

**‘Direct’ (or ‘hidden’) intervals**Malcolm Sailor

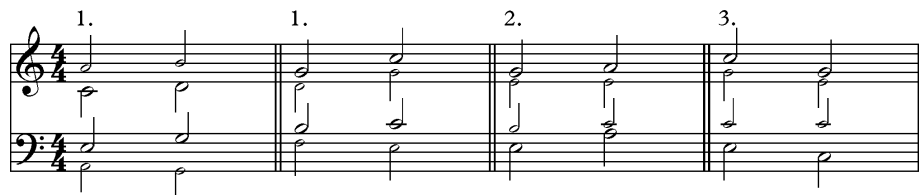
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“Direct” fifths or octaves occur when **two voices approach a perfect fifth or a perfect octave by similar (but not parallel) motion**. (They are sometimes also called “hidden” fifths or octaves.)

Direct fifths and octaves are sometimes prohibited in counterpoint and harmony textbooks. But they can be found regularly in actual music, so prohibiting them altogether seems a bit silly. Nevertheless, it’s true that, if we approach perfect intervals in similar motion, it can sometimes create a “hole” in the contrapuntal fabric similar to that created by parallel perfect intervals. Below I have attempted to give guidelines for how we will use direct intervals in this course.

Direct intervals are **ok** when

1. **at least one of the voices is an inner voice**
2. **the soprano steps**
3. **changing position within the same harmony**



**Figure 1:** Illustrating cases 1–3. The voices involved in the direct interval are in normal noteheads; the other voices are in small noteheads.

4. **they occur within a cadence**



**Figure 2:** Illustrating case 4. Bach, Invention no. 10 in G major

Direct intervals are to be **treated with caution** when they occur **between the outer voices and the soprano leaps**.

- In general, this will mainly occur as an instance of case 3 or 4 above.
- For our “first species” or “note-against-note” exercises, you should avoid direct intervals with soprano leaps unless one of the numbered cases above applies.
- Later in the course, you may use direct intervals with soprano leaps if, on consideration, you think that they sound good and allow you to write better counterpoint. In this case, you should add an annotation indicating that you are aware of the direct intervals.

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### Notes

Just in case there is any ambiguity, when I say “direct intervals” above, I am using this phrase as a shorthand for “direct perfect octaves and fifths.”

If you’re interested in a cognitive account of *why* direct intervals may need to be treated with caution, see David Huron’s *Voice Leading: The Science behind a Musical Art* (2016), (available online through the Yale library), chapters 7 and 12.