

CHAPTER 1

PRINCIPLES OF PART WRITING FOR VOICES

THE basic principles of good part writing are essential tools for the choral arranger. Although these principles are, in varying degrees, also applicable to two-part, three-part and multiple-part writing, in this first chapter they will be considered in the most traditional voicing for chorus — four-part writing.

Vocal ranges

Ranges for the respective voices of the mixed chorus are shown below. White notes show the normal ranges for most non-professional groups; black notes represent extensions of these ranges for exceptional and professional choruses. The latter should be employed sparingly even under the most favorable circumstances and reserved for short climactic fortissimo passages or for special effects. These passages must be short because prolonged singing in extremely high or low tessitura will overtax the voices.

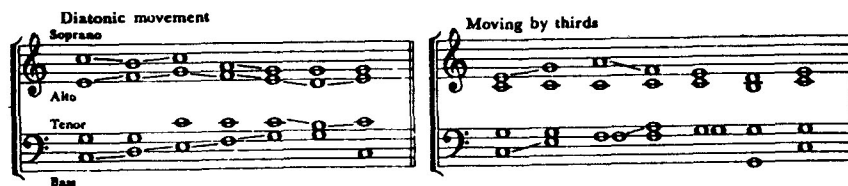
In writing unison passages for either beginning or advanced groups, limited use of the extended ranges is permissible in the downward extension for Soprano and Tenor and the upward extension for Alto and Bass, provided these voices need not strain to maintain volume but can rely on the sections still in normal ranges.



Discussion of ranges for special groups of voices will be found in sections dealing with those groupings.

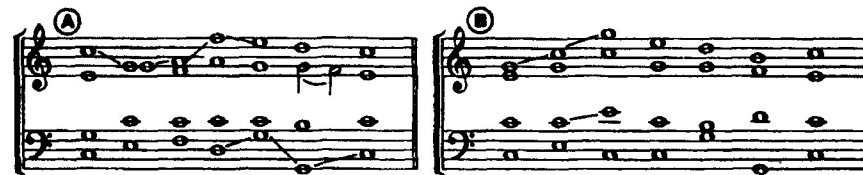
Melodic voice parts

The fundamental law of good part writing requires that each part move smoothly and melodically. Corollaries to this law are that, (1) diatonic (stepwise) movement and leaps of a third are always good.

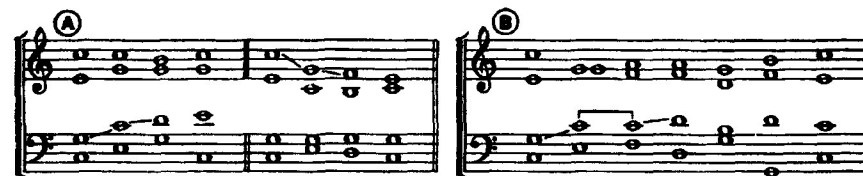


(2) leaps greater than a third are more difficult and must be handled with greater care. Rules which apply are:

a) After a wide leap, a melodic line usually changes direction, as in (A), but may continue in the same direction when moving within the same chord, as in (B).



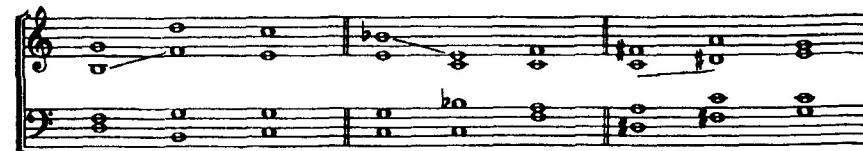
b) The melodic line may likewise continue in the same direction if the movement following the leap is diatonic (See (A)), or if the tone to which the wide leap is made is sustained long enough to imply a new melodic starting point, as in (B).



Difficult intervals

Certain intervals are quite difficult to sing and should be avoided, particularly when writing for inexperienced groups. The most hazardous intervals are augmented seconds and augmented fourths upward, and diminished fifths downward.

An exception to this rule occurs when voices merely shift position within the same chord, in which case, these intervals are readily heard because another voice will be sounding the note to which a leap must be made.



Some of the difficulties arising from the use of augmented seconds may be resolved through judicious voice leading. Observe that smooth voice leading in **Ⓐ** required doubling the third in a tonic chord. In such situations good voice leading usually takes precedence over the traditionally recommended doubling within isolated chord structures.

Two musical staves are shown side-by-side. The left staff, labeled **Ⓐ Awkward voice leading**, shows a vocal line with a sharp interval (augmented second) between two notes, which is difficult to sing. The right staff, labeled **Ⓑ Good voice leading**, shows the same phrase with a smoother interval (minor third) achieved by doubling the third of the chord, making it easier to sing.

When alteration of voice leading is impractical, enharmonic spelling may be used. In **Ⓐ**, the augmented second from C to D sharp is difficult to hear and sing. In **Ⓑ**, the same interval spelled enharmonically becomes a minor 3rd, C to E flat, and is now easy to sing.

Two musical staves are shown side-by-side. The left staff, labeled **Ⓐ Awkward spelling**, shows a vocal line with a sharp interval (augmented second) between two notes, which is difficult to hear and sing. The right staff, labeled **Ⓑ Enharmonic spelling**, shows the same phrase with the interval spelled as a minor third (C to E flat), making it easier to hear and sing.

Close voicing and open voicing

Close voicing is spacing vocal parts with the three upper voices within an octave, as in **Ⓐ**. Open voicing is spacing the voice parts with the upper three voices spanning an interval greater than an octave, as in **Ⓑ**.

Two musical staves are shown side-by-side. The left staff, labeled **Ⓐ Close voicing**, shows a choral setting where the three upper voices (Soprano, Alto, Tenor) are spaced within an octave. The right staff, labeled **Ⓑ Open voicing**, shows a choral setting where the three upper voices are spaced over an interval greater than an octave.

Because continued use of either closed or open voicing tends to result in stylistic monotony, free interchange between the two is recommended, except when a monochrome effect is desired. (See Exs. 12, 13, 14.)

Male and treble voice intensity

The difference in the relative intensity of the same note as sung by male and treble voices frequently confuses the inexperienced arranger. The problem can perhaps best be visualized by considering the difference in tonal timbre which results from the mezzo-forte sounding of the G above Middle C by a Soprano and by a Tenor. The Soprano is singing in a comfortable middle register, whereas the Tenor is nearing the top of his normal range, and to reach this pitch must make a relatively greater effort. His vocal timbre therefore will have a greater intensity, creating the illusion that he is sounding a much higher note than the Soprano.

This difference in timbre applies in varying degrees to all the relationships between male and female voices, and must be carefully taken into account by the arranger when choosing voice placements for the notes in each chord. The basic principle may be stated as follows: Any given pitch will appear to sound higher when sung by a male voice than will the same pitch sung by a treble voice.

Example **Ⓐ** illustrates normal spacing with all voices in their middle register where they will sound with approximately the same intensity. In **Ⓑ** Soprano, Alto and Bass voices are still in their middle registers, but the Tenors are near the top of their range where they will predominate because of greater vocal intensity.

Two musical staves are shown side-by-side. The left staff, labeled **Ⓐ Normal spacing**, shows a choral setting where all voices are in their middle registers and spaced normally. The right staff, labeled **Ⓑ Unusual spacing**, shows a choral setting where the Tenors are near the top of their range, making their voices predominate.

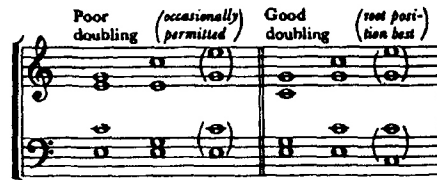
Such spacing is sometimes desirable. In situations where a more stentorian quality is indicated, the closeness of the upper three parts and the intensity of timbre of the high Tenor may produce exactly the desired result. Similarly, in situations where prominence for Tenor or Bass parts is needed to point up a contrapuntal line, effective use may be made of this characteristic of male voices. In order to observe the operation of this principle and to be able to calculate carefully the effect of any variation from normal range relationships, the student should hear the above examples as well as others. A few moments of careful listening will prove more instructive than many paragraphs of explanation.

Limits of intervals between voices

The general rule for spacing vocal parts is that no two adjacent parts should be separated by more than an octave. Greater intervals may occasionally be permitted if they are not long continued and if needed to achieve smooth voice leading. The use of larger intervals between Tenor and Bass voices is more common than between Tenor and Alto or Alto and Soprano. This rule, as with others applying to part writing, defines generally advisable procedure, and may be disregarded when the musical circumstances require an unusual treatment. The general rule is illustrated in the following examples.

