Last Updated: Dec 31, 2023

Chapter 4: Harmonization of Melody with Primary Triads

1. Harmonization

Harmonization is the process of adding chords to a voice (melody or bass) to create a logical and continuous harmonic progression. This requires an understanding of the functional significance of each note in the voice and their relationships and development.

2. Practice Instructions

First, you need to determine the functional role of each note in the melody as the root, third, or fifth of a T, S, or D triad.

When a note can be interpreted in two ways, you need to consider the following harmony. This "foresight" helps to avoid incorrect connections and the use of the D-S progression, which should be avoided.

The first and last chords of a phrase are generally stable chords, such as the tonic chord. However, a phrase can also start with a dominant chord, especially in a weak-beat measure. It is rare for a phrase to start with a subdominant chord.

It is best not to repeat the chord from the weak beat of the previous measure on the strong beat of the next measure. In compound meters or in simple meters with multiple notes per beat, it is also best not to repeat the chord from the weak beat of the previous measure on the secondary strong beat.[①]

It is important to pay attention to the correct connection between chords, from the first to the second, from the second to the third, and so on.

The bass should move in a wave-like pattern within a certain range, from one to one and a half octaves, or up to two octaves. This can be achieved by alternating upward and downward movement. However, it is not allowed to move in two consecutive fifths (and as far as possible, not in fourths) in the same direction. This is because such a movement is not clearly melodic, especially when it starts on a strong beat and ends on a strong beat. In addition to the leaps of fourth and fifth, the bass can also leap an octave when the same chord is repeated.

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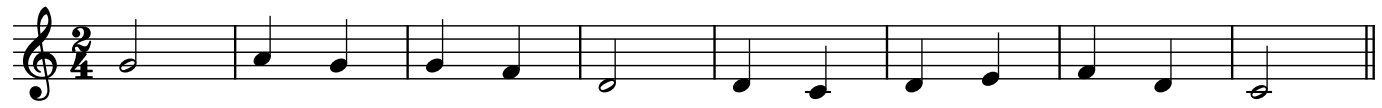
① This restriction is because musical statements generally have their own "harmonic pulse," the most important characteristic of which is the change of harmony between the weak beat and its nearest strong beat (or even the secondary strong beat), thus creating a sense of "rise" and "fall" (that is, strong beat and weak beat). The exception is that if the chord starts on a strong beat, it can cross over this measure (see examples 1-31, 8-89, 8-90, 8-98).

3. Example of harmonizing a melody

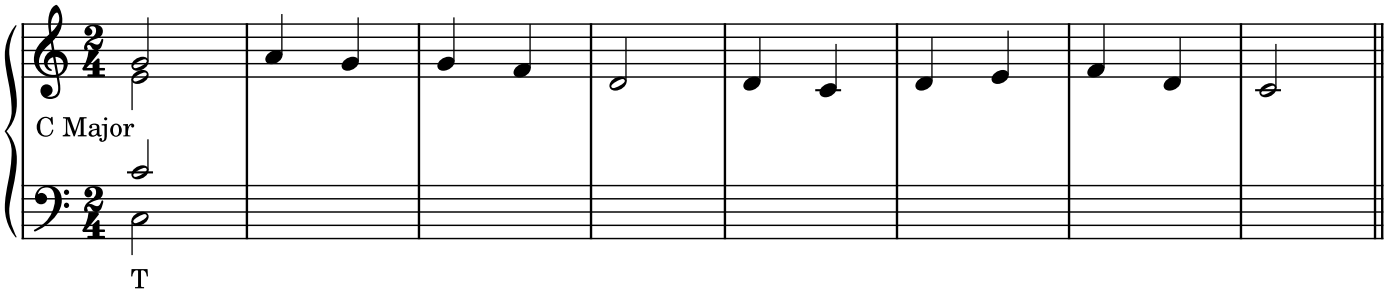
Let's harmonize the following melody:

Example 4-57



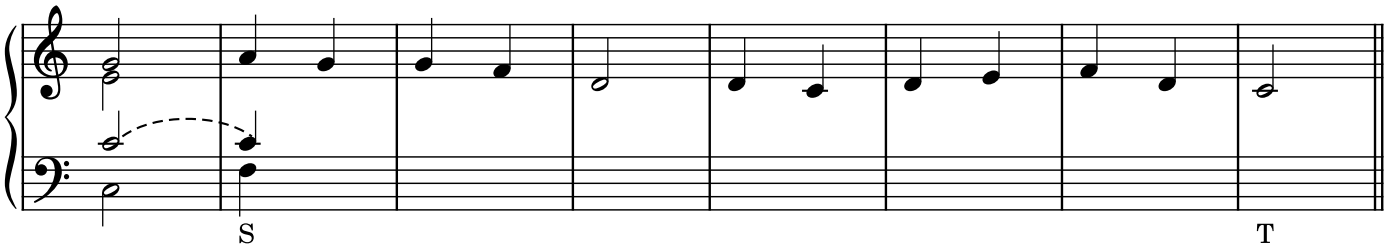
First, play the melody on the piano to determine its key (based on the functional structure, ending note, and key signature). In this case, it is C major. In this key, the G note could be the root tone of a dominant triad (**g**-**b**-**d**) or the fifth tone of a tonic triad (**c**-**e**-**g**). However, we know that the first chord is generally the tonic chord. The next melody note is a, which is definitely the third of a subdominant triad (other triads do not have this note). If we use a D chord as the first chord, then we must follow it with a subdominant chord, which is a connection that should be avoided. Therefore, the first interpretation of this **g** note cannot be correct. We can only understand it as the fifth tone of the tonic triad. Since the melody is already in a low register, it is best to use close position and continue to do so until the end of the example:

