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Roger Graybill

Drawing Inspiration from Europe

A Three-Pronged Approach to Keyboard Pedagogy

Introduction

In the introduction to his book *Teaching Approaches to Music Theory*, the American author Michael Rogers states its underlying premise as follows: »The common distinction in theory teaching between written skills (part-writing, composition, analysis, etc.) and aural skills (dictation, sightsinging, etc.) is an artificial one [...] Finding ways to eliminate the distinction should be one of the primary goals of theory teaching.«¹ Similarly, he later refers to the importance of integrating the »conceptual and perceptual components of students' training«, and he offers a simple diagram to illustrate the symbiotic relationship between »thinking« and »listening«.²

Rogers' book is well regarded in the United States, and for good reason: it advocates for a close relationship between conceptualization and aural experience, and with great sensitivity and creativity. Yet something seems to be missing: What role does keyboard training play in this pedagogical model? Rogers devotes only two pages to keyboard, about which he states, »from the standpoint of a theory program [...] the central justification for a keyboard component is [...] as *reinforcement* of conceptual skills.« The key word here is »reinforcement«, which Rogers even puts in italics; it seems clear that keyboard plays a supporting role in his pedagogical model, not a primary and essential one.

Such a view of keyboard harmony in fact reflects a nearly universal attitude in American undergraduate pedagogy. And this is manifested in American curricula. In a 2002 survey of music programs throughout the United States, Richard Nelson observes that only slightly over half of the 248 schools he surveyed reported requiring one or two years of keyboard, and that in the vast majority

1 Rogers 2004, p. xv.

2 Ibid., p. viii.

of those cases, keyboard harmony was taught as part of piano class instead of through the theory curriculum. In addition, fifty-two of the schools required no keyboard of any kind.³ There has been no comprehensive survey since Nelson's study, but there is little evidence to suggest that the picture has changed appreciably since then.

This state of affairs serves as a backdrop to the present essay, which is inspired by a sabbatical project that I undertook in spring 2014. During that time I visited several music schools in Europe – the Conservatorium van Amsterdam, the Universität der Künste (UdK) in Berlin, the Hochschule für Musik und Theater Rostock, the Hochschule für Musik Freiburg, and the Hochschule Luzern – Musik – in search of a keyboard-based pedagogy that I could in some way incorporate within my own teaching in the United States.⁴ The remainder of this essay describes a particular feature of European keyboard pedagogy that I found to be especially interesting, and then considers the practical question of how to transfer that pedagogical approach from Europe to an American institutional setting. While the resulting essay may seem of most relevance for American readers,⁵ I hope it will interest European readers as well, since it will shed light on certain American assumptions about music theory.

A final caveat before launching into the first part of the essay: the primary purpose of my pedagogical tour of Europe was not to conduct a comprehensive survey of European pedagogy, but rather to take inspiration for my own teaching. What I found to be interesting and engaging was inextricably linked to, and even colored by, that objective. For this reason, my observations are highly selective; moreover, much of this essay will be subjective in tone, with considerable emphasis on first-person observations.

A Three-Pronged Approach to Keyboard Pedagogy

Each of the schools I visited featured keyboard work in at least one of the classes I observed. The small classes sizes (generally between three and eight students) facilitated such keyboard work, and the activities included melody harmonization, the playing of figured bass exercises (including sequences and

3 Nelson 2002.

4 I am a member of the music theory faculty at New England Conservatory in Boston.

5 Throughout the rest of this essay, I will use the designation ›American‹ as shorthand for ›North American.‹

the Rule of the Octave), and the playing back of melodies from a recording. As an outside observer, I found the diversity of keyboard activities to be not only stimulating but also rather bewildering, since it was difficult to imagine how I could incorporate them within an American textbook-based curriculum in an organic way. Eventually I came to see that this objective was too limited, however; perhaps what I was really seeking was not some keyboard exercises that could be plugged into a pre-existing American curriculum, but rather a coherent and full-fledged keyboard regimen with the potential to *transform* such a curriculum.