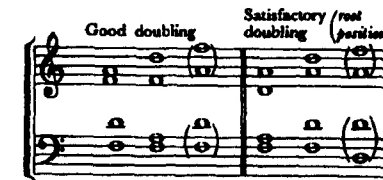
**Doublings**

The doubling of notes in all triads is governed by the basic principle that the best tones to double are the principal steps of the scale, the tonic, dominant and subdominant. From this principle follows the rule that in the principal triads, I, IV and V, the root is doubled when these chords appear in root position, while in inversions either the root or the fifth may be doubled. The corollary to this rule prohibits the doubling of the third, particularly when these chords are used in first inversion, with the third in the bass. Since it is the first inversion which is most apt to be troublesome, we illustrate doublings within the tonic chord in that position. These also apply to the dominant and subdominant chords.



From the principle that the best tones to double are the principal steps of the scale, the tonic, dominant and subdominant, we derive also the rule that the

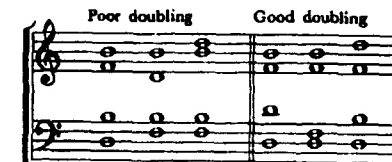
third is the best tone to double in the subordinate triads, II, III, and VI. The roots of these chords may also be doubled because of their harmonic importance to these structures; in inversions the fifth may be doubled. We illustrate doublings in the II chord in first inversion in the following example. Similar doublings apply to the III and VI chords.



The foregoing rules for doublings apply in general to both major and minor triads. The outstanding exception is the II chord in minor keys, which is a diminished triad and therefore requires inversion. First inversion is best with either root or, more commonly, the third being doubled. The following examples illustrate correct and incorrect doublings.



The triad on the seventh step of the scale, the leading tone, is infrequently used. Again, as a diminished triad it requires inversion, first inversion being best with anything doubled except the leading tone.



In dominant seventh chords in root position, the fifth may be omitted and the root doubled. Unless the melodic line necessitates this, it is just as well to include all four tones of the chord.



In inversions of the dominant seventh chords, all four tones must be included.



All rules for doublings in dominant seventh chords apply equally to secondary sevenths, diminished chords, and augmented sixth chords. In the latter, it is usually inadvisable to use inversions which do not permit inclusion of the interval of the augmented sixth.



In dominant ninth chords in root position the least important of the five tones, the fifth, is omitted.



In all inversions of dominant ninth chords the root is omitted. In major keys the ninth must not appear in the bass in traditional harmonization.

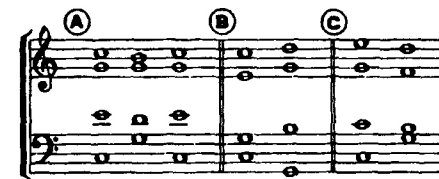


Rules for doubling of parts apply only to traditional choral writing in which the bass voices carry the fundamental bass line of the harmonic structure. In other types of writing, particularly those using parallel motion, they may be disregarded.

Chord progression in traditional style

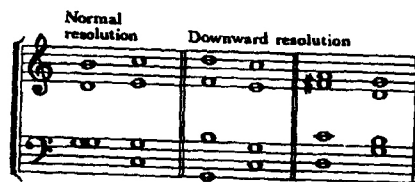
Common tones

A tone common to two consecutive chords should usually be retained in the same voice as in (A), though occasional exceptions will occur as in (B) and (C). In the latter, the G is a common tone not retained in the same voice.

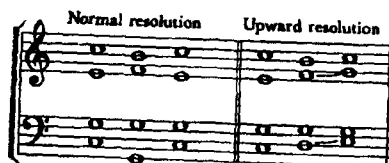


Tonal tendencies

The leading tone, the seventh step of the scale, has a strong tendency to resolve upward, and this tendency should usually be respected. Occasionally a downward leap of a third to the dominant is permitted in an inner part to attain complete harmonization of the tonic chord. This liberty is more common in close voicing where the inner parts are heard less prominently.



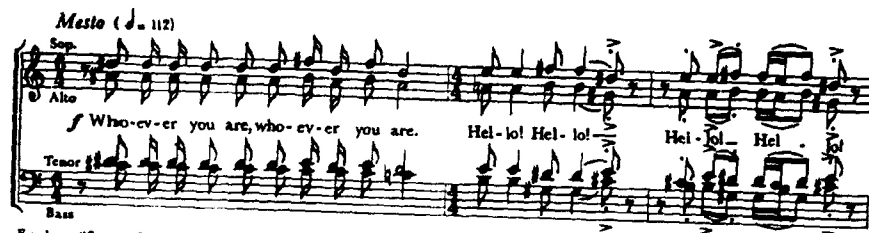
In dominant seventh chords the normal resolution of the seventh is downward, but occasional upward resolution is permitted when the seventh ascends diatonically in thirds or tenths with the bass.



