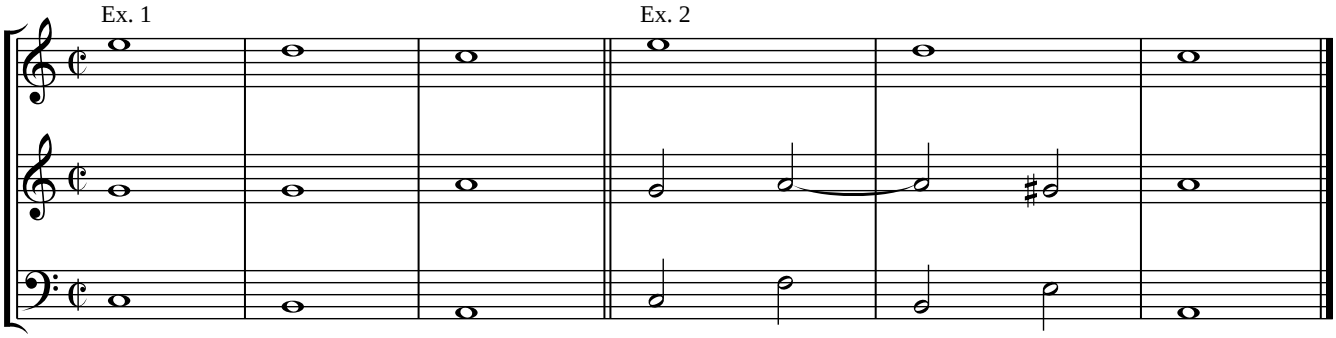
Parallel motion as a structural model in Bachs Sonata II, BWV526

"All of nature is a melody in which a deep harmony is hidden. Nature creates new forms forever; what is there has never been, what was there - will not come back - everything is new and yet always the same." (Johann Wolfgang von Goethe)

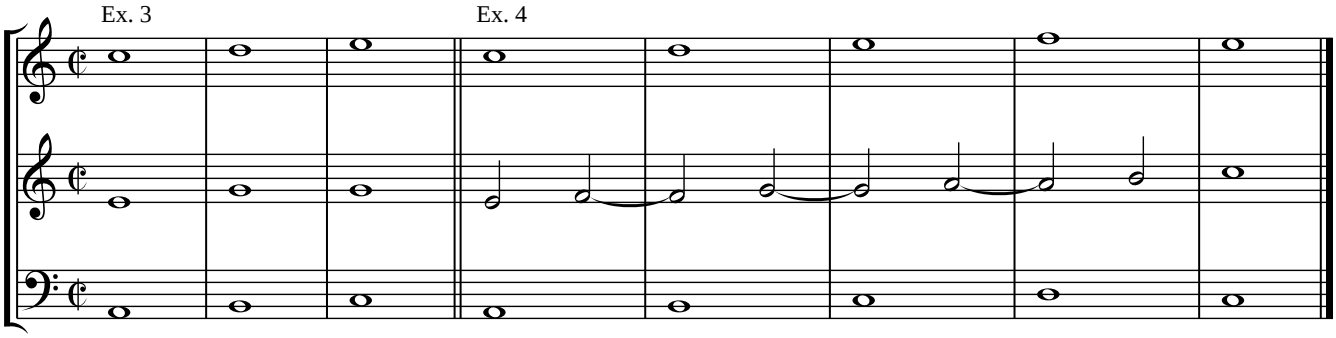
Writing voices in parallel motion is a composition technique of all times, especially voices that move in parallel third intervals and move up or down a step. This voiceleading strategy appears to be a structural model in modal and tonal music from renaissance to the romantic era. The second movement of Bachs Trio sonata for organ, BWV 526, "Largo" is an intriguing example of this practice (1).

