Connexions module: m35111

HARMONY IN WESTERN MUSIC*

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NOTE: Please note that you must have the most recent copy of Macromedia's Flash plugin installed to play the musical examples.

Harmonic practice in Western music evolved gradually over hundreds of years. At first, voices joined in **unison** to sing a **melody**. In the early Middle Ages, monophonic chant became **parallel organum**, where voices followed identical contours but with small improvisations.

Example 1

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at http://cnx.org/content/m35111/1.1/Veni Creator Spiritus.mp3>

Over time, the **organum** became more elaborate, with each voice becoming more independent. In this excerpt from **Leonin**, one voice moves slowly while the other more floridly decorates the melody.

Example 2

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at http://cnx.org/content/m35111/1.1/Organum.Viderunt omnes.mp3>

When the added voices broke free from the original melody, **polyphony**—multiple parts played together—was born.

Example 3

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at http://cnx.org/content/m35111/1.1/Perotin.Sederunt principes.mp3>

Once music was notated, as opposed to improvised, composers became interested in studying and controlling the vertical possibilities. Still, music was primarily viewed "horizontally"—that is, as the sum of melodies. Just as social institutions arose to enable people to live together, harmony began as a way of enabling melodies to "coexist."

Example 4

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at http://cnx.org/content/m35111/1.1/Palestrina.Kyrie.mp3

Whereas "harmony" is not a well-defined and separate category in the music of many cultures, it became a central pre-occupation of European music. Chords were classified; progressions were created that were shared from piece to piece. Whereas harmony originated as the result of melodies being combined, now the reverse could happen: Harmony could generate melodies.

For instance, a harmonic progression nicknamed the "Gregory Walker" underlies many American folk songs, including Boil Them Cabbages and Home on the Range.

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Connexions module: m35111 2

Example 5

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at http://cnx.org/content/m35111/1.1/Boil Them Cabbages.mp3>

Example 6

This media object is an audio file. Please view or download it at http://cnx.org/content/m35111/1.1/Home on the Range.mp3>

When harmonic progressions started to get nicknames, a lot had changed since the 14th century! Just as social institutions can develop their own identity and legacy, harmonic practice took on a life of its own. Thinking harmonically has now become common-place: Pop and jazz artists frequently perform from lead sheets that indicate the chord changes. Throughout the world, melodies that were originally performed **monophonically** are now harmonized. What began as a resultant property of melodies became a foundation of music.