

'Joyeux', the triad as melodic and harmonic force

In Piece no. 10 Joyeux (Gaily) from 'Fantasia' of Oscar van Hemel (1892–1981), Van Hemel shows us an elementary but imaginative way of melodic and harmonic thinking, based on only one triad. We can learn here how to ask questions in order to make sensible, musical decisions.

Step 1: period 1 with a tonic triad melody.

Within the key G major, the triad G–B–D, with its tonic and dominant tone, is an important structure. It is quite easy to compose a well shaped melody with only tones of these tonic triad. As an example: an eight–bar period, with two four–bar phrases, which can be subdivided in two–bar units; so: $8 = 4 + 4 = (2+2) + (2+2)$.

Example 1



In bar 4 the fifth tone of the G major key has the effect of the interpunction of a questionmark (hence, phrase 1 could be characterized as a question). In bar 8 the first tone, the tonic, ends the melody (hence, phrase 2 could be seen as an answer).

Step 2: elaboration of the melody with tonic triad tones

Each tone of our melody could be elaborated with e.g. an ascending, ostinato figure based on the tonic triad G–B–D.

Example 2



Step 3: elaboration of the main tones of the melody with tonic and non tonic triad tones

Each tone of G major outside the tonic triad G–B–D has some instability. E.g. tone A has a drive to tone G or to tone B. In the first case, we speak about neighbour tone A and in the second case about passing tone A. In both cases these instable tones give a melody continuity and tonal variation. These effects can also be realized with tonic triad tones, although to some degree. In Example 3 an application of these principles on the main tones of the melody.

Example 3

PERIOD 1

Note the tones d B (=reversed B d) in bar 2: a slight, but musically more interesting variation on the tones B d which are in the ostinato figure.

Step 4: elaboration of the ostinato figure of the melody with non tonic triad tones

The ostinato figure can also be elaborated with non tonic triad tones.

Example 4

PERIOD 1

Step 5: finishing touch

Some small changes and additions lead to the definitive version of Van Hemel.

Example 5

PERIOD 1

The musical score for Example 5, Period 1, is presented in two systems. Each system contains four bars of music. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4. The bass line consists of a repeating ascending triplet figure (G4-A4-B4-C5). The treble line features a melody of eighth notes with rests. The first system ends with a fermata over the final note. The second system ends with a final chord. Bar numbers 4 and 8 are marked above the treble staff.

Note the register change of tone D in bar 4: reason is of course the dominance of the highest tone D in the second octave (bar 2, 6).

The chord in bar 8 could be expected. The top tone B is may be associated with the last tone D in bar 4. We can hear the progression D–B which was actually heard in bar 2 and 6.

Step 6: starting points for composing a contrasting period 2.

When we try to compose a contrasting period 2 (at least with some character change), there are some basic considerations. The main question is: what to change and what to maintain? When we listen to period 1 many times, trying to grasp its main features, we could come to the following whislist of contrasting options:

1. skip more or less the tonic triad tones as main melody tones (6a)
2. try to find an other harmonic color than the tonic triad: dominant chord? other key? harmonic rhythm? (6b)
3. differentiate in setting: solo and chordal approach? (6c)
4. change the ascending ostinato figure: descending or descending–ascending? (6d)
5. focus on an other register area (6e)
6. investigate the effects of less continuity: more stops in the music?

As an example: again an eight–bar period, with two four–bar phrases, which can be subdivided in two–bar units; so: $8 = 4 + 4 = (2+2) + (2+2)$.

Example 6a

PERIOD 2

Phrase 1 (a+b) Phrase 2 (a+c)

Example 6a (elaborated)

PERIOD 2

Phrase 1 (a+b) Phrase 2 (a+c)

Note that the non triad tone A in period 1 (an elaboration tone) now plays an important role. This tone has advantages from a harmonic point of view: it is member of a second important chord in G major: the dominant seventh ($V7 = D-F\#-A-C$), which has a drive to the tonic (I). You may notice that the tones C and F# were absent in Period 1!

However, the dominant seventh, with its drive to the tonic, defines G major and would make Period 2 predictable. Denying G major to some extent could be an interesting option. So mixture (= borrowing tones from an other key without the need for an explicit modulation)? Playing with mediant keys always surprise!

Example 6b

PERIOD 2

V2 V2

Van Hemel's bar 4 and 8 seems to play with E minor and B minor, both mediant keys in relation to G major. In addition, solo settings are extremely useful in defining ambiguous tonal relationships. In the following example the ostinato figure is presented (now with descending and ascending parts) as an elaboration of the triad E-G-B (VI) which fits within G major and E minor.

Example 6c + 6d + 6e

PERIOD 2

Example 6c + 6d + 6e elaboration I

PERIOD 2

Really ambiguous: one could argue that the triplet elaboration of bar 1 refers to the tonic (I). In other words tone G can be interpreted as first tone of I or as third tone of VI or first tone of I in minor!

Four times the same ostinato figure asks for variety. See bar 7 in the following example: same figure, same tones, other register.

Example 6c + 6d + 6e elaboration II

PERIOD 2

Indeed, the stops works nice as a contrasting idea. However, some continuity will do a better job.

Example 6c + 6d + 6e elaboration III

PERIOD 2

Bar 4 and 8 could be more expressive. How? Van Hemel 'heard' the tone d'' in Period 1 (bar 4 and 6), which is restated in bar 1 of Period 2, as isolated and gives it a melodic live via d-e-f#!

Example 6c + 6d + 6e elaboration IV

PERIOD 2

Note that D–E–F# is a natural progression in G major. In other words, the B major triad and the F# major triad are at the end the main forces to deny G major.

When some embellishments, phrasing and articulation, portato and staccato signs and sustaining ped. indications are added, the final Period 2 emerges. However, this finishing touch is of vital importance.

Step 7: finishing Joyeux = assembling Period 1 and Period 2

Van Hemel's form for Joyeux is: Period 1 + Period 2 (and repetition) + Period 1. So, an elaborated A–B–A
On the next page the complete score of Joyeux with dynamics and phrasing of Van Hemel.

Joyeux

Allegretto

p

4

8

12

p *sfz* *mf* *p*

Red. *

16

20

24

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