

Conventions of the Western Classical Tradition

Most of the music written between about 1600 and 1900 follows a loose set of conventions that are particularly clearly expressed in pieces from the Classical era (e.g. the Haydn Symphony set work from AoS A). The WCT covers music from the Baroque, Classical and Romantic eras and it is important to be clear that these are common traits that are *generally* found, not a set of rules that had to be followed.

General characteristics

Structure

- Movements in the Classical era usually have clear sections demarcated by cadences and repetition. Forms are not always so clearly presented in the Baroque era and in the Romantic era, composers tend to modify and disguise standard patterns.
- Forms common to the whole tradition include binary, ternary and variations. Fugues and Ritornellos are typically Baroque whilst sonata forms and rondos are common in the Classical era. Through composed and programmatic structures become more prevalent in the Romantic period.

Melody (see also voice-leading conventions below)

- Melodies tend not to be too angular (i.e. lots of apparently arbitrary leaping) unless the composer is trying to achieve a specific effect – large leaps that are not balanced by a leap or steps in the opposite direction are quite rare
- Phrases tend to be based on regular units of 2 and 4 bars
- Melodies use lots of repetition including exact repeats, sequences and the repetition and development of motifs

Harmony and Tonality (see also harmonic conventions)

- Modulations are most often to closely related keys (dominant, subdominant and the three relatives). Moves to a parallel key (i.e. C major to C minor) open up a new set of closely related keys.
- Harmony is based on diatonic triads but chromatic chords such as diminished sevenths and augmented sixths are used to reinforce cadences or to change key.
- Harmonic sequences, for example the cycle of fifths, are very common

Dissonances (notes not in the chord)

- Melodic (and accompanying) lines tend not to leap away from dissonant notes (with the exception of the *échappé*).
- Unaccented dissonances are nearly always approached by step
- The Romantic period saw a freer approach to dissonance (as did some early Baroque music)

Texture and Timbre (see also Voice-leading conventions)

- The parts in a given texture tend to have clear and consistent roles such as melody, accompaniment or counter melody. More complicated textures tend to have a clear technical basis such as using imitation or being based on an *ostinato*.
- Idiomatic use of instruments: make sure parts are playable and are both possible and typical of writing for the instrument (look at lots of examples)

Voice-leading conventions

S

Spacing and Doubling

- Chords are usually spaced with the largest gaps at the bottom (i.e. between the lowest parts) unless the aim is to create a darker, murkier texture
- Parts avoid crossing unnecessarily (particularly above a melody at the top of the texture)
- It is normal to include all the notes of a triad or seventh (although the fifth or the third are sometimes omitted in the latter)
- The most common note to double in a chord is the root

L

Leaps

- Avoid excessive leaps in melodies
- Avoid two large leaps in the same direction

A

Augmented and diminished intervals

- In melodies, avoid augmented and diminished intervals (particularly augmented seconds and tritones).

P

Parallels (5^{ths} / 8^{ves})

- Avoid consecutive parallel octaves and fifths, particularly between the melody and the bass
- Octaves used to double a melodic line or the bass line as reinforcement are fine

Harmonic Conventions

- Use characteristic progressions at cadences (e.g. **II V I** and cadential 6/4s)
- **I** and **VI** are the best approach chords to **II** in the run up to a cadence
- All other things being equal, it is a good idea to keep a root position **I** on the first strong beat of a phrase
- Root progressions using falling thirds (e.g. **VI** to **IV** and **I** to **VI**) are much better than those using rising thirds.
- Don't use second inversions other than in cadential 6/4s
- Avoid progressions using **II** other than as an approach chord to **V**. Chord **IIb** can also be used as an approach to a cadential 6/4.
- Avoid diminished triads in root position (e.g. chord **VII**)
- Don't use **III** other than 1) as an approach to **VI** or 2) as part of a sequence between **II** and **IV**
- Only use **VI** in root position
- Don't use **VII** other than as **VII6** resolving either to **I** or **I6**