

HARMONY WITH DRONES*

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Abstract

Activities that introduce this simplest kind of harmony.

Drones - notes that do not change, or change very rarely - are the simplest type of musical accompaniment. Here is a lesson plan for introducing students to harmony, and to part singing, by having them learn this simplest type of accompaniment.

Goals and Standards

- **Goals** - The students will learn what the term **drone** refers to, in music, will learn to recognize drones when heard, and will learn to play or sing an appropriate drone along with a melody.
- **Music Standards Addressed** - National Standards for Music Education¹ standards 1 (singing, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music), 2 (performing on instruments, alone and with others, a varied repertoire of music), 6 (listening to, analyzing, and describing music),
- **Grade Level** - Recommended for grades 4-8, but with music of age-appropriate difficulty, adaptable for K-12.
- **Student Prerequisites** - Before attempting this lesson, the students should be able to sing a melody, together, with accurate pitch and rhythm. This lesson is a good one to begin the students' exploration of singing in parts.
- **Teacher Expertise** - Teacher expertise in training students in part-singing, and in conducting and accompanying a music class, is recommended.
- **Time Requirements** - Depends on the difficulty of the piece to be learned, and the students' abilities to learn parts quickly.
- **Objectives** - The students will listen to a short explanation, with musical examples, of drone accompaniment in music. The students will learn to sing a song, and will also learn to perform (on voice or instrument) the drone accompaniment for the song.
- **Evaluation** - Assess student learning by evaluating class participation in the singing and playing. You may also quiz students, following this lesson, by playing short audio examples and asking them whether the accompaniment is, or includes, a drone. Advanced students may be tested following all of the harmony lessons, by playing audio examples and asking them to identify the type of accompaniment (drone, chordal harmony, counterpoint, etc.).
- **Adaptations** - Students who cannot sing, or cannot sing well, may be asked to simply provide the drone accompaniment to a tune, on appropriate instruments. Students who are having trouble singing parts can be asked to sing the melody and play the drone accompaniment on a simple instrument.

*Version 1.6: Mar 11, 2011 4:59 pm +0000

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¹<http://menc.org/resources/view/national-standards-for-music-education>

- **Extensions** - Advanced music students may be asked to compose a tune with a drone, or to arrange an appropriate tune by adding a drone accompaniment.

Materials and Preparation

- If at all possible, arrange to play several different recordings for the class that include drone accompaniments. Audio recordings are fine, but if the drone is produced by an unfamiliar instrument, video recordings are even better. Bagpipe music or classical music from India will probably be the easiest examples to find, but some more uncommon instruments from various music traditions, like the Appalachian dulcimer (not the hammered dulcimer) may also have drones.
- Decide on a song to teach your students that has a drone part in the voice or on instruments. Collections of Scottish folk songs may include some useful arrangements, or you may use one of the arrangements below. **Get on Board** is recommended for younger or less musically experienced students, and **Rio Grand** is recommended for older or more musically experienced students.
- If the students are going to play rather than sing the drones, appropriate instruments must be provided. Bells, keyboard instruments, and stringed instruments are all recommended. Instruments that are difficult for students to play in tune (such as recorder), are not recommended. Instruments in which the sound dies away quickly (such as some xylophones) are not recommended.
- If it is possible, arrange to have a live demonstration, or have the class attend a concert, that includes bagpipes, tambura, or other traditional drone instrument.

Procedure

1. Explain to your students that a **drone** is the simplest kind of harmony. The melody is played along with one or two notes that never change, or change rarely.
2. Play your example recordings for them. Can they identify the drone notes by humming or singing along with the instruments?
3. Hand out the copies of the song you are going to teach them. Teach all of the students the melody, going over it as many times as necessary until they are confident.
4. Teach all of the students to sing or play a drone part.
5. Divide the class into groups, letting each group have a turn playing or singing the drone(s) while the other groups sing the melody. The melody should be louder than the drone, so the groups should only be large enough that one group can confidently play or sing the drone, and be heard.

Performance Notes for "Get on Board"

- If you feel the reference to the gospel is inappropriate for your classroom, you can easily change the word to something more secular or universal, for example "the freedom train..."
- The tune and lyrics are in the public domain. The arrangement is the author's and is covered by the same Creative Commons attribution license as the rest of this lesson; feel free to use it as long as the author and source are properly attributed.
- You can listen to a MIDI file² of the arrangement.
- Part 1 is the melody, to be sung. Part 2 is the drone, which may be sung on a simple syllable ("woo" might suggest a train sound, for example), sung using words from the melody, or played on an instrument.
- Drones are usually lower than the melody, but if the G drone is too low for young singers, they may sing it an octave higher than written. If the class can sing the melody high enough, you may prefer to transpose the entire arrangement to a higher key.
- This arrangement is compatible with the arrangements in Parallel Harmonies, Simple Chordal Harmony, Independent Harmonies, and Counterpoint Activities. You may want to use several of these arrangements together, in teaching or performance situations.

²<http://cnx.org/content/m11844/1.6/GetOnBoardDrone.MID>

Get On Board

Get on Board, Little Children

Traditional

1
Get on board lit-tle chil-dren, get on board lit-tle

2

This musical system consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in G major, 4/4 time, with lyrics: "Get on board lit-tle chil-dren, get on board lit-tle". The middle staff is a piano accompaniment for the right hand, and the bottom staff is for the left hand. A repeat sign is placed at the beginning of the first measure of the vocal line.

chil-dren, get on board lit-tle chil-dren, There's room for ma-ny a -

This musical system continues the piece with three staves. The top staff has lyrics: "chil-dren, get on board lit-tle chil-dren, There's room for ma-ny a -". The middle and bottom staves provide piano accompaniment. A repeat sign is placed at the beginning of the first measure of the vocal line.

Figure 1

The image displays a musical score for the hymn "Get on Board, Little Children". It consists of two systems of music. The first system (measures 2-8) includes a vocal line with lyrics: "more The more Gos - pel train's a - com - ing; I hear it just at". The second system (measures 13-19) includes a vocal line with lyrics: "hand: I hear the car wheels rum - bling and rol - ling through the land. Get on". Both systems feature piano accompaniment with a treble and bass clef. The score includes first and second endings for both the vocal and piano parts, and a "D.S. al Fine" instruction at the end of the second system.

Figure 2

Performance Notes for "Rio Grand"

- The tune and lyrics are in the public domain. The arrangement is the author's and is covered by the same Creative Commons attribution license as the rest of this lesson; feel free to use it as long as the author and source are properly attributed.
- It is probably historically accurate to use the "Texas" rather than the Spanish pronunciation: "REE-oh GRAND".
- You can listen to a MIDI file³ of the arrangement.
- Drones are usually lower than the melody. Altos should be able to sing the upper drone in this arrangement. To allow girls to sing both drones, you may either transpose the entire arrangement so that it sounds higher, or simply allow girls to sing the drones an octave higher than written. Although unusual, this can be effective, particularly if the boys are singing the melody in a lower octave.
- This arrangement is compatible with the arrangements in Parallel Harmonies, Simple Chordal Harmony, Independent Harmonies, and Counterpoint Activities. You may want to use several of these arrangements together, in teaching or performance situations.

³<http://cnx.org/content/m11844/1.6/RioGrandDrone.MID>

Rio Grand

Rio Grand

Traditional

1

I think I heard the old man say: Oh you Ri-o I

Mmm - - - Mmm Oh Ri-o

The first system of the musical score for 'Rio Grand' consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef with lyrics. The middle staff is a bass line in bass clef with lyrics. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 6/8 time signature.

5

think I heard the old man say: We're bound for Ri-o Grand. - And a -

Mmm - Mmm - Mmm - Mmm bound for Ri-o Grand.

The second system of the musical score continues from the first. It also consists of three staves: a vocal line with lyrics, a bass line with lyrics, and a piano accompaniment. The system is marked with a '5' at the beginning, indicating it is the fifth measure of the piece.

Figure 3

The image displays a musical score for the song "Rio Grand". It is written in 2/4 time and the key of D major. The score is divided into two systems. The first system begins at measure 2 and includes a vocal line with the lyrics "way for Ri-o. Oh, you Ri-o. So fare ye well, my" and a piano accompaniment with the lyrics "Way, a-way, away, Oh away, fare well". The second system begins at measure 14 and includes a vocal line with the lyrics "bon - nie young girl, and we're bound for Ri - o Grand." and a piano accompaniment with the lyrics "bon - nie girl, bound for Ri - o Grand." The piano accompaniment consists of a right-hand melody and a left-hand bass line.

Figure 4

NOTE: Thanks to everyone who participated in the survey! It was very useful to me, both as a researcher and as an author, to get a better picture of my readers' goals and needs. I hope to begin updating the survey results module in April. I will also soon begin making some of the suggested additions, and emailed comments are still welcome as always.