A decisive shift in my thinking occurred during my visit to Rostock, where I had the opportunity to discuss keyboard training with Jan Philipp Sprick. He and a faculty member of the Rostock *Schulmusik* department, Philip Peter, had co-authored an unpublished keyboard manual for the *Schulmusik* students there.⁶ The manual proposes a three-pronged approach to keyboard harmony, involving a focus on (1) cadential harmony (*Kadenzielle Harmonik*), (2) the Rule of the Octave, and (3) sequences.⁷ The individual components of this tripartite categorization (which, as I eventually discovered, is well known in German theory pedagogy) explore different aspects of tonal harmony. Peter and Sprick explicitly regard cadential progressions and sequences as complementary, noting that »sequences, in contrast to the goal-directness of the cadence, are in principle designed as an endless progression. To a certain extent, they form a dialectical opposition to the harmonic definiteness of cadential processes.«⁸ Furthermore, while the authors are less explicit about this, the Rule of the Octave in turn complements both of the other two categories. First, the Rule pedagogically complements cadential progressions by highlighting the harmonic implications of the bass line *prior to* the cadence. Second, the Rule instills an acute awareness of the bass as a series of scale degree functions, while a sequence weakens such awareness by transposing a harmonic/melodic pattern – which of course includes the bass – to different pitch levels.⁹

6 Peter/Sprick 2009.

7 While the third unit focuses primarily on sequences, it does include three non-sequential patterns (*Satzmodelle*) that feature a chromatic bass (for instance, the ›*Lamento-Bass*‹).

8 »Sequenzen sind im Gegensatz zur Zielgerichtetheit der Kadenz prinzipiell auf eine unendliche Fortschreitung hin angelegt. Sie bilden gewissermaßen ein dialektisches Gegenmodell zur harmonischen Eindeutigkeit kadenzieller Prozesse« (p. 19).

9 This point is elaborated in Graybill 2017, pp. 286–87.

Considered together, then, these three prongs of keyboard-harmony instruction – cadences, the Rule, and sequences – comprise a remarkably comprehensive model of harmonic progression. Moreover, while this progression model differs in significant ways from what is found in American textbooks, we see some tantalizing areas of overlap as well. The next portion of this essay considers whether and how such a keyboard regimen might be adapted to an American theory curriculum.

Adapting a three-pronged keyboard pedagogy for American curricula

Of the three keyboard-harmony ›prongs‹ discussed above, cadential progressions are most easily accommodated within American curricula. Virtually all American theory texts agree on the importance of cadences, and those texts that incorporate a keyboard component generally put a great deal of emphasis on cadences as well. Even so, the Peter/Sprick text suggests ways of expanding the role for keyboard cadences in the American curriculum. The authors systematically explore possible variants of authentic cadences on the keyboard, incorporating a variety of chromatically altered pre-dominant chords – for instance, the Neapolitan sixth or the augmented sixth. Moreover, Peter and Sprick regard the plagal cadence as a rich domain in its own right, including progressions such as $ii_5^6 - I$ and $bII^6 - I$.¹⁰ Such emphasis on the plagal cadence and its variants tends to be underplayed in American pedagogy, no doubt due in large part to the influence of Schenkerian theory with its emphasis on the tonic-dominant axis. However, given the increasing importance of plagal cadences towards the end of the nineteenth century, it may be advisable to incorporate them, at least later in the curriculum.

Unlike cadential progressions, the Rule of the Octave resists an easy transfer to the American keyboard curriculum.¹¹ Part of the problem is that the Rule represents a distillation of a keyboard-based practice that has not survived within the modern academy. As Robert O. Gjerdingen notes, the Rule of the Octave is

10 Peter and Sprick use Riemannian labels, hence S_5^6 for ii_5^6 and S^a for bII^6 .

11 Christensen 1992 and Jans 2007 provide good introductions to the Rule and its history. Sánchez-Kisielewska 2017 considers the role it might play in the American undergraduate curriculum.

not to be understood »as a fixed set of chords, but rather a summary or norm of the fluid and highly contingent practices of eighteenth-century musicians.«¹² But what would it mean for a student to learn the Rule without being versed in such practices? In particular, if the student is not engaged in a rigorous figured-bass regimen, what benefit would the Rule offer the student?

