

Harmonizing a Melody

Melody harmonization is harder than figured bass realization because with a figured bass you have a harmonic design that is already well constructed.

In harmonizing a melody you must discover the best among the many harmonic possibilities.

You must also use your knowledge of harmonic progression (to be introduced momentarily) to eliminate the ungrammatical options among those many possibilities.

The Basic Process

- 0) ID key
- 1) Sing, analyzing phrase structure – label cadences
- 2) ID scale degrees (will become automatic)
- 3) List possible chords for each note
(use only chords – including inversions – that have been covered in class; so far, I, IV, and V, in major, i, iv, and V – not v! – in minor)
- 4) Fill in the things there is no question about (e.g because of scale degree, cadence participation, or rules of voice-leading and harmonic progression)
- 5) Compose the rest of the bass line
- 6) Write the inner voices

Rules of harmonic progression (so far)

- 1) Unless instructed otherwise, end with a PAC.
- 2) V doesn't lead to IV – this is called a **retrogression**.

V wants to lead on to I as the most basic progression of tonal harmony. A retrogression is very literally a moving backwards relative to the forward pull of V toward I.

2) Harmonic rhythm should not be syncopated.

Music generally features many simultaneous rhythms; the most obvious rhythms are those formed by the notes in each individual part, but other rhythms exist. One example is composite rhythm, the rhythm formed by combining all attack points; in the example below, the two parts form a composite rhythm of even eighth notes.



Harmonic rhythm is the rhythm with which chords change; the example below has a variety of rhythms in different parts, but the harmonic rhythm is even half notes.



Harmony is one of the most reliable indicators of meter; the chord changes almost always reinforce the meter. Contradicting the meter with the harmony is an error that is called **syncopated harmonic rhythm**; it occurs, as the name suggests, when the harmonic rhythm contains syncopations.

Composers have a variety of techniques – especially the use of strong motivic patterns – that can reinforce meter strongly enough that it can withstand syncopated harmonic rhythm, but in chorale style this is rarely possible. There are just two standard exceptions:

At the very beginning of the exercise, it is acceptable for an upbeat and the following downbeat both to have tonic harmony.

After a cadence, the new phrase can start with the same chord that the last phrase ended with, even if this syncopates harmonic rhythm.

The example below shows each of these exceptions, as well as three errors of syncopated harmonic rhythm.

