necessary leisure for this task has not, however, been forthcoming, so I welcome this opportunity for putting my thoughts on this matter in some kind of order.

It is perfectly true that the newer books on harmony approach the subject in a more enlightened manner, that is, the authors see the falsity of doling out rules to be followed unquestioningly by the student. For instance, Sir Edward Bairstow in his book *Counterpoint and Harmony* says:

‘ There has been a tendency in this country to teach counterpoint and harmony in such a way that students became stiff, cramped and unimaginative in their work. They were not encouraged to use their ears and their common sense, but were merely told that certain things were wrong and must be avoided. The view in this book has been adopted that nothing is wrong or right, but that if rules are observed, smoothness will result—no more and no less.’

Again, R. O. Morris in *Figured Harmony at the Keyboard* says:

‘ When I was young, harmony was taught exclusively by means of figured bass. One was given a bass with serried ranks of figures massed in close formation underneath it ; in accordance with these hieroglyphics one put down various dots, dashes and smudges on the staves above, and took the result to one’s teacher. He scanned it rapidly through, drew various parallel lines in blue pencil to show where the consecutive fifths and octaves were, and that was that. No attempt was made to regard the thing from a musical point of view, or to consider whether consecutive fifths have a less noticeable effect in some

positions than in others. The lesson might have been regarded, conceivably, as an exercise in freehand drawing ; it certainly was in no sense an exercise in music.'

And Giard, in his *Fundamental Harmonic Material* (an American treatise) says :

' There exists an irritating tendency on the part of many theorists to state rules of harmony as if they were so obviously true, so axiomatic in character as to require no explanation nor justification. Take for instance the usual custom of warning the student against two parts moving in octaves or unisons. Certainly the sound of consecutive octaves and unisons is not disagreeable, yet the student attempts to avoid them in order to adhere to a rule which makes no appeal whatever to his intelligence. It would be far more reasonable to explain that in four part harmony there are four separate melodic lines, and when two parts move in unison only three separate melodic lines are in evidence.'

But, however enlightened, the attitude is the same as in the older text-books, and it is this very attitude that I am venturing to criticize.

What is harmony? Certainly not an abstract thing, but something that is the direct outcome of the stuff of sound. This stuff of sound consists, in our European civilization, of twelve equally spaced semitones. We recognize that there are infinite gradations of pitch between each of the static semitones, but as the material of art has to be limited, these gradations have had to be ignored. However far then music seems to flow—and some musical masterpieces seem to flow into eternity—it never really moves away from the influence of those twelve magnetic centres. This release in bondage is one of the prime mysteries of art. Melody is the successive use of any of these twelve sounds, counterpoint is the combination of such melodic structures, and harmony is the result. All this is tacitly recognized in the usual text-books: what is not tacitly recognized is that when the ear became used to hearing counterpoint as fluid chords, those chords tended in time to be detached and thought of as *single sounds*, having the property, as real single sounds have, of combining with others. To try to find the *raison d'être* of modern harmonic methods by analysing down to the

single note constituent is therefore, in many cases, quite false. Take, for instance, this progression, found in many of Vaughan Williams' works:



Is this accurately described as a succession of six-four chords? And is this, from Debussy's *La Cathédrale Engloutie*, to be described as consisting of consecutive dominant sevenths?



Obviously not, yet the ordinary text-book will lead the poor analyst to no other conclusions. Actually, in these two cases we have got back to a single unaccompanied melodic line. In this connection, it must be noted that a single sound is only a convenient name, for actually it consists of numerous sounds caused by sympathetic vibrations. The composers of the examples I have just mentioned are then but extending, complication and subtilizing the accretion of sounds that makes up the so-called single melodic note. Music can only rightly be termed harmonic when the sounds that make up the chords move independently: when, as in the examples given, everything moves in the same direction by the same steps, the music is purely melodic, and I am convinced that the only way of hearing such music is to take in the notes of the chords *en bloc*, in the same way that one would listen to early examples of organum, and not mentally dissect the chords into a number of constituents. In this sense of the use of the word 'harmony' we are led to the unorthodox opinion that this, from Beethoven's E flat Sonata, Op. 7,



is harmonic in a sense which cannot possibly be applied to, say, the fuller and more sonorous phrases found in the 'organ' section of Debussy's *La Cathédrale Engloutie*.