An adaptation of the Rule for contemporary American pedagogy would need to update and simplify Gjerdingen's formulation. As his statement implies, the original purpose of the Rule allows for myriad realizations and elaborations (including improvisation). Yet there is no reason why we could not identify one such realization as especially representative of 18th century practice and ask students to learn that particular realization. In effect, we would be converting a single manifestation of the ›myriad possibilities‹ into an exemplary model progression that merits close attention in its own right. In fact, the student could learn several such variants – say, one containing only triads, and another that includes seventh chords. Yet another possibility is to split the Rule into two components: a lower pentachord ($\hat{1}$ -to- $\hat{5}$ and $\hat{5}$ -to- $\hat{1}$ in the bass) and an upper tetrachord ($\hat{5}$ up to $\hat{1}$ and $\hat{1}$ down to $\hat{5}$) and have students learn a few variants of each at the appropriate time.¹³

There is no question, however, that reducing the Rule into one or two model keyboard progressions considerably devalues its original pedagogical purpose. One may fairly ask: Does the effort spent in learning such models yield a sufficient pay-off for the students? One can make a strong case that it does. Since the Rule assigns a characteristic harmony (or several such harmonies) to each scale degree in the bass, it provides the student with a tool for harmonizing an unfigured bass; moreover, it aids the student in reading the harmonic implications of a bass line in a score. This latter benefit would be of special value in the American curriculum with its strong orientation towards analysis.

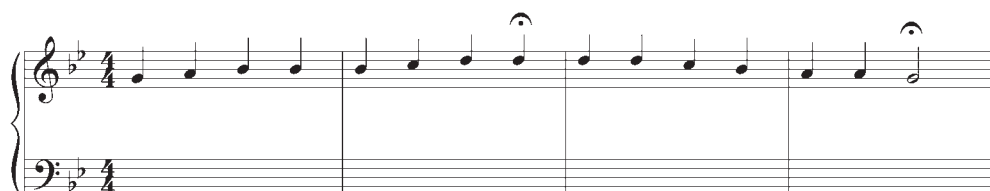
The *sequence*, which constitutes the third component of a tripartite keyboard pedagogy, occupies a comfortable niche within the typical American curriculum. Moreover, those texts that do incorporate keyboard tend to assign a rather prominent role to sequential keyboard exercises. Thus the sequential material in the Peter/Sprick text might seem easily adaptable to an American pedagogical context. This statement requires some qualification, however, since the sequence

12 Gjerdingen, N.d.

13 One such variant might be to extend the lower boundary of the $\hat{1}$ -to- $\hat{5}$ pentachord with a neighboring scale degree $\hat{7}$.

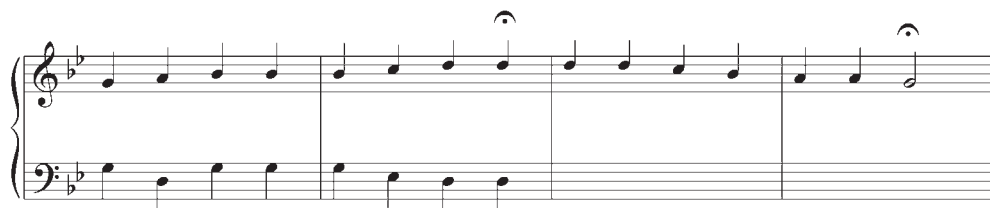
appears to play a different role in their text (and in European pedagogy in general) than in the United States. Indeed, the very fact that the Peter/Sprick text elevates sequences to full partnership within a three-pronged keyboard pedagogy is one indication of that; such emphasis seems out-of-sync with the priorities of the typical American curriculum, which confines sequences to one or two units of study.

The difference between American and European approaches to sequences is best illustrated through an anecdote from my visit in Rostock. I was observing Jan Philipp Sprick teaching a second-semester class, and on that day he was introducing the students to chorale harmonization with the chorale tune *Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig* (Example 1).



