
Letters

Laura Campbell's article (Vol. 5, No. 3, November 1988) seems a little ambivalent. On the one hand she proposes a 'method' for harmonising chorales in the style of J. S. Bach; on the other she seems to suggest that this is not in any case an appropriate task for the student.

By implication this raises once again the whole question of the value of 'imitative' work as an agent of musical education. Does it teach anything other than knowledge of the particular style involved and if not, does it matter? To take a style even more remote from everyday musical experience, that of Palestrina, I am sure that those of us who devoted a good deal of time to it as students did gain much useful practice in the writing of smooth vocal lines applicable in fields as distant from the idiom of Palestrina as the arrangement of modern light music. In the same way the budding composer can learn from Bach-style chorale harmonisation something of the way in which harmonic considerations interact with the writing of interesting vocal lines, and the compromises that have to be made in the process of fusing the two together. It is true that the principal benefit of this activity is knowledge of Bach's methods in chorale harmonisation, but the same is true of what is now known as 'pastiche' work in any idiom; the idea that one can learn a sort of all-purpose abstract harmonic language which can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to all tonal music from the Baroque to the late Romantic era has now fallen into disrepute. It is worth noting that Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Bruckner all considered it worth their while to work at Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum*, a sort of archetypal 'pastiche' method. Figured bass, incidentally, is not primarily a method of teaching, but a shorthand performing notation.

A composer will, of course, normally create melody and harmony together, so Bach's chorale workings have a particular interest: they present (in accessible form) the work of a great composer engaged in the same task as a modern student – harmonising melodies written (mostly) by someone else. It is true that those derived from plainchant sources are modal, but the chorale to which Laura Campbell gives detailed consideration (*Herzliebster Jesu*) is not one of these; it is an early Baroque composition by Crüger. In any case plainchant (at any rate in the psalm tones) does not have a 'third quarter'; each

verse divides into two halves (hemistichs) each beginning with a reciting note on a monotone and proceeding to a more elaborate 'mediation' and 'ending' respectively. One other small point: it is now generally accepted that the pauses in chorale melodies do not indicate a halt but are merely a convention showing the singer where each line of words ends.

It seems odd to begin a piece of harmonisation with a series of consecutive perfect fifths! If I have understood the process of 'landscaping' correctly it is merely to indicate the root of the chord that will most comfortably accommodate two or more consecutive melody notes. Why not then indicate just the bass line? The appeal to natural law in the shape of the harmonic series in order to validate the process is no more convincing here than it is in the case of Schenker's characterisation of the major triad as 'the chord of nature'. The harmonic series cannot be used to authenticate any process of chord selection, which is ultimately a matter of human choice. We live, *pace* Hegel, in a dualistic world of facts and decisions; facts must be taken into consideration in order to arrive at decisions but the decisions are in no way inherent in the facts.

The 'landscaping' process also strikes me as open to objection on two counts. In the first place the line of the bass is more important than the chords it happens to support; for example in the progression II_b – (or IV_a)– I_c – V – I (discussed under the heading 'Developing inner hearing', towards the end of the article) the important factor is the movement of the bass from subdominant to dominant; whether the chord above the subdominant is IV_a or II_b is incidental and has no functional significance in this context. The process of 'landscaping' also seems an uncomfortably mechanical one; the aim in any work of this kind must surely be to develop an 'instinctive' aural response to a given melody or bass line. Continual practice in singing the vocal lines of Bach's chorale harmonisations will enable the student to develop the faculty or 'inner hearing' so that he or she will be able to improvise at least some of the bass line to a new chorale melody. Obviously the process must be an aural one and it is best studied, like all such work, through intensive group work in sight-singing and aural training.

HAROLD JONES

*Senior Lecturer and Head of Junior Department,
Trinity College of Music, London*