Example 4-58



The second note in the melody, a, is the third tone of the subdominant chord. We use a harmonic connection to connect the first tonic chord to this subdominant chord, because only this method can achieve a smooth voice leading (see Chapter 3, Section 5).

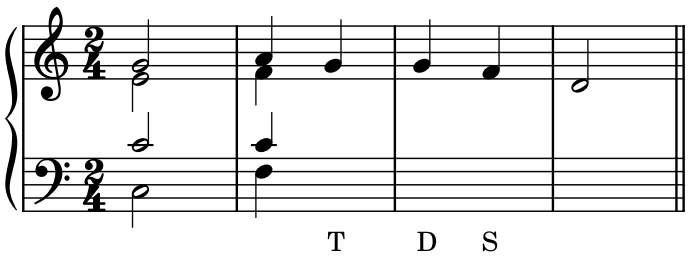
Example 4-59



Later, the melody in the second measure also has a g note, which could be the fifth of the tonic chord or the root of the dominant chord. If we use T here, since the melody will repeat this note later, and when the strong beat repeats the weak beat, it requires a change of chord. Therefore, the g in the third measure must be used as the dominant chord. Then, the **f** in the melody later can only be S.

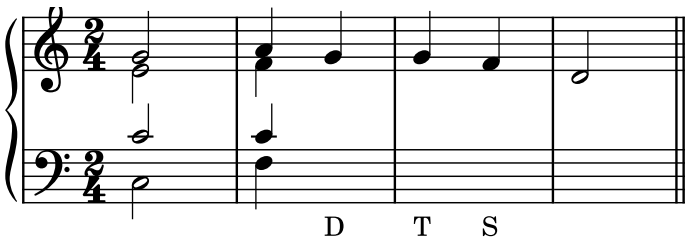
In this way, the harmonic layout of this melody becomes the following:

Example 4-60



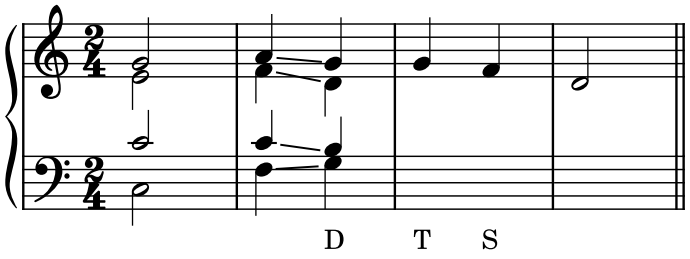
The reason why this treatment is incorrect is not only because it forms the D—S progression that should be avoided as much as possible, but also because, as we know, when two chords with a second relationship are connected, the bass should move in the opposite direction to the three upper voices. Here, the bass of the D to S in the third measure is a second down, so the upper voices should move up, but the melody is actually a second down. Therefore, it is impossible to connect D—S correctly in this case (and in principle, it should not be done). Based on the above analysis, the above configuration method cannot be used here, but only another method:

Example 4-61



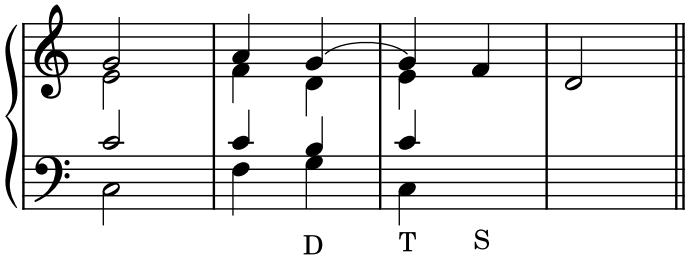
The S and D of the second measure should be connected by a melodic connection, with the bass moving up by a step and the three upper voices moving down.

Example 4-62



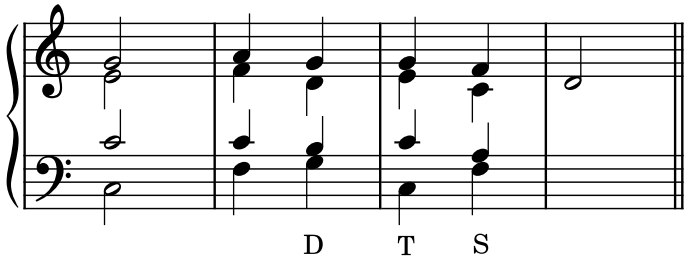
According to the considered layout, the next step should be the D-T harmonic connection (the common tone **g** remains stationary in the upper voice).