Consecutive fifths and octaves

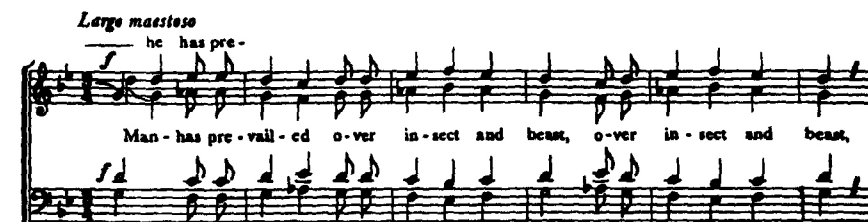
The traditional prohibition against consecutive fifths and octaves is soundly based upon the principle that they reduce the number of independent vocal lines and tend to create an effect of stiffness and rigidity. The prohibition still applies in traditional four-part work and is a valuable means of achieving smooth part writing.

In current usage many composers disregard this prohibition, particularly when they desire an effect of rugged strength which may actually be enhanced by the stiffness and rigidity of parallel fifths and octaves. The following two examples illustrate this usage in modern writing. The student should be cautioned to use parallel fifths and octaves only when he is sure their effect is desired.



Ex. 1 "Song of the Open Road" — N. Dello Joio
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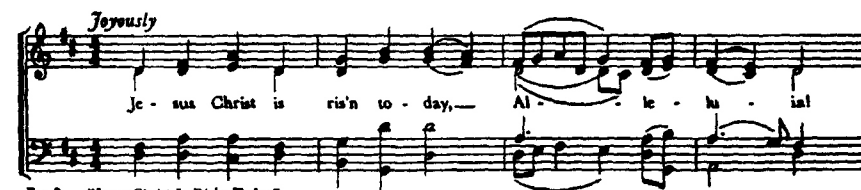
CHORAL ARRANGING



Ex. 2 "Songs of Conquest" — H. McDonald
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Contrary motion

Good traditional part writing requires the use of contrary motion in one or more parts whenever possible. As a corollary, when contrary motion is impractical, one or more parts should retain the tones common to consecutive chords. These procedures impart to the writing that sense of balance and solidity which is characteristic of the traditional style illustrated in Ex. 3.



Ex. 3 "Jesus Christ Is Risen Today"

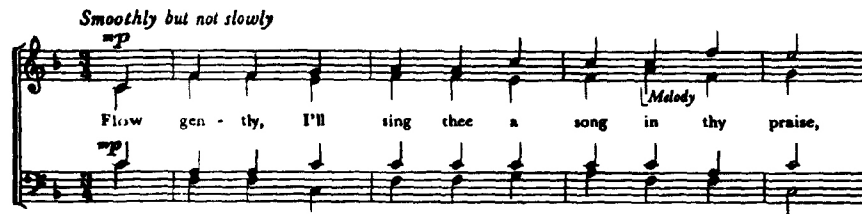
A number of exceptions to the preceding rules will be noted throughout this volume in treating musical materials suggesting emphasis on buoyancy and movement. In such instances, parallel motion in all parts is recommended. One such situation is illustrated in the following example, which shows the surging effect of an upward and downward sweep in parallel motion.



Ex. 4

Dividing the melody among various parts

Though this device is used mainly in writing for four-part male voices (T.T.B.B.) and will be discussed later in that section, it is occasionally useful in S.A. T.B. scoring. Discreetly employed, it adds interest to the writing, giving a more melodic character to inner parts. To avoid the danger of obscuring the melodic line, it is advisable to suggest, through a footnote, that a few "roving" voices be assigned to the melody throughout such an interchange.



Ex. 9 "Flow Gently Sweet Afton"

Chromatic and dissonant passages

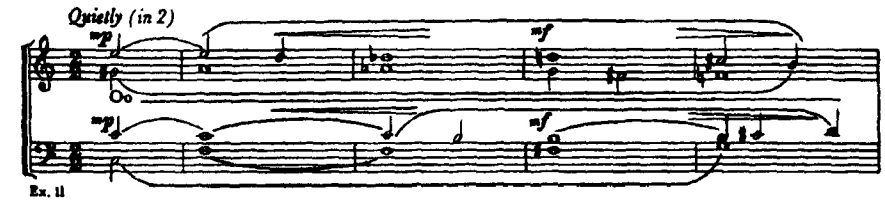
The vocalist, unlike the player of a keyed instrument, must be able to hear mentally each pitch before sounding it. This circumstance imposes rather severe limitations upon the choral arranger in writing chromatic or dissonant passages. He must be acutely aware of vocalists' limitations in general, and particularly those of the group for whom he is writing. The tempo must be moderate enough to permit mental anticipation of all the intervals. In faster tempos there is little likelihood of satisfactory performance of chromatic and dissonant passages.

In chromatic passages which move rapidly, unison writing rather than harmonization is often the most effective as well as the most easily performed treatment.



Ex. 10

In writing dissonant passages, it is advisable to prepare the dissonant tones by including them in the previous chords. If such preparation is impracticable, approach the dissonance step-wise or by leaps no greater than a third.



Ex. 11

SUMMARY

The foregoing principles should serve as a guide in developing the ability to write choral parts that are singable and effective, and also achieve good choral balance. The experienced arranger will not be rigidly confined by these rules in all situations, but they should be carefully observed by the beginner. Gradually he will recognize with assurance those situations in which these principles may be safely disregarded.

The student must hear as many as possible of his own arrangements in performance, noting particularly any awkwardness of voice leading or muddiness of texture. Study of these passages will usually disclose a violation of one or more of the principles given here, and will indicate the necessary alterations. Adherence to this procedure for a reasonable length of time will result in a greatly improved command of the techniques of good part writing.

Reference or Study Suggestions

1. Review selections from standard repertoire as to how they illustrate part writing principles discussed in Chapter One.
2. Make a detailed analysis of a traditional (homophonic) composition showing the ways in which the following are effected:
 - a) voice ranges
 - b) use of close and open voicing
 - c) doubling of notes within chords
 - d) crossing of parts
 - e) use of contrary motion
3. Study a contemporary arrangement by comparing the part writing with more traditional practices; itemize the differences and similarities.

Akkordegne

Gennemgangs-
(ubetonet)

Betonings-

Et Forudholds Opløsning til andet forventet

Oversprungen opløsningerne ved at andre stemmer bevæger sig samtidig med at forudholdet opløses; is forudholdsakkorden til en anden akkord end forventet – se Fig. 3

Fig. 3 Akkorderne ved choldsakkorder, hvor den dissonerende tone opløses samtidig med, at andre stemmer bevæger sig opstår en ny akkord. I det nederste system er opløsningen af de to forudholdsakkorder

a) b) e) f) g)

Afsmiitng af gennemgangstoner

1 Tonika 2 Akkordfremmede toner

3 G 4 G 5 G 6 G

7 Subdominant 8 Akkordfremmede toner

9 C^b D G 10 C^b D G 11 C C^b (F^b) G 12

13 Dominant 14 Akkordfremmede toner

15 D7 16 D7 17 D7 18 D7 G

Et par eksempler fra "Hvad synger du om, så højt i det blå"

19 G 20 21 22 23 24 25

Lille vejledning i 4-stemmig sats efter leadsheet af trad. sang

Efter E.A.Wessberg

Forlægget er becifringssatsen fra WH Sangbogen 1.

Tonearten ændres fra F-dur til G-dur for at løfte sopranen lidt op fra de dybeste steder (c¹ og d¹).

1. Bas tilføjes

Modbevægelse til melodien tilstræbes

1

2. Udfyld med akkordtoner

Stemmeføring: Nærmeste vej!

2

3. Udjævning af uheldig stemmeføring

3

I overgangen fra takt 3 til 4 ses nu en sløjfe. Bassen går over den tonehøjde, tenoren var på i akkorden før. Dette er ikke nødvendigvis dårlig sats, men det hører til det, vi gerne undgår, hvis vi kan.

3

4. Akkordfremmede toner – afsmitning i andre stemmer

4

5. Forudhold

5

My Lord, What a Morning

Swing Low

2. Swing low...
If you get there before I do,
Comin' for to carry me home.
Tell all my friends I'm comin' too.
Comin' for to carry me home.

3. Swing low...
The brightest day that I ever saw,
Comin' for to carry me home.
When Jesus washed my sins away,
Comin' for to carry me home.