1.1 Examples of parallel motion

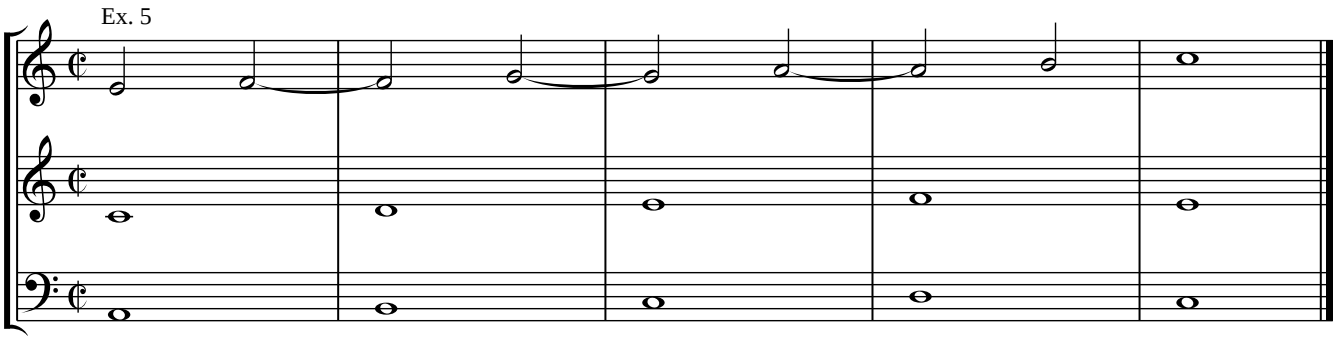
To demonstrate the basics of parallel motion, study the next short examples of a three part elaboration of the descending melos e-d-c in the upper voice. In example 1 the lower voice moves easily in parallel thirds. Example 2 is a well known variation of this model, the Quintfall sequence.



Not only descending melodic progressions can be ’harmonized’ by thirds, ascending as well. Example 4 is an extension of example 3 in order to demonstrate the use of the syncopation in the middle voice.



When applying voice exchange to the two upper voices, the syncopated middle voice become the upper voice and the upper voice -transposed an octave down- will be the new middle voice.

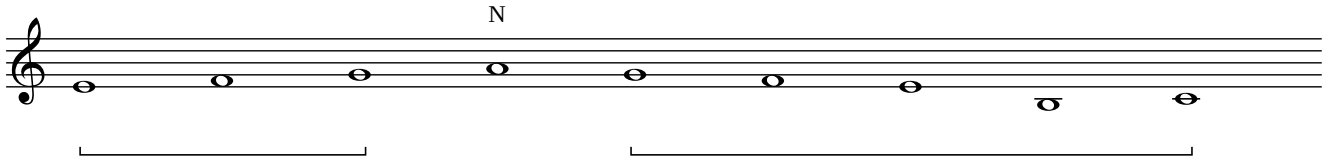


2. Types and uses of linear progressions.

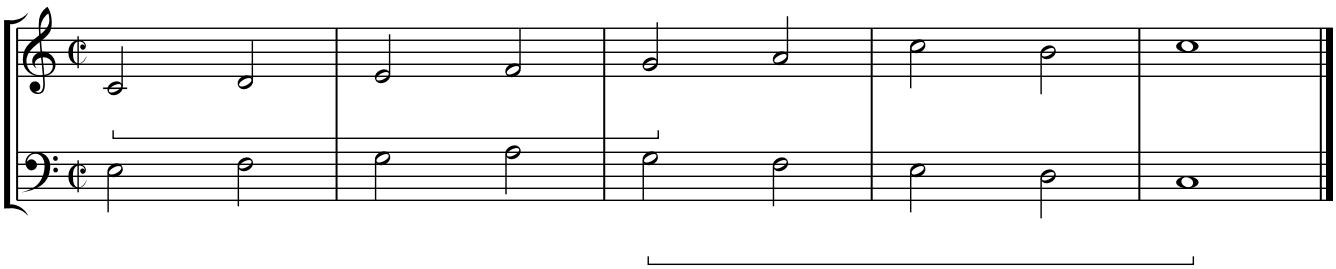
Something has to be made explicit now: descending and ascending linear progressions are excellent means in constructing parallel moving voices. Notice that the previous examples 4 and 5 present three linear, stepwise progressions simultaneously (the so called faux bourdon). We can discern descending and ascending, complete and incomplete linear progressions which vary widely in their ambitus. These progressions can be processed in several ways. Two examples:

2.1 Descending and ascending linear progressions combined

A combination of an ascending and a descending linear third progression (’third’ refers to the range or ambitus of the progression and ’linear’ refers to the stepwise motion). A neighbour tone can connect linear progressions to one melody:



2.2 Voice exchange applied to descending and ascending linear progressions



A combination of an ascending fifth progression in the upper voice and the descending linear fifth progression in the lower voice: voice exchange as a means to ’complete’ a linear model in a meaningful sense. We could call this technique: chiasm, which is related to voice exchange.

More examples can easily be made. For now, recall that linear progressions differ in

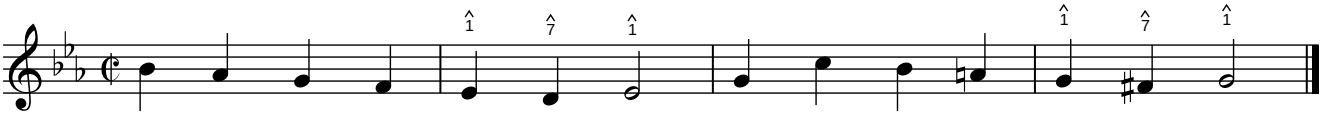
1. length
2. direction

In addition, linear progressions can be

3. put together (directly or via a neighbour tone), in one or more voices (voice exhange)
4. complete or incomplete

3. Powerful leading tone cadence

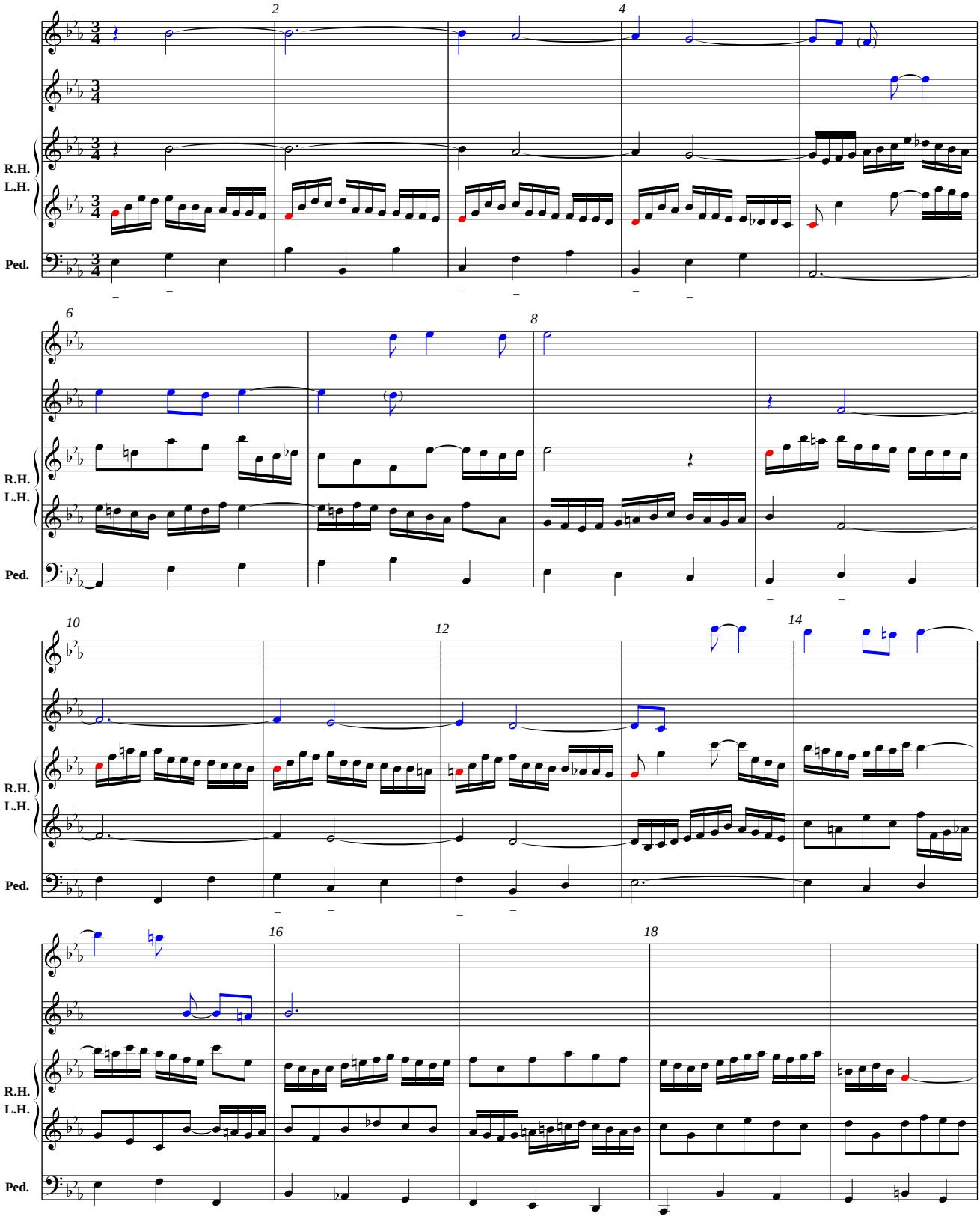
To understand fully what Bach is doing in his "Largo", you've to know the incredible power of the leading tone cadence. This cadence can not only conclude a musical sentence, but it can also define a (new) key (i.e. an excellent mean to modulate). In the next example the descending melody will be concluded and -at the same time- key E flat will be defined with the leading tone cadence. As a follow up the melody modulates to G minor, established by the same closing formula.

