

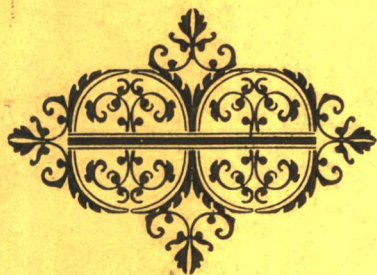
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MALCOLM BOYD

Harmonizing



'BACH'

Chorales

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HARMONIZING 'BACH' CHORALE

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Bach's 371 harmonized chorales (collected and published after his death by his son, C. P. E. Bach) are unique in achieving such a wide expressive range through such limited means. It has long been a tradition that students of harmony should, at some stage in their studies, imitate Bach's chorale harmonizations. Certainly, many diploma examinations and B. Mus. degrees have at least one question on the lines of 'Harmonize the following chorale tune in the style of Bach', or 'Here is a harmonized chorale by Bach. Add orchestral parts and turn the whole into a cantata movement'. The value and success of the study of Bach's chorale harmonizations largely depends on the extent to which the student assimilates this aspect of Bach's style.

This lucid booklet illuminates the procedures adopted by Bach and, going beyond the conventional harmony textbook approach, discourses on how often various harmonies occur, in what contexts and, where possible, why they occur. The student is led to a more satisfying appreciation of Bach's treatment of the chorale and, at the same time, gains a practical insight into an important period of musical history through wise analysis and emulation. The exercises offered are musically rewarding and allow the student to write 'live' music rather than merely to jump through academic hoops.

Uniform with this volume

BACH'S INSTRUMENTAL COUNTERPOINT
Malcolm Boyd


BARRIE &
JENKINS

HARMONIZING 'BACH' CHORALES



MALCOLM BOYD

Harmonizing 'Bach' Chorales

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INTRODUCTION

The imitation of Bach's chorale harmonizations has for long, and rightly, been considered an instructive part of a musician's general training. Students themselves nearly always find it stimulating to write 'real' music and to be able to match their efforts not against arbitrary textbook examples, but against music by one of the great composers. This applies even to those for whom the exercise remains purely one of imitation, but the more gifted student will find that the restrictions which a given style imposes will stimulate his invention, perhaps even to the extent of entirely original composition, not necessarily in the same style.

The success of the study will depend to a great extent on how well the given style has been assimilated by the student, and indeed it is largely towards this assimilation that the exercise is directed. Too often the imitations fall short of their models not through any lack of innate musicianship on the student's part, but because Bach's methods have been inadequately studied and insufficiently understood. Harmony textbooks are not always helpful here either, and sometimes misleading. It is not enough to know that such-and-such a procedure is sanctioned by Bach; the student (if he is to produce harmony and texture at all resembling Bach's) must have some idea also of how often it occurs, in what contexts, and, if possible, why. In other words, he must be able to distinguish the typical from the exceptional so that he may know what to imitate and what to avoid in his own attempts to reproduce Bach's chorale style.

The present booklet, in attempting to help the student in this way, presupposes some experience in 'traditional' harmony on his part. It assumes also that he knows how and when to modulate and that he is aware of the nature and function of passing notes, suspensions, and appoggiaturas. The writer's intention is to guide the student in his own investigation of the Bach chorales, and to assist him to reproduce Bachian harmony and texture by drawing attention to those features which distinguish Bach's style. It is

not his intention to present ready-made formulae for writing 'Bach' chorales, and it is most important that the present booklet should be used side by side with a volume of Bach chorales—never as a replacement for it.

In order to encourage and facilitate this kind of study the reader is frequently referred to examples in the '371' chorales by Bach. Numerical references in the text are to Albert Riemenschneider's edition, published by Schirmer/Chappell.¹ Quantitative analyses are based on the chorales in this volume, omitting those which present duplicate harmonizations, of which there are about twenty-four. Another eleven harmonizations have not been considered here, either because they go beyond the normal chorale style in their texture and figuration (see chorales nos. 270 and 283), or because they are unusually long and elaborate (chorales nos. 132 and 205). Also omitted from the analysis is no. 150, both because it is a unique five-part setting and because it is not by Bach. Figures and tables quoted in the booklet are therefore based upon analysis of the remaining 335 chorales, excluding all repeats.