The bearing of all this on the subject of harmony teaching should by now be clearer. If I were to isolate one chord from the succession of chords given in the first two examples from Vaughan Williams and Debussy, I could conceivably analyse them and say 'Ah yes, six-four, resolve five-three,' or: 'dominant seventh, follow by tonic.' But in reality, such statements mean just nothing, for dominant sevenths, six-four chords and so forth have no absolute existence: they are *that or something else* according to what surrounds them. An analogy from another art, that of dancing, may make the point clearer. There has arisen in recent years a school of dancing which calls itself Greek. This dancing is modelled on the postures found in extant friezes, etc. It is an easy enough matter to adopt one of these postures, but as we have no knowledge of how the Greek changed from this posture to another, the so-called Greek dancing of our time is really only Greek posturing. Similarly, the harmonist has isolated harmonies and progressions (postures) from the classics, and the student is asked to move from one to the other by means of rules which have not the slightest universal validity. The results are what we know. The rules isolated from particular practice are valid for that practice and for no other. The harmonist preserves the heart and muscles of music in some kind of spirit and the student is at liberty to observe their anatomy; but he doesn't see the heart beating and the muscles moving. This can only be done when the whole body is functioning. The argument for the usual text-book approach is of course that the student must learn that there is order in music—consequently, his first steps must be ordered, so that later he can use the wings of his imagination. Such an argument *sounds* perfectly logical. There is, however, one serious flaw in it. It is true that music, to be good, must be ordered, but the ordering cannot be imposed upon the substance of music. I therefore fail to see how the discipline of the usual harmony and counterpoint exercise can affect composition except to shackle it to academic standards. We say, in effect, to the student: 'Damp down your imagination for a few years until we have gone through chromatic harmony and fugue.' Or may be the two activities

of harmony and composition are carried on simultaneously, so that what is given with one hand is taken away with the other. The same artificial ordering is apparent in the study of what is known as 'Form in Music.' I have seen enlightened text-books which as preliminary exercises give eight-bar rhythms upon which the student must construct a tune. And Sir Edward Bairstow, in the introduction to the aforementioned book, recommends that 'as soon as students have developed sufficient skill in part-writing, they can carry out this plan in composition by first of all taking as a model a short Minuet or Scherzo by Haydn, Mozart or Beethoven. Only the form should be copied—the length of phrases, the modulations, and above all the rhythmic contrasts and development of themes. The rest—themes, harmony and rhythmic divisions—must be original work.' To what can such discipline lead? Only to endless imitational music, of which the world has more than enough already. Such books ignore the fact that any idea the student may have *contains within itself* its own form and its own harmonic evolution. To impose these from without may make the music conform to, as we deem, respectable standards, but will hardly make it alive and interesting. Rules as we know them through the text-books have not been formulated from the works of any particular composer, Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Brahms or Palestrina (actually it would be more interesting for the student if he could study a series of text-books each dealing with the harmony and contrapuntal procedures of one of the great composers), but are a sort of composite photograph of general tendencies. This gives them their colourless character. They are a series of abstractions upon which nothing of any value can be built.

What is the alternative? It is agreed that art must be disciplined: how attain that if abstracted rules are not allowed to shape the material? One can understand of course why the vogue of the text-book is so wide—it makes the task of the teacher so much easier. It gives him a foot-rule to measure with, it gives him cut-and-dried formulæ for dealing with any contrapuntal and harmonic situation, it relieves him from the necessity of using the imagination. All he needs is a blue pencil to exorcise those demons—consecutive fifths and octaves. When the student starts his harmony or counterpoint lessons he is usually familiar with much

classical music, *i.e.*, the bases upon which Western music is constructed are already familiar to his ear, if not to his pen. Having this background, any musical idea that comes to him will conform to some particular idiom: his thinking will automatically revolve round Western scales and modes and not round those of other cultures. Bearing in mind this natural conformity of idiom, it should be the business of the teacher, not to force the ideas into greater conformity, but to help any personal traits to evolve unhampered by non-applicable rules. I am, of course, dealing with the claim of the harmony text-book that the training it gives is preparatory to composition. If the student's work shows no personal traits whatsoever, then I agree that a course of harmony training on orthodox lines will do no more and no less harm than a mathematical training, being a juggling with notes instead of with figures, unrelated to a specific and creative end.

Now, to come down to details. Suppose the beginner in harmony or composition were to bring to his teacher an unaccompanied melody. How is the teacher to set about criticizing it? Is he immediately to search for large leaps that take the tune away from a prescribed plane—is he to see that the modulations are right (in the text-book sense)—is he to see that there are not more than three repeated notes? He may, of course, do all of these things, in which case the final result of the so-called 'corrections' will be a colourless tune devoid of all emotional significance. And the student in such a case will, if he knows his classics, be quite justified in protesting that many of Beethoven's themes leap from one plane to another, that Wolfe's songs contain scores of examples of more than three repeated notes in a melody, that Purcell's melodic modulations are anything but orthodox. On the other hand, he may take the more difficult path of criticizing, not from a fixed angle, but from the angle of the tune itself: *i.e.*, whether the tune does what it sets out to do. Supposing this simple tune were brought to a teacher:



If, instead of searching for things which contradict the orthodox ruling, we search for the characteristics of the tune, our criticism will

be a creative and not a negative one. In this particular instance, the characteristic is the rise and fall of a third—all we must ask then is whether this particular characteristic has been used to the fullest advantage. Judged from this angle, we find that the second phrase, the notes of which move step-wise to a cadence similar to that in the first phrase, could be altered to conform to the prevailing movement by thirds. This results in:



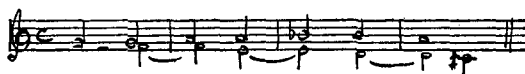
But an orthodox judgment would lead to something like this:



because (1) the opening didn't clearly establish the key, (2) the cadential bars of the first and second phrases are similar and (3) there are too many successive thirds in the last phrase: all of which reasons have not the slightest *musical* significance.

Is there less discipline involved in the methods I advocate? Surely not. Rather more, for the discipline is achieved through the ideas themselves, and for this reason one's critical acumen is constantly changing its ground. Instead then of submitting to the student formal and rhythmic shapes to be filled in, my text-book would begin by giving numerous tunes, each of which has to be altered in order to develop to the maximum its particular characteristic, always preserving of course a related balance, tonally and rhythmically. When the student's mind and imagination have been well exercised by these means, then is the time to introduce counterpoint and its concomitant harmony. Now I do not at all see why, in these matters, the elaborations in modern music should be left out of account. Music, if it is alive, is contemporary, no matter when it was written, so that I do not see the necessity for ruling out in early contrapuntal exercises unorthodox dissonances. Counterpoint is dependent upon the nature of the tunes used, and is not something to be imposed upon the tunes from without. If

a student brought me this example of two-part counterpoint



I'm very much afraid I should smile my approval and say 'Get on with it.' But I should not be nearly so pleased with this version, although it is very correct:



One may, of course, retort that my methods won't help the student to pass his Bachelorship and Doctorship in Music. Against this just criticism I have nothing to say, except to ask 'What are we teaching paper work for, if not to help the student's creative ability, however small, to unfold from its own natural bases?' The unnatural bases inculcated by normal methods induce either conformity or revolt, neither of which leads to the greatest art.