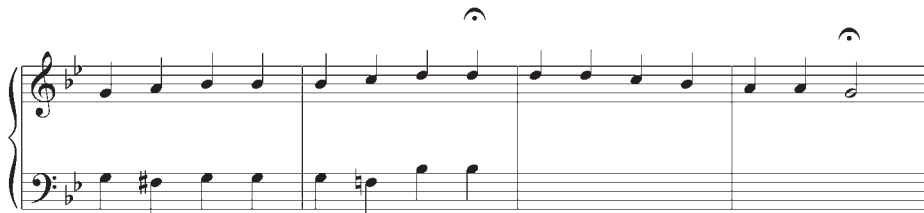
Example 1: *Ach wie flüchtig, ach wie nichtig*, first two phrases

The class considered two possible basses for measures 1–2; one possibility is shown in Example 2, and a second in Example 3. In this second option, the instructor referred to the progression in m. 2 as being derived from a *Dur-Moll-Parallelismus* progression, with which the students already were familiar.¹⁴



Example 2: possible bass-line solution for the first phrase

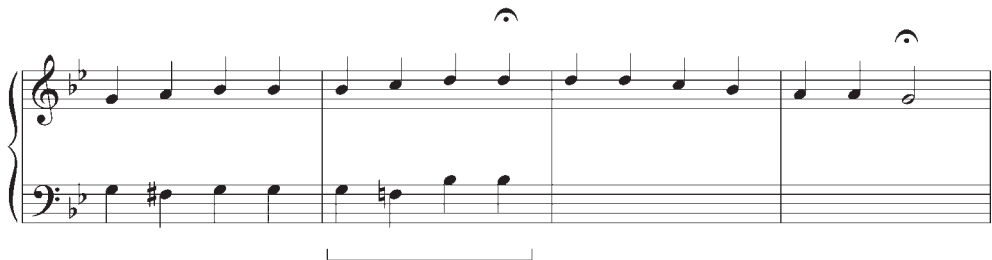
¹⁴ The term *Dur-Moll-Parallelismus* (major-minor parallelism) derives from Dahlhaus 1966, and refers to its alternation of major and minor triads in successive transpositions of the sequential model.



Dur-Moll Parallelismus (major-minor parallelism)

Example 3: an alternate bass-line solution for the first phrase

The class discussion of the second option was striking to me in several respects. First, the students recognized the three chords in m. 2 as a pattern, and in fact had a name for it. Second, this pattern was different from the kinds of tonic-prolongational patterns that one would find in an American text. Third, as implied by the label ›Dur-Moll Parallelismus‹, the three chords are a sub-pattern extracted from a larger sequential progression, shown in Example 4. (Example 4 is taken from the Peter/Sprick manual, but transposed up a fourth to highlight the correlation with Example 3; the bracketed portion is used for m. 2 of the chorale setting.)



Steigender Parallelismus *



* transposed up a fourth

Example 4: from Peter/Sprick 2009, p. 31

For some reason, it had not occurred to me to regard this second solution for m. 2 as a subcomponent of a sequence. I suspect the reason for this is that

American textbooks introduce the sequence as an *analytical* topic rather than as a keyboard activity, the primary pedagogical objective being for the students to learn to recognize and analyze sequences in music that they are studying or playing. Accordingly, American textbooks typically provide illustrations from the repertoire of sequential passages that are lengthy enough to be seen and heard *as* sequential (i.e., with several transpositions of the material that serves as the basis for the sequence) and that exhibit memorable and distinctive melodic material. Such an analytical attitude differs markedly from a procedural keyboard-based introduction to the topic, in which sequences are treated as raw material for the development of the student's musicianship.¹⁵ The metaphor of ›raw material‹ implies a literal hands-on involvement, in contrast to a more detached analytical approach; moreover, this metaphor conveys well the potential malleability and flexibility of sequences, which not only may be elaborated and varied, but also may be broken down into subunits and recombined with other kinds of patterns.¹⁶

The different roles assumed by the sequence in German and American pedagogy bring to mind the ›false friend‹ problem that one encounters in learning a second language. The sequences in the Peter/Sprick manual *look* familiar from an American pedagogical perspective; yet they function differently in a German pedagogical setting than they would in a typical American curriculum. This in turn complicates the question of adaptation, for now we are considering what it would mean to import not only some specific exercises, but also the pedagogical mindset that gives a particular meaning to those exercises. Indeed, this question applies to the three-pronged keyboard approach *in toto*; it does not really make sense to ask how we might adapt this approach for American purposes without taking seriously the pedagogical assumptions underlying it.