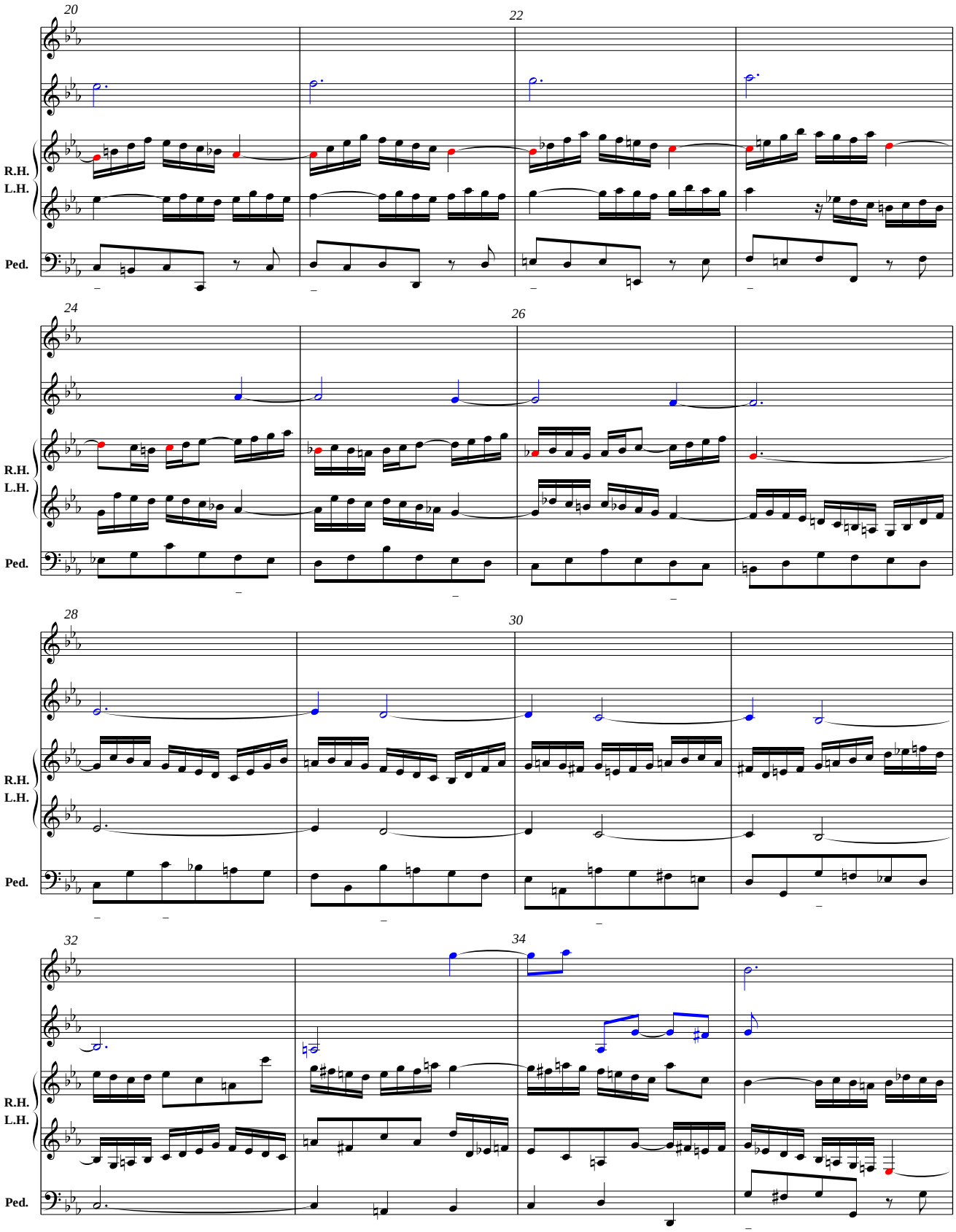


4. Discovering structural lines

In the next annotated score, the first two staves (with their blue notes) will give the main tones of the structural line that determines the musical flow. Notice that the notes of both staves can interact; i.e. the idea of voice exchange has to be applied to make melodic progressions complete; in other words Bachs melodies of the R.H and L.H. (right and left hand; Ped = pedal and has to be played by the feet) share tones of a meaningful melodic progression. 'Meaningful' is here defined in terms of linear progressions, its parallel motion context and closing formulas, i.e. cadences. And 'meaningful' should be grasped by the ear easily!

In some cases, one could argue that an annotation in terms of other linear progressions is possible too. Indeed, often linear progressions are playing an interwoven contrapuntal play. To avoid a complex annotated score, I gave tones of other important lines in red colour. The dashes below the lowest staff denote the tone that has a third relation with a blue or a red note.


2
4
R.H.
L.H.
Ped.
6
8
10
12
14
16
18


20
22
R.H.
L.H.
Ped.
24
26
R.H.
L.H.
Ped.
28
30
R.H.
L.H.
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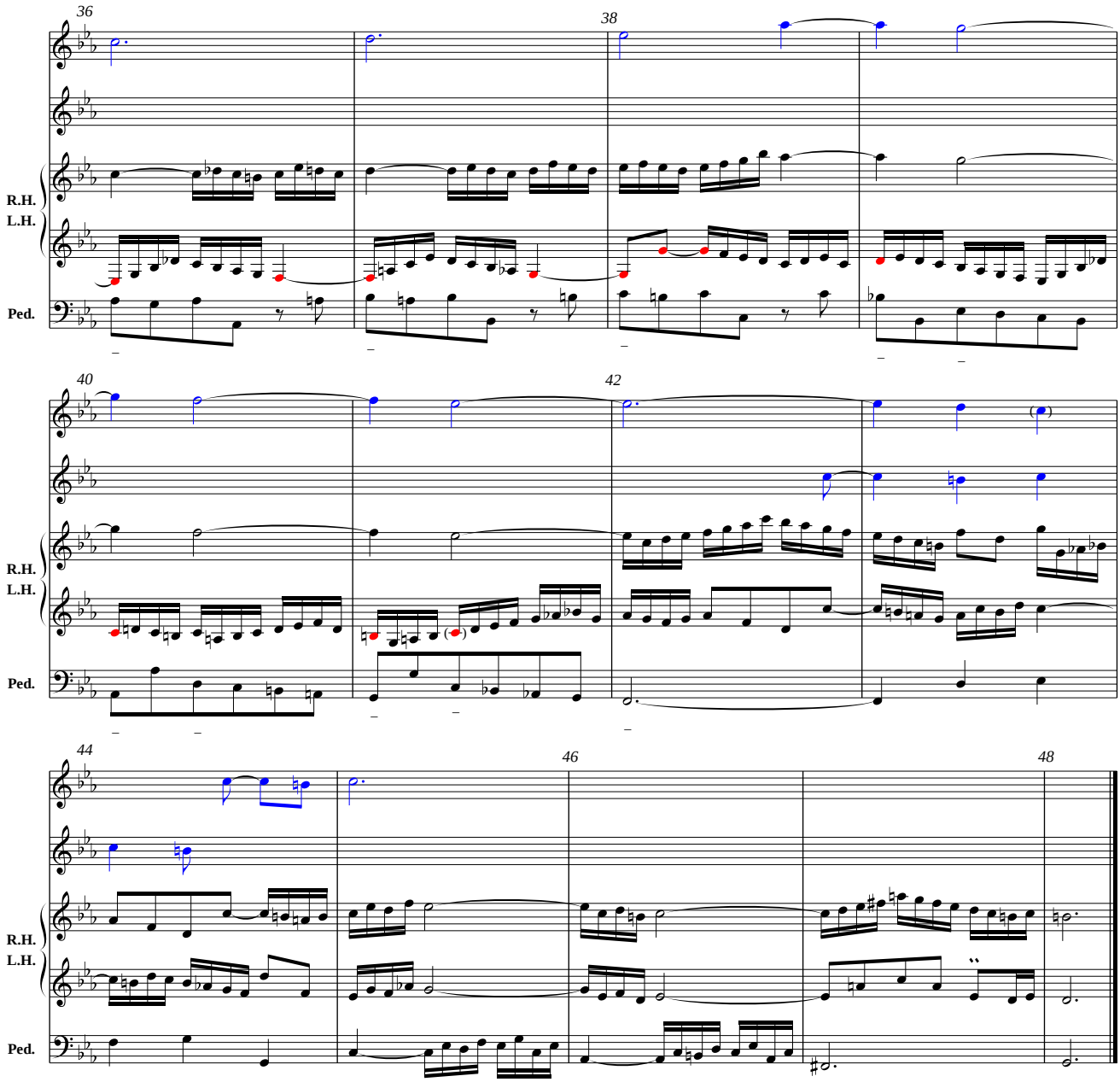
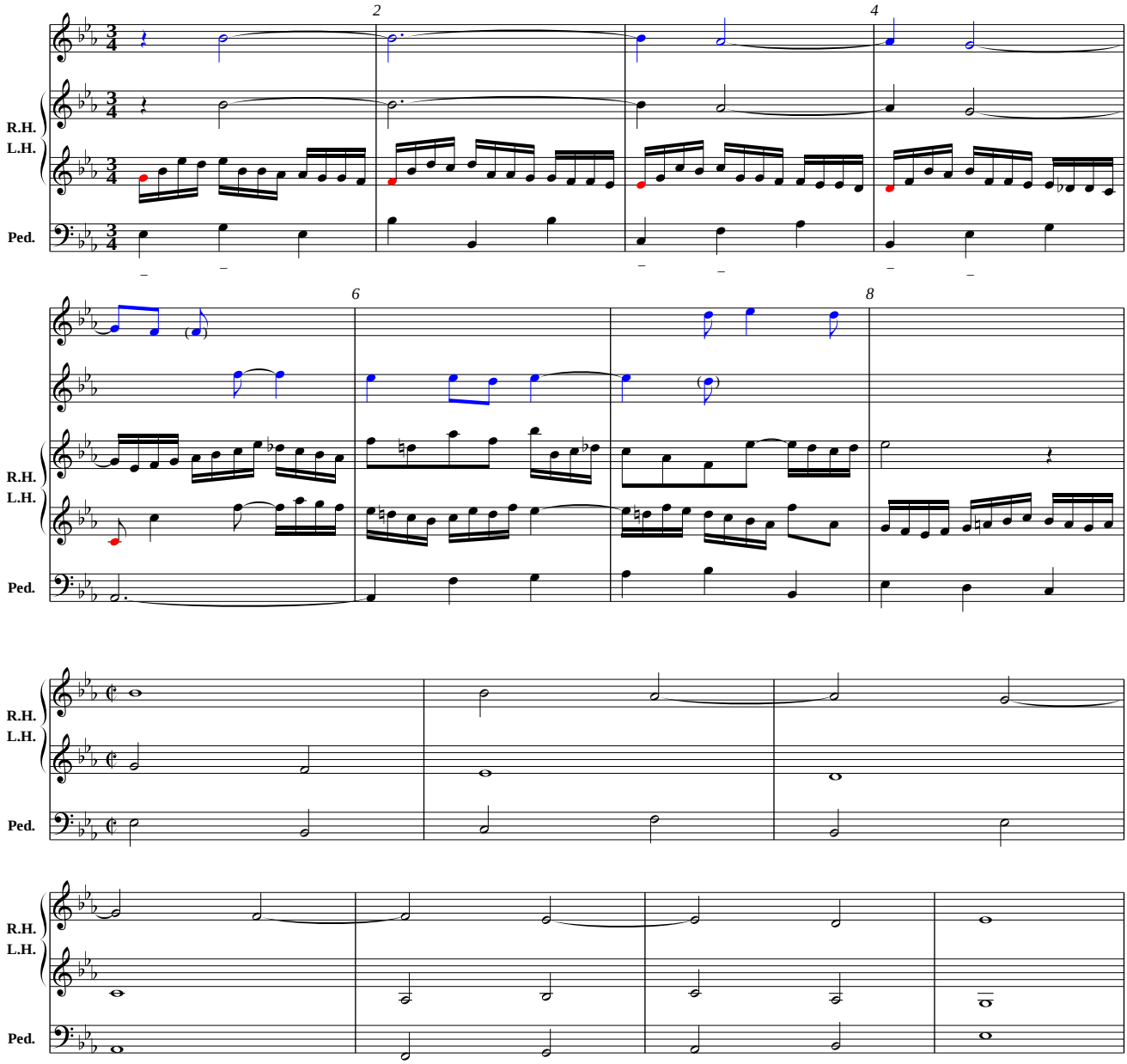
32
34
R.H.
L.H.
Ped.



5. Parallel motion

The previous annotated score can be reduced to a simple three part, chorale setting, showing the basic examples of parallel motion, elaborated with syncopations. To demonstrate, we make a reduction of the first 8 bars. The complete reduction can be found at the end of this text.



6. Conclusion

It stands without reason that the musical sections of Bachs Largo, BWV 526, can be described by descending and ascending linear progressions with their concluding cadences and voice exchange techniques. These progressions are part of a model where three voices move in parallel motion. The third interval defines the basic harmony. Diminution, syncopation and voice exchange make the melody of the voices more lively and less predictable.

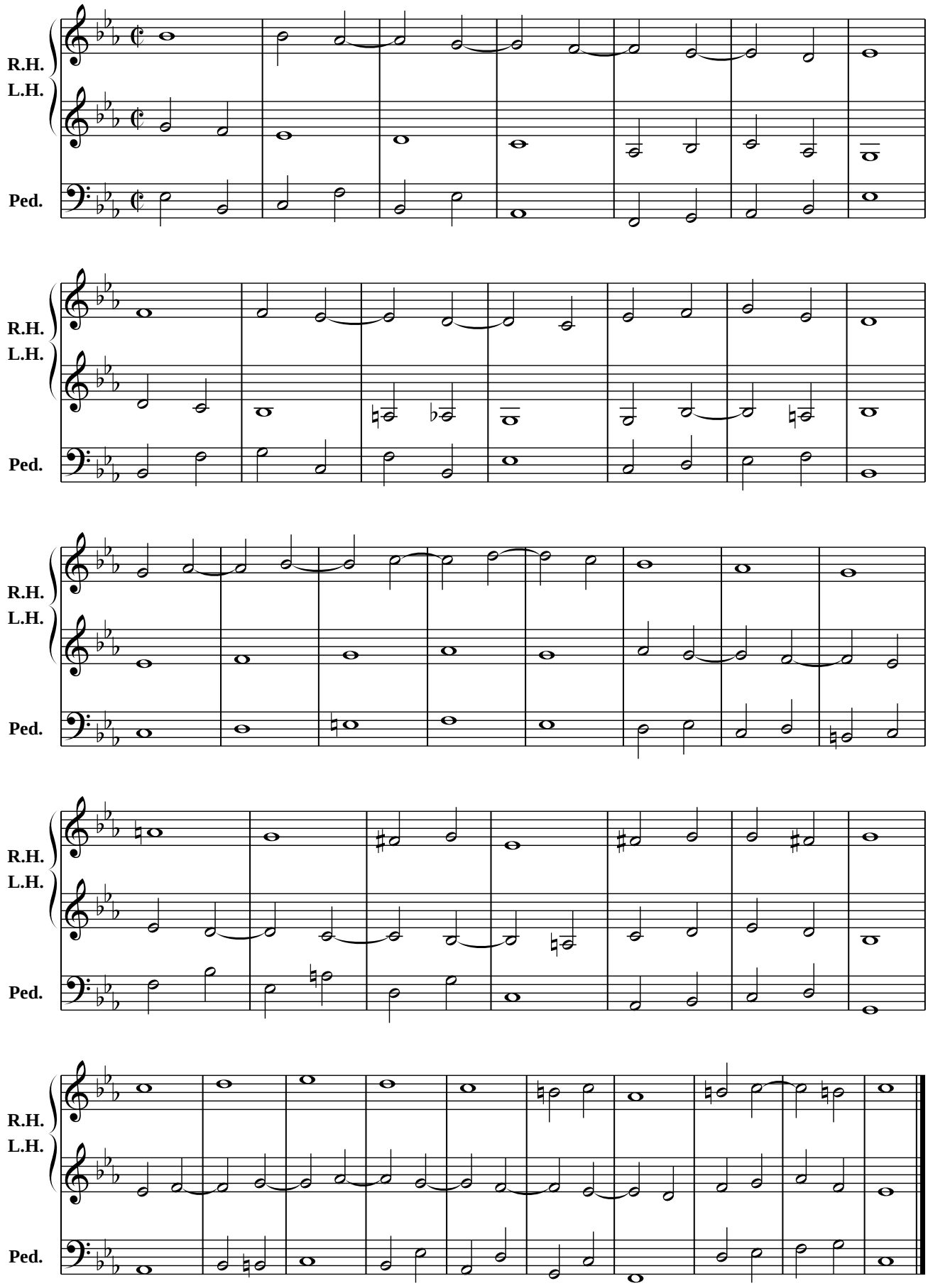
Last but not least, two special techniques of processing linear progressions need some attention:

1. The chiasm (cf. x.2.4): the connection between R.H m. 35-38 (Bb-C-D-Eb) and the L.H in m. 39-41 (D-C-B-C) on the one side. And on the other side the connection between L.H m. 35-38 (Eb-F-G) and the R.H. in m. 39-41 (Ab-G-F-Eb-D-C-B-C). more importantly, this technique suggests a large scale planning of sections by Bach.

2. Linear progressions can be used as a modulation tool: m. 16-20 has a cadence in Bb major and a bass line moves from Bb to G, the fifth tone of C minor, which makes a cadence in C minor possible. Due to the limitations of an organ Bach has to break the line in m. 18. In m.8 Bach uses the same idea in the modulation from Eb to Bb.

Again, Bach demonstrates a very interesting example of elaborating a basic structure of three voices in parallel motion. All voices emancipate into beautiful melodies, each show their own identity while members of one family.

Footnote

(1) A triosonata -a typical baroque genre- is a composition for three obbligato parts -usually two treble (e.g. violins) and a bass (e.g. a violoncello) - with optional continuo. Bach wrote six triosonatas for organ solo (!), to be played by both hands (for the treble parts) and feet (for the bass part).

Reduction