¹ This is the text most commonly used today, in Great Britain at least. Readers with other editions are referred to Appendix on page 40.

MELODIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHORALE

Before beginning to harmonize a chorale (or any other melody for that matter), the student should pause to consider its salient musical characteristics. The term 'chorale' itself need cause no bewilderment; it is more or less synonymous with our 'hymn tune', and both chorales and hymn tunes exist in great variety. There are certain features, however, which serve to distinguish the chorale from other types of hymn tune, and which make the retention of the German term desirable and on the whole more meaningful than our use of the word *Lieder* for German songs. Since melodic features will partly determine the kind of harmony to be used, it will not be out of place to preface our investigation of Bach's chorale harmony with some remarks upon the nature of the chorales themselves.

This is not the place for a history of Lutheran hymnody, and it need not concern us now that some of the attributes we are about to describe were not necessarily characteristic of the chorale before Bach's time. It is worth pointing out, however, that only a few of the melodies which Bach harmonized and used so extensively in his music were actually written by him. Many of the Lutheran hymn tunes can be traced back to the more popular plainsong melodies of pre-Reformation times, and their modality is often still apparent. Others again were adapted from secular origins, or 'stolen from the Devil' as Luther himself would have it. Of these the best known is undoubtedly the so-called 'Passion' chorale, familiar to most English-speaking congregations as 'O sacred head sore wounded'. This famous tune first appeared in a volume of love songs by Hassler, printed in 1601. Still other melodies were specially written in the two centuries following the Reformation, but by Bach's time interest in chorale composition had largely died out. Interest in the reharmonization of the old melodies, however, was never keener.

During the two hundred years which preceded Bach's appointment as cantor at St Thomas's Church, Leipzig, the chorale had quite naturally undergone many changes. The most important of these was that it had lost most of the metrical freedom associated with its earliest period in favour of a steady movement in crotchets and minims, with occasional quavers as

passing notes. The typical chorale melody as Bach found it proceeded in a regular $\frac{4}{4}$ metre, usually with one syllable to each note; $\frac{3}{4}$ metre is not uncommon, however, and sometimes both $\frac{4}{4}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ metres are found in the same chorale (see chorale no. 11). The impression of strength and solidity which this steady rhythmic 'tread' conveys is intensified by a melodic line which combines a preponderance of stepwise movement with an insistence on primary intervals (fourths and fifths). The chorales which embody these melodic and rhythmic features accord well with recurrent Lutheran images of God or Christ as a rock, a fortress, a shield—*ein feste Burg*, in fact. Their very style is like a profession of faith.

The melodic characteristics of the chorale should exert their influence on the kind of harmony and texture one chooses to support it. In the first place, one has to ensure that each of the added parts—alto, tenor, and bass—has sufficient notes for the number of syllables sung by the soprano. Ideally the student should be given the words as well, for these too ought to influence his harmonizations as they certainly influenced Bach's. For practical reasons it is perhaps wise not to insist upon this, but the student should always bear in mind that the parts he is writing are intended to be sung, and for the most part with a change of syllable every crotchet.

Secondly, one must recognize that the crotchet tread of the melody will determine the rate of chord change in the harmony. In fact there will usually be a change of chord (or position of the chord) with every crotchet beat; quavers will, in general, be treated as passing notes, and minims will be harmonized with more than one chord. It may be taken as a general principle that repetition of a chord from a weak to a strong beat will halt the pulse of the music, and this rule is not invalidated by certain exceptions which will be described in a later paragraph.

Finally, the student must endeavour in his treatment of the chorale to match melodic strength with harmonic firmness. The method of achieving this will be the subject of a later section, but it is worth pointing out here that the student needs no particularly advanced knowledge of harmony to begin a study of Bach's chorale style. A good grasp of the formation and function of simple triads and of the dominant seventh is all that should be required in the way of harmonic resource; it is a very simple matter to assimilate the supertonic seventh needed at cadences, and idiomatic use of the diminished seventh soon comes with observation and practice. The cadences provide the pillars for the harmonic structure, and it is towards these that our attention should first be directed.

CADENCES

A glance at any Bach chorale will show a number of pause marks placed above certain notes in the melody. These sometimes puzzle the student at first, particularly when he finds that they are by no means always observed in performance. They are, of course, intended merely as a guide to the singers, and indicate the ends of lines in the text in much the same way as do the double bar lines in most English hymnals. A pause at such places will, in fact, be both appropriate and desirable in most cases, and when it comes to harmonizing a chorale we can normally regard the pause marks as indicating cadence points.

It is most instructive to study carefully the cadence points in Bach's harmonizations, and to observe how carefully the modulations are planned and the cadences chosen to produce the utmost variety without impairing the basic strength of the harmony. As we might expect, perfect cadences predominate because they are required to establish modulation. And root position chords are used far more frequently than inversions because they serve to strengthen the harmony at those places where strength is most needed. The extent of this predominance is clearly shown in the following table, which summarizes the findings of an analysis of all the cadences in the '371' chorales:

<i>Cadence</i>	<i>Root position</i>	<i>Inverted</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Approximate Percentage</i>
Perfect (V-I)	1,241	211	1,452	73
Imperfect (?-V)	225	190	415	21
Plagal (IV-I)	30	14	44	2
Interrupted (V-VI)	33	nil	33	1.5
Others (including the final cadences of modal chorales)			50	2.5

The insistence on perfect cadences in root position contributes in no small measure to the overall strength of the harmony, and plagal cadences, with their altogether 'softer' effect, are comparatively little used. Imperfect cadences are, of course, indispensable and, since they come to rest on the dominant, in no way detract from the vigour of the harmony. The small proportion (1.5 per cent) of interrupted closes is rather surprising perhaps, and deserves careful notice. In spite of their usefulness for avoiding undesirable full closes in many contexts, they are on the whole foreign to Bach's chorale style. Most of them, though not all, are to be found in one or another of the following contexts:

- (a) As a penultimate cadence when the melody would otherwise invite a full close *in the home key*. See nos. 15, 60, 122, 176, 183, 184, 219, 238, and 241.
- (b) In a succession of two or three very short lines, where the unvarying use of perfect cadences would tend to break up too much the flow of the music. See chorales nos. 179, 278, 321, and 360.
- (c) In very long chorales, where a greater variety of cadential progressions is naturally more desirable. See chorales nos. 214, 215, 241, and 296.

Unless he is quite certain that it would come into one of these three categories, the student should think again before using an interrupted cadence in a 'Bach' chorale.

Still more to be avoided are any cadences demanding the use of the dominant 13th, or what some textbooks refer to as the first inversion of the mediant chord (IIIb). The chord evidently held no attraction for Bach in this context, and cadential progressions like that in example 1 are very rare

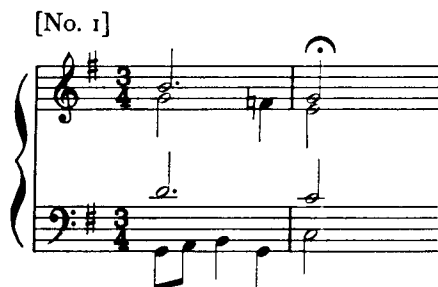
Example 1

[No. 181]

II' b V¹³
[III b]

indeed. Bach's usual practice in such cases is to modulate to the relative minor (in example 1 this would be to E minor); occasionally, however, he will choose to treat the first note of the cadence as a leading note and make an unexpected move to the subdominant, with the leading note proceeding to the fifth of the next chord (see example 2). The progression is not a common one, and occurs in all less than a score of times in the '371'; it is

Example 2



nevertheless characteristic, and the student might like to experiment with it from time to time.

Our investigations into Bach's cadences show that, except in imperfect cadences, inversions are greatly outnumbered by root position chords. Moreover, when an inverted cadence is used it is almost invariably the first of the two chords which is inverted. Inversion of the pause chord itself is *most unusual*; there are only nineteen instances of it in the nineteen hundred cadences analysed. No doubt the reason is, once again, to achieve the maximum harmonic strength. A few of those which are inverted are dominant sevenths, and there is even one diminished seventh (see chorale no. 327), but on the whole the student would be well advised to use only root position for the pause chords.