Such an inquiry would unavoidably open up new possibilities – and even challenges – for theory curricula in the United States. In particular, the tripartite keyboard approach discussed in this essay calls into question a deeply held epistemological assumption within American pedagogy – namely, that music-theoretical knowledge is essentially conceptual in nature, and that all other

15 In fact, one could make the case that the primary objective of American music theory pedagogy is to train analytical skills, with procedural skills (involving actual music-making) only playing a supporting role.

16 Sanguinetti 2012. The Monte (rising 5–6) sequence is especially valuable as a ›superset‹ for generating smaller segments, especially in its chromaticized form (for instance, IV – V⁶/V – V).

modalities of understanding play a supporting role. According to the latter view, such supporting modalities are ultimately less important than conceptual knowledge – or even (as in the case of keyboard) dispensable. But the three-pronged approach discussed in this essay suggests that music-theoretic training is better regarded as a multi-modal enterprise (embracing conceptualization, playing, hearing, reading, singing, and writing) in which each modality is indispensable even as no one modality is privileged over the others. Within such an epistemological framework, the role of keyboard kinesthesia gains equal footing with the other modalities.¹⁷

For a curriculum that is truly geared towards a multi-modal understanding, the three-pronged approach described in this article suggests new angles on the topics covered in the typical American curriculum. For instance, we could introduce various chromatic predominant chords as elaborations of more basic cadence types (both authentic and plagal) through keyboard work. Sequences can now be leveraged as raw material to be explored and manipulated (both figuratively and literally – i.e., through ›hands-on‹ work on the keyboard) in the ways suggested earlier – a quite different approach from regarding them primarily as analytical categories. And the Rule of the Octave suggests a more flexible and keyboard-based attitude towards chordal patterns than does the prolongation-based theory found in many North American curricula. For instance, while tonic prolongations are often taught as pre-fabricated units of three or four chords, the Rule provides a ›play‹ space for generating a greater diversity of patterns over the same bass scale degrees ($\hat{1}$, $\hat{2}$ and $\hat{3}$, plus lower neighbor $\hat{7}$ and upper neighbor $\hat{4}$). Here three- or four-chord patterns are not granted special privilege; groupings can just as easily consist of simple chord pairs (for instance, $V_5^6 - I$), or longer schemata of five chords or more (for instance, $I - V_2^4 - I^6 - V_5^6 - I$, a pattern found at the opening of the slow movements to Beethoven's *Pathétique* sonata and his Ninth Symphony).¹⁸

A truly multi-modal musicianship training will also seek to integrate keyboard training with other modalities of musical understanding. *Play-and-sing* activities are especially valuable for integrating the ear, the voice, the hands, and the mind.¹⁹ Indeed, this kind of intermodal activity seems especially well suited to

17 Graybill 2018, pp. 187–89.

18 Such an approach is not incompatible with prolongational awareness, though one could argue that we better serve the needs of students by *not* invoking prolongation at the beginning stages of study. See Rothgeb 1981.

19 Graybill 2018, pp. 189–191.

the North American academy, given its broad consensus on the value of singing within the curriculum.

In closing, many theory instructors in the United States have long been concerned about the gap between theory and practice in our pedagogy. In recent years, we have seen a significant movement towards bridging that gap, even if the dominant textbook culture still holds sway. As a contribution to that effort, this essay has advocated that American theory pedagogy take advantage of the recent research on European keyboard pedagogy of the 18th and 19th centuries. Doing so will help us not only to rethink the role of keyboard in our curricula, but also to reexamine our ideas about the very nature of music-theoretic knowledge. Finally, this essay has proposed that we seek inspiration not only from European treatises and manuals of the past, but also from European pedagogy of the *present* day.

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