Did Bach influence Chopin in his Mazurka op. 50, 3?

1. Introduction

What do we know about the influence Bach on Chopin? A few facts to think about:

1. Liszt described Chopin as an 'enthusiastic pupil of Bach'. With Liszt and Hiller, Chopin performed J. S. Bach's concerto for three harpsichords (on 23 March 1833)
2. Chopin's pupil Jane Stirling refers to the important place of Bach in Chopin's teachings: "I started with some Bach preludes, as he always said". " Always practice Bach," advised Chopin "this will be your best means to make progress." And indeed Bach was the daily bread of Chopin's pupils as it was for Chopin.
3. Many keyboard teachers were still using Bach's Well−Tempered Clavier a generation after Bach´s death. Chopin`s piano teacher Wojchiech Zywny gave Chopin the two volumes of Bach´s Well−Tempered Clavier.
4. Chopin was a devotee of Bach (and Mozart, as he said). "One morning he played from memory fourteen preludes and fugues of Bach´s," writes Chopin's pupil Madame Streicher, "and when I expressed my joyful admiration at this unparallelled performance he replied: They can never be forgotten." When Chopin was asked how he prepared for concerts, he answered: "For a fortnight I shut my self up and play Bach. That's my preparation, I don't practise my own compositions".
5. It seems that Bach was a important point of reference. The Well−Tempered Clavier is said to be the only score he took with him to Majorca in the winter of 1838−39, at the time he was completing his 24 Preludes op. 28 which seem to recall Bach's work.

It stands to reason that there has to be some influence of Bach on Chopin's compositional style. But what is that influence? Could Chopin's compositional logic, his elegant voice leading and linear, polyphonic style in his later works, stem from an intimate connection with the work of J.S. Bach? Yes, it is supposed that "[In the last compositions] one notices a new strength and additional interest supplied by the fresh contrapuntal element, presumably the belated fruit of long study of Bach's 'Forty−eight' and of more recent study of 'Cherubini's traité' −on counterpoint, R.M.− [which he had requested in 1841]." (Gerald Abraham, Chopin's Musical Style, Oxford University Press, 1939). And sometimes some similarities are found between Chopin's and Bach's melodies (Nigel Nettheim, The derivation of Chopin's fourth ballade from Bach and Beethoven, The Music Review, Vol. 54 No. 2, 1993). However, one can see such efforts as results of wishful thinking.

To be honest, although convinced of the intimate relationship between Bach and Chopin, I don't know if we can make that connection visible.

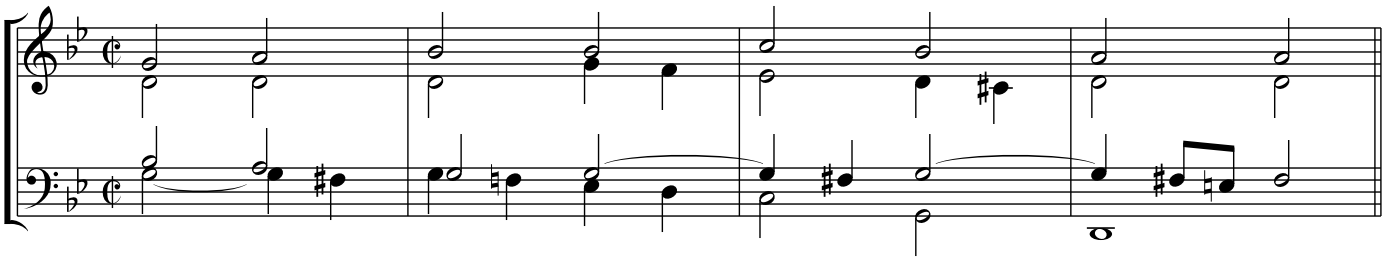
2. Chopin's Mazurka op. 50, no. 3

In this text, I will analyze some measures of Chopin's Mazurka op. 50, no. 3 from a specific point of view. Listening to this Mazurka, there is one astonishing section: measures 159 −164/171, which is a repetition of the 'polyphonic' idea of m. 159/160. It is a passage, that is associated with a baroque way of composing, at least for me.