The harmonic method I have very briefly outlined is, of course, difficult to incorporate in a text-book, simply because the do's and don'ts and 'exceptions to the rule' that fill out the normal text-book would have no place. How then, shall it proceed after the already-mentioned chapters devoted to melodic writing? The next steps will be to two, three and four-part free counterpoint, which, bearing in mind the earlier melodic freedom, will be equally unrestricted as to dissonances, etc., *always provided that the ear of the teacher, widely experienced in different kinds of music, will approve of the logic of the progressions, given certain characteristics in the phraseology of the parts.* At the end of each chapter would be given a list of works that the student should thoroughly soak himself in: masses and motets of Vittoria, Byrd, Morales, Josquin des Prés and Palestrina, madrigals of Monteverde, Vecchi, Gesualdo, Wilbye and Weelkes, the masses of Bach, Beethoven and Vaughan Williams, Bach's Art of Fugue, the fugues of Mozart, and even the fugues in Sorabji's 'Opus Clavicembalisticum.' With perhaps the offer of a prize if he can find, in this mass of counter-

point, more than one general principle: namely, that it is best to move by contrary motion.

By the time the student has had plenty of practice in this kind of four-part free counterpoint he will have become used to a far wider range of harmonic resource than is possible by other methods. Moreover, the equal exercise given to mind and imagination will have fitted him for developing his ideas in a personal way, for such will be but a continuation of his early exercises. I cannot insist too often that composition should be a consistent development from early contrapuntal and harmonic training, and not a free activity as opposed to a restricted one.

The remainder of my book would be analytical—showing how the harmonies arrived at by moving parts became detached and used as expressive and dramatic units. The recitatives in Monteverde's 'Orfeo' would be called upon to show up the falsity of the prevailing rules for harmonic progression. Schubert, Beethoven, Debussy and Vaughan Williams would yield numerous examples of the pliability of the common triad, while Hugo Wolf's songs would show how the augmented triad can be used for expressive ends. The student would thus be given opportunities for seeing how the same material is shaped to quite different ends, for realizing that the history of the art is not one of evolution but of change of emphasis. He must be made aware that he is dealing with pliable material, not something frozen in a mould.

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A CLASSICAL EDUCATION AND EIGHTEENTH - CENTURY POETRY

THAT the eighteenth century suffered, for one reason or another, from an impoverished poetic sensibility is a fact too familiar to require emphasis. The claim that the minor verse of the century is interesting despite its lack of first-hand experience and intimate response, because it expresses a social order, or preserves the decencies, or anticipates the romantic revival, can only be a plea advanced for lack of a better. Pope and Blake are raised above their fellows by the sheer differentiation of genius ; outside their work it is the dignified expression of sincere commonplaces, of 'images which find a mirror in every mind, and sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo,' which represents the age's best achievement. These qualities are not negligible ; honest observation of men, faithful reflection of their thoughts and habits, call for estimable abilities in a poet, and we rightly admire Gray's *Elegy*, Collins' *Ode to Evening* and a few other pieces, the best of Johnson, Goldsmith and Crabbe, perhaps a little of Churchill. But the absence of anything but a dubious historical interest in nine pages out of ten of Johnson's *Works of the Poets of Great Britain and Ireland* implies a fundamental inner weakness which has long aroused curiosity.

Explanations of course are ready to hand. Mr. Eliot's famous 'dissociation of sensibility' describes what happened ; Mr. Willey's analysis in *The Seventeenth Century Background* of the quarrel between science and poetry gives cogent reasons for the change of intellectual climate. It is true that poetry suffered from a recognition that its materials were apparently of an inferior truth-status ; Granville's *Essay upon Unnatural Flights in Poetry* (1701) shows the effect of this recognition :

'The Poetic World is nothing but Fiction: Parnassus, Pegasus, and the Muses, pure Imagination and Chimaera. But