Another feature of the pause chord is worth stressing here. Its function as a pillar in the harmonic framework of the chorale is further strengthened by making the chord complete—that is to say, including the fifth as well as the root and the third. This is not an invariable rule, but it does apply to more than ninety-five per cent of Bach's cadences, and is therefore one which the student who aims at a typical harmonization might well regard as invariable. Although, as we have already hinted, observation of the pause in performance will depend largely upon the sense of the text, Bach evidently wanted the harmony at such places to sound as sonorous as possible, and chorale no. 100, in which all six pause chords are incomplete (i.e. lacking the fifth of the harmony) is in this respect most unusual indeed.

Some good reason for the omission of the fifth is usually quite evident to the investigator in those cases where Bach has left it out; often it has been done to avoid consecutive fifths.

Filling out the pause chord in this way frequently makes it impossible for the leading note at the cadence to proceed to the tonic, and the student must here unlearn one of the most common of textbook precepts. In such cases, the leading note will usually fall a third (as in examples 1, 3(b), 3(c), 3(d), 7(a), 7(b), and 8(b)), but it is not uncommon for it to rise to the third of the chord which follows, even when a minor key results in the interval of a diminished fourth (see examples 3(a) and 5). Other resolutions of the leading note are also found, but they are not common and need not be shown here. It is important to note that which ever way the leading note proceeds at a cadence, it is quite wrong to insert passing notes between it and the note which follows. For instance, in example 3(c) the student might be tempted to write a passing note between the G sharp and the E in the alto part; this is *never* found in Bach's work.

Suspensions, a feature of Bach's chorale style in general, should seldom be used at the end of a line. As a rule, Bach makes all the parts halt together at the pause chord, and the student who writes to follow Bach's example in this will introduce a suspension at such places only once in about twenty-five cadences, and reserve most of them for the more elaborate treatment of longer chorales. It is perhaps necessary to add that passing notes will be used between the pause chord and the one which follows it only by those who have forgotten that there are words to be sung.

The crotchet rate of chord change should not be relaxed at the cadences until the pause itself is reached. The inexperienced student will often arrive at the dominant chord too soon, especially where there is a minim in the melody immediately before the pause. In such cases the minim should be harmonized with two chords (as in examples 3(a), 3(c), and 3(d)) or with a suspension resolving into the dominant chord (as in example 6(d)).

The chord of the supertonic seventh, especially in its first inversion (II' b), is so commonly found as the approach to a perfect cadence in both major and minor keys that the student would be well advised to memorize the progression and to reproduce it on most of the occasions which permit its use. It is most frequently found in the simple form which we see at example 7(a), and always with the seventh itself prepared in the previous chord. Example 1 shows a slightly embroidered version, and some other variants may be observed in example 3. Examples 3(c) and 3(d) show the

supertonic seventh in its chromatic form—that is with the third of the chord sharpened (and also the fifth in a minor key). This chromatic form is by no means uncommon in the Bach chorales, although it occurs less frequently than the plain diatonic form. Perhaps its most useful function

Example 3

Example 3 consists of four musical examples, each showing a two-staff musical phrase with a supertonic seventh chord in its chromatic form. The examples are labeled (a), (b), (c), and (d).

- (a) [No. 9]: The chord is II^7b in G major. The treble staff shows a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. The bass staff shows a half note F#3, a quarter note G3, and a half note A3.
- (b) [No. 345]: The chord is II^7b in G major. The treble staff shows a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. The bass staff shows a half note F#3, a quarter note G3, and a half note A3.
- (c) [No. 106]: The chord is II^7b in G major. The treble staff shows a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. The bass staff shows a half note F#3, a quarter note G3, and a half note A3.
- (d) [No. 356]: The chord is II^7b in G major. The treble staff shows a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note B4. The bass staff shows a half note F#3, a quarter note G3, and a half note A3.

is to avoid exact repetition of a cadence already used earlier in a chorale.

On the subject of cadences there remains to be mentioned only the fact that the final chords of all chorales, including modal and minor ones, are almost invariably major.