3. Variation VII in Bach's partita 'Sei gegrüssest Jesu gütig'.

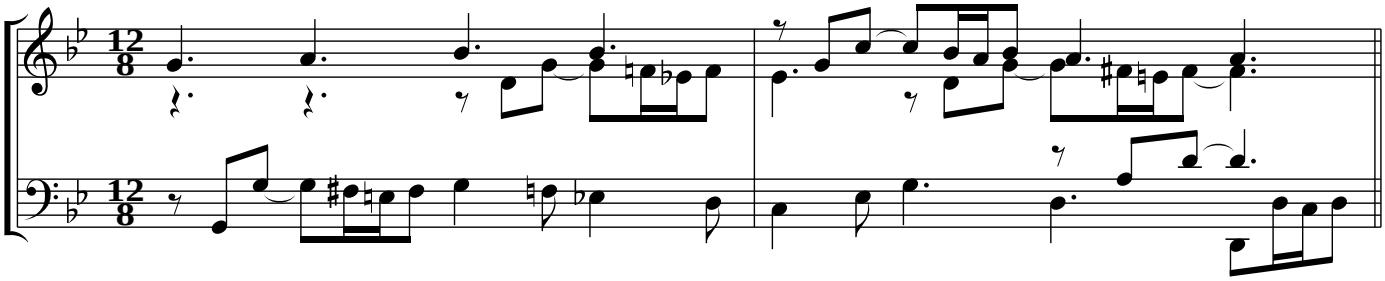
Bach's partita 'Sei gegrüssest Jesu gütig' contains 11 variations on the choral melody 'Sei gegrüssest Jesu gütig' based on Bach's four−part setting.

Bach's choral setting



Variation VII maintains the harmonic−melodic framework of this setting while using 'harmony notes' in a horizontalized way (called by Richard Wagner 'new polyphony' −sic−) and applying the techniques of diminution and imitation.

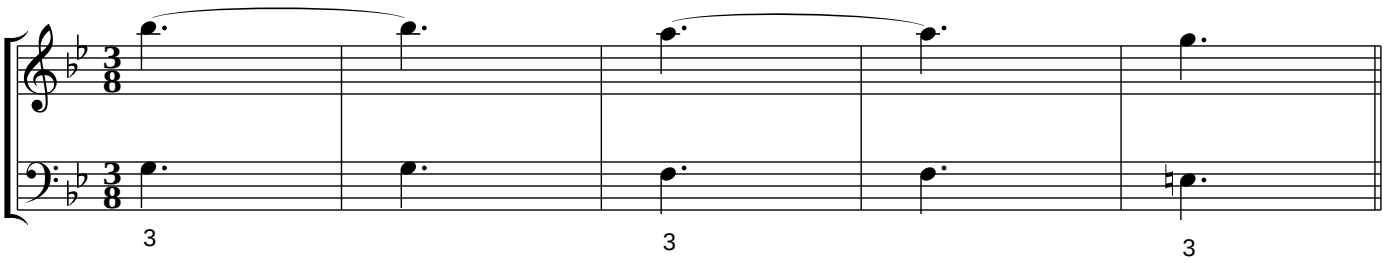
Variation VII



4. Bach's sinfonia XI

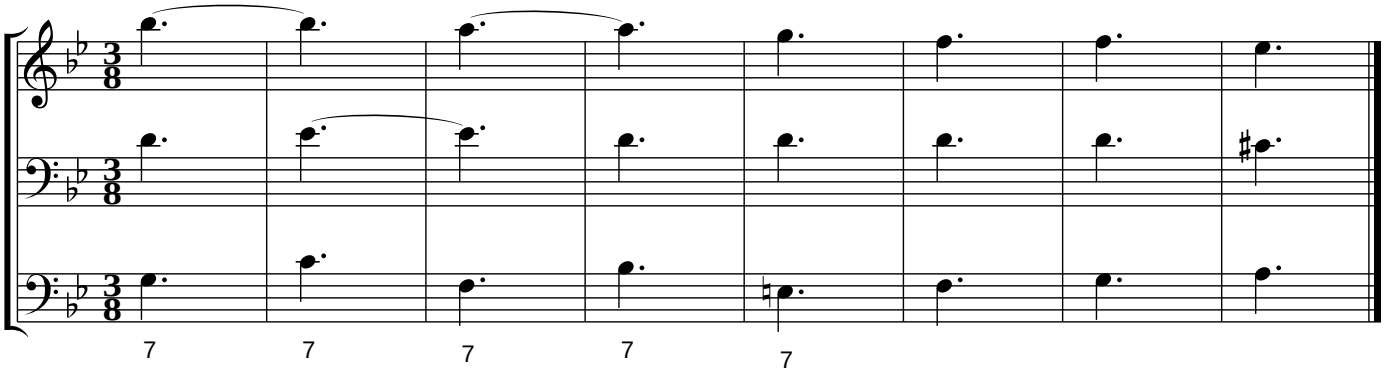
The measures 17−24 of Bach's Sinfonia XI are a nice application of the baroque 'Regola dell'Ottava', the method of learning harmonic progressions in connection with ascending and descending scales, we find in general bass treatises of 18th century music theoreticans as Heinichen and Rameau. The basic model is a progression of parallel thirds (outer voices).

Bach, Sinfonia XI, model parallel thirds
m. 17 − 24



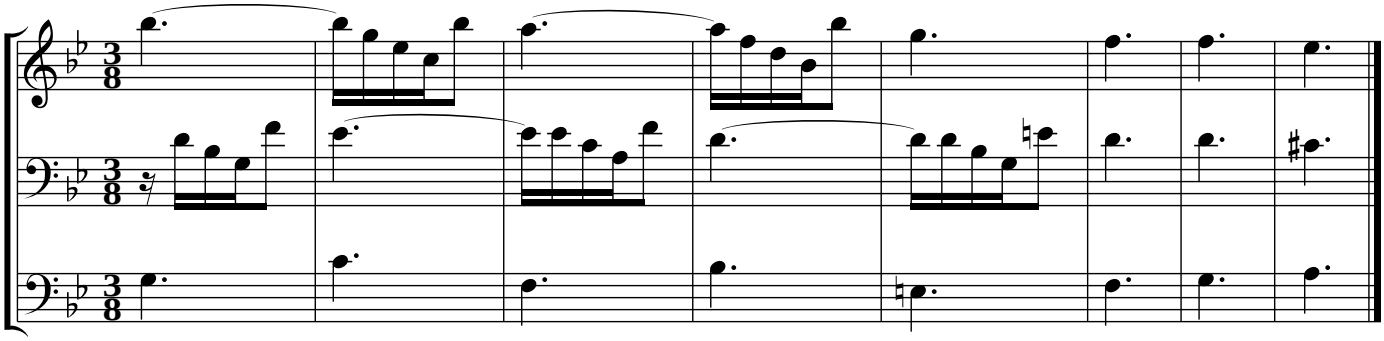
This basic model is elaborated as 5th sequence of ’seventh chords’.

Bach, Sinfonia XI, model



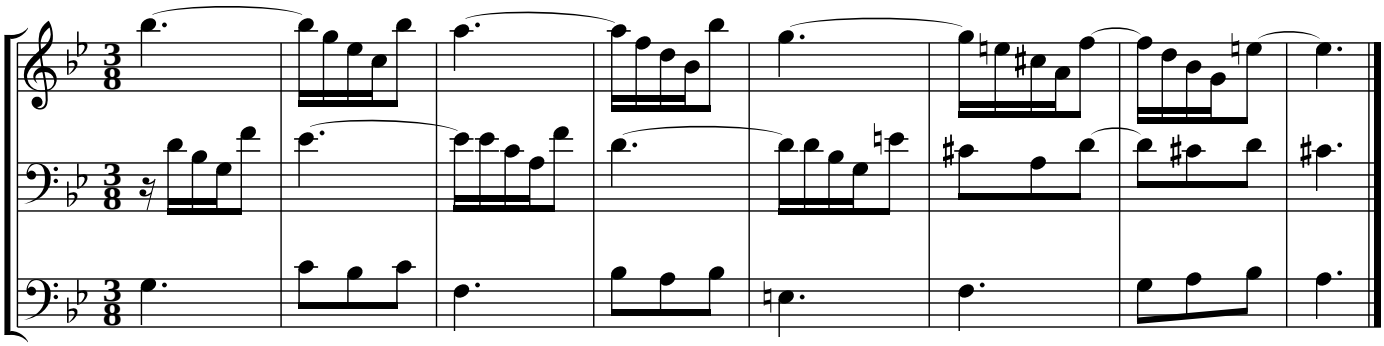
Bach diminishes this model with arpegio’s of (implied) harmony−notes.

Bach, Sinfonia XI, application of the arpeggio idea



Finally, Bach diminishes the lower and middle voice with appoggiaturas, neighbour and passing notes. In the upper voice he continues −within a suspension context− the arpeggio idea. Note that the result is a nice alternation of consonant and dissonant harmony.

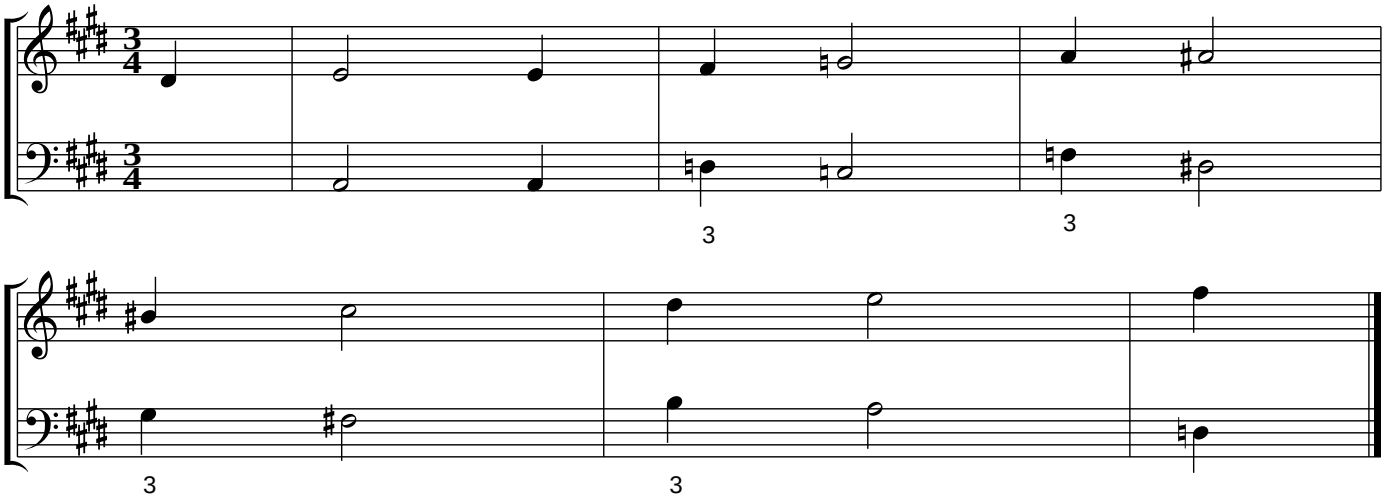
Bach, Sinfonia XI



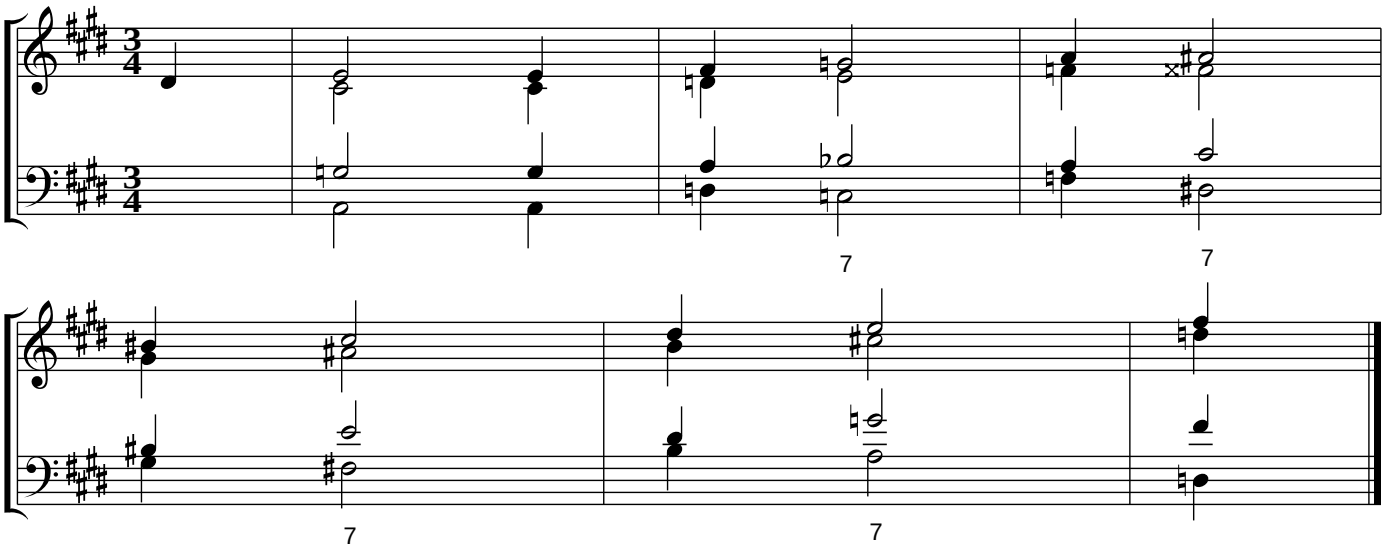
5. Baroque techniques in Chopin's Mazurka op. 50, no. 3

Of course, the methods described above are not specific for Bach. These can be seen in many compositions from the baroque and later. It's quite easy now to follow Chopin's baroque thinking in Mazurka in C# minor Op. 50 no. 3 in a few steps. I only 'discuss' the measures 159−164 (which is then repeated by Chopin). As shown earlier, my technique of analysis is 'simulated composition'; a technique to describe musical phenonema and not to 'explain' the compositional process (of which we don't know anything).

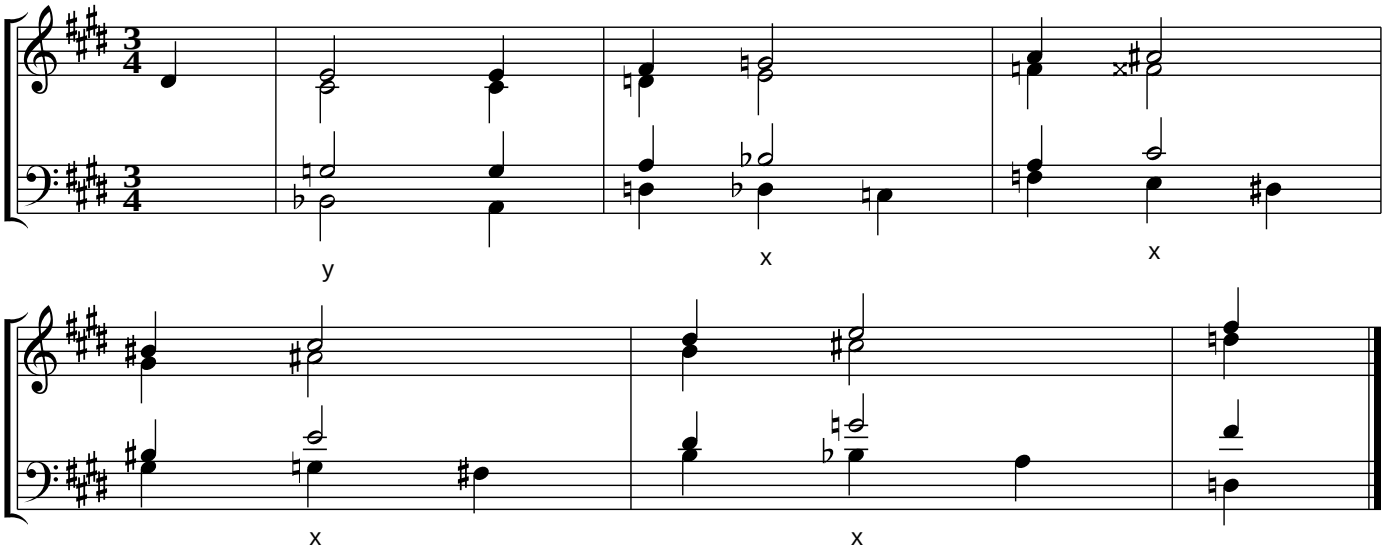
Chopin Mazurka in C# minor Op. 50 no. 3
Step 1: basic model of parallel thirds



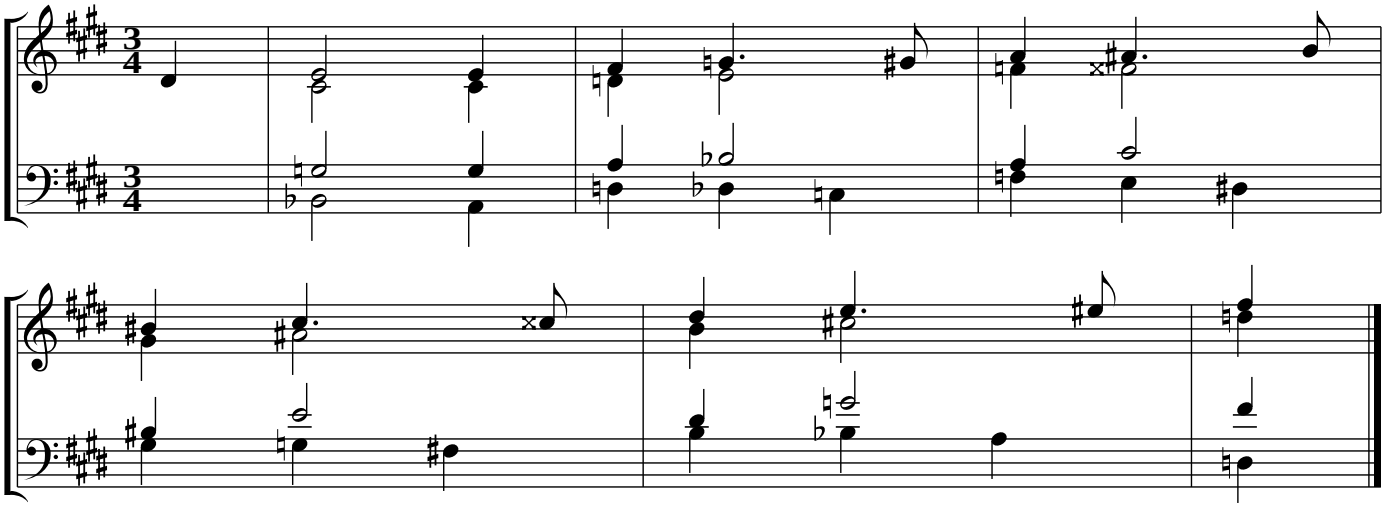
Step 2: basic model, with triads and dominant seventh chords.



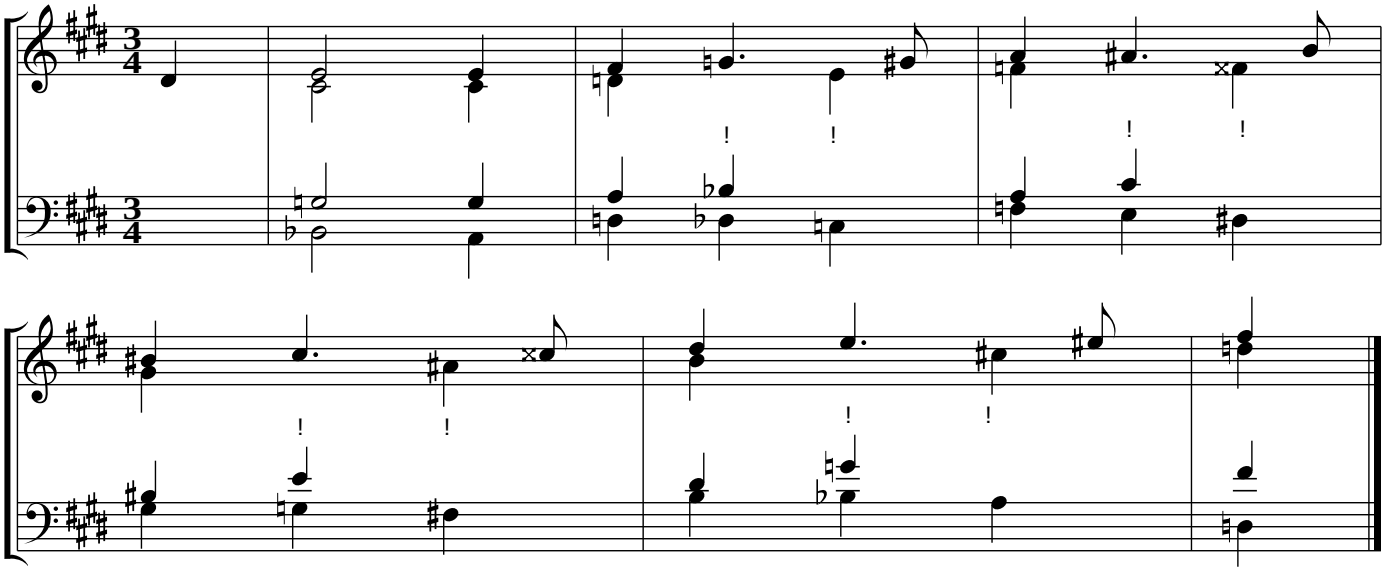
Step 3: playing with the bass: suspension (y) and passing note (x)
Baroque terms: retardatio and transitus



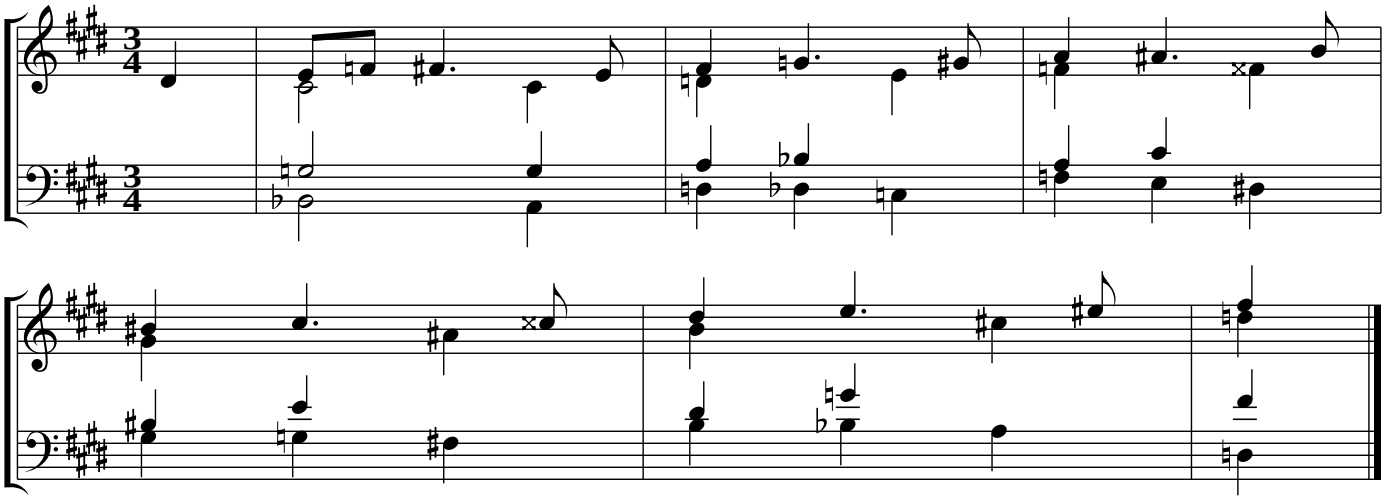
Step 4: Playing with the upper voice: passing notes (or transitus)



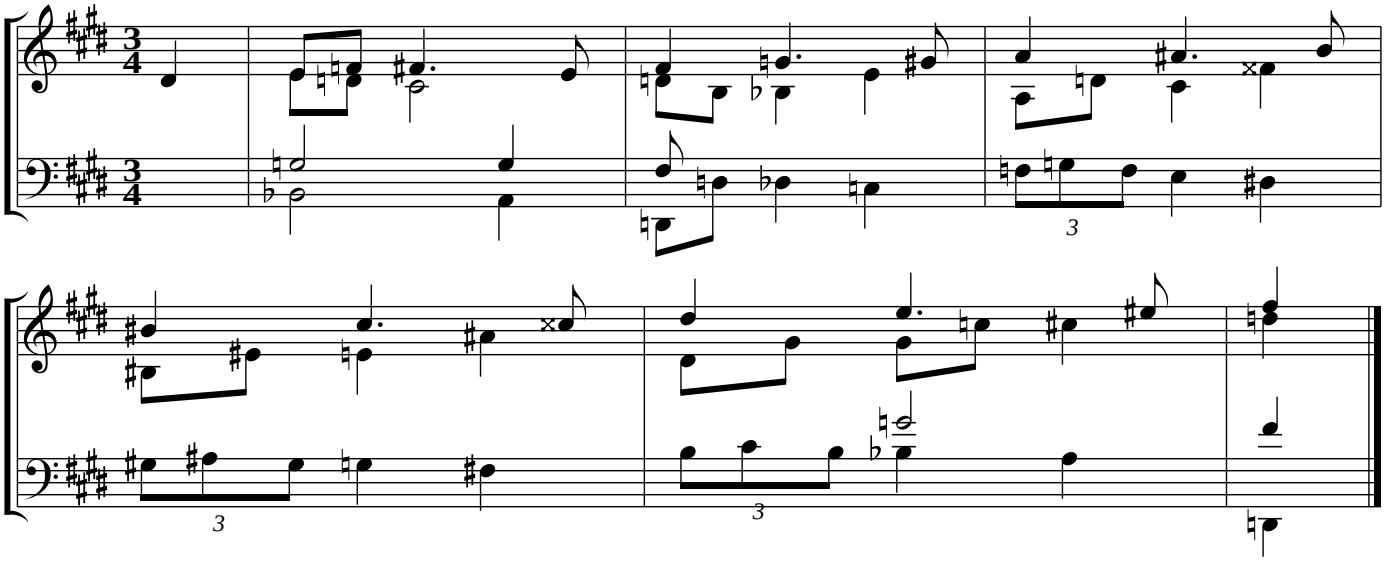
Step 5: From 4 part to 3 part: horizontalization of chords (Wagner's 'new polyphony')



Step 6: Elaboration of the first measure.



Step 7: Finishing touch, i.e diminishing bass and middle voices



6. Conclusion

Again, the 18th century methods transitus and retardatio −basic techniques in the musical practice of the figured bass player− are excellent concepts to describe 19th century harmonic progressions (see also my articles on www.bestmusicteacher.com: 'Old methods of ´chord construