

## MUSIC THEORY.aargh©

### Performance – 3 (Session 30) Every Rehearsal is a Performance: Harmony

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#### **How do I ensure that the performance of a piece written for handbell choir creates the sound that the composer intended?**

The composer's most straightforward indicators are those of tempo, dynamic and articulation as we discussed in Session 28. The composer's score notation also tells us about the melody (Session 29), rhythm, **harmony**, texture, tone color and form.

**Harmony** is the vertical in music. Harmony in music developed slowly from the addition of one pitch above or below a given melody note to addition of several pitches. This began in about the 9<sup>th</sup> century. By the time of J.S. Bach (1685-1750) triads (three note chords) were established, as were some four-note chords. This column has addressed features of harmony (Sessions 19-27). Basically, any note of the scale can be the "root" of a chord. Notes used above that root are in intervals of thirds and fifths. Further extension can be made with addition of intervals of the seventh, ninth, eleventh, and thirteenth. (Chords can also be built using intervals of even numbers as we see in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.) The basis of the chord is still the "root". How this root relates to the scale differs by the relationship of its root to the Tonic of the scale, the first scale degree. (In the C Major scale tonic is C.)

**Harmonic progression** or **Harmonic motion** refers to the change in harmony within a composition. Harmony will support the main pitches of the melody. The change of harmony will have its own logic, it will be neither too static nor too overelaborate. Harmony will provide a steady foundation that will always be there no matter how decorated other elements of the composition are, elements such as rhythm, melody, texture, color of sound and overall form.

Harmonic motion is guided by consonance and dissonance. Consonance and dissonance can be categorized in successive sounds. Some sound seems to require "resolution" where others are "stable". Consonance and dissonance concepts are different from one person to another, from one era to another, from one composition to another, from one society to another. However, it is the relationship of consonance and dissonance that guides the harmony in a composition.

**Can you find the most structurally important chords in the handbell composition you are preparing?** Tonic, dominant and subdominant chords, chords built on the first, fifth and fourth scale degrees are these chords. Where do these chords appear? How can you stress their appearance? Do these chords create consonance and stability in the composition? How will you make this happen? Do tempo, dynamic and articulations influence their stress?

**Can you find chords in the composition that are decorating and intensifying the harmonic motion?** How will dynamics and tempo be affected by these chords? Is there resolution moving away from these chords? How do you build the performance of the composition to create the peaks of harmonic stability and instability required by the composer?

Remember that Aaron Copland stressed that "melodies cannot be submerged by the accompanying material." \* As interesting as the harmonic consonance and dissonance is for both the ringer and the listener, melody must be foremost in the performance. But, the fun part begins when the melody is harmonized and dissonance leading to consonance is achieved. Tension and relaxation paired with tempo, texture and dynamics will let the composition speak as the composer intended.

\*Copland, Aaron, **What to Listen For in Music**, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1957.

Until next time,

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