Example 4-63



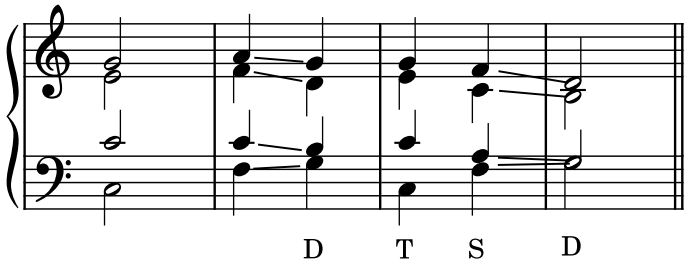
Then, the T—S of the third measure can be connected by a melodic connection.

Example 4-64



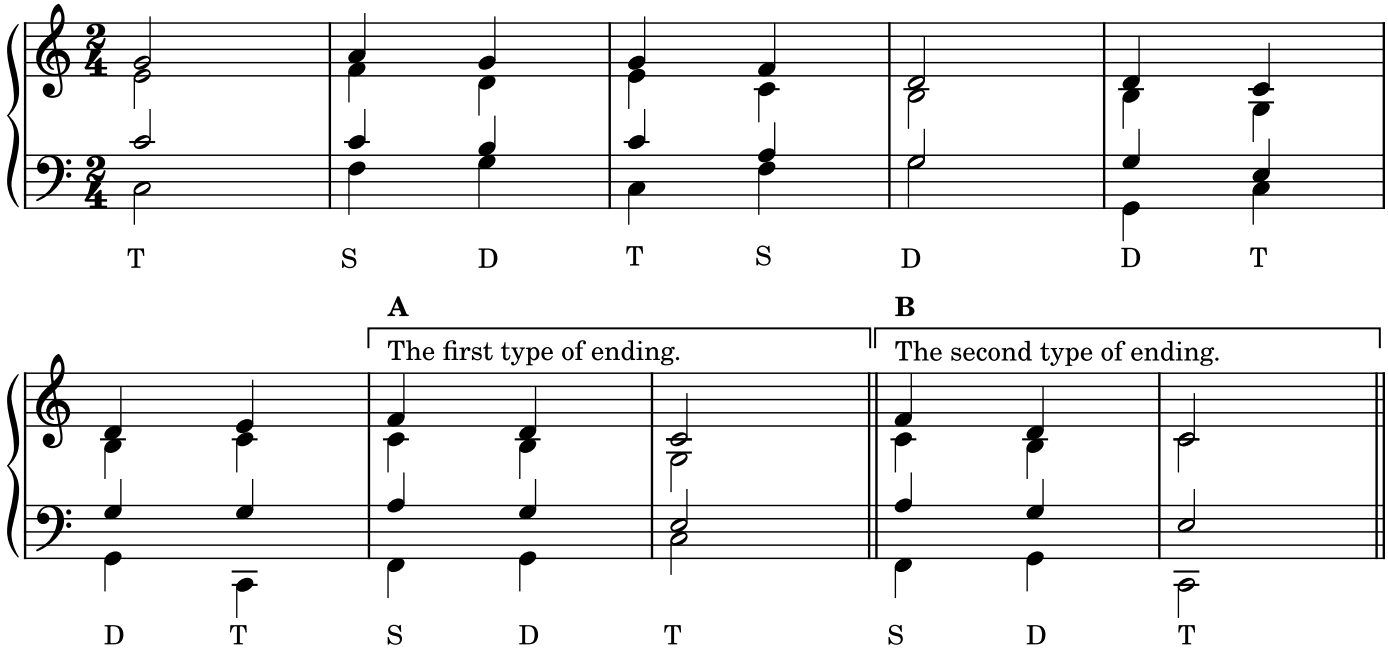
The fourth measure's **d** is the fifth note of the dominant chord (there is no other possible interpretation). Here, the bass should move in the opposite direction to the three upper voices (this is a typical method for connecting triad with a second relationship by melodic connection) to connect with the preceding subdominant chord.

Example 4-65



Analyzing the latter half of the specified melody using the same method yields the following harmony:

Example 4-66



Note the second type of ending where the tonic triad is incomplete; it lacks the fifth and has the root appearing three times. Omitting the fifth from the tonic triad does not compromise its functional clarity and doesn't significantly affect the fullness of the chord sonically. The basic purpose of using an incomplete tonic triad in the ending is to resolve the leading tone b in the middle voice to the root C of the tonic chord by tendency. It is a typical practice to use this incomplete tonic triad in the D—T progression at the end, when the fifth tone of the dominant triad moves down.

Here is an example of harmonizing the same example using open spacing. To avoid excessive ledger lines and too low a pitch range, we raise the melody by an octave.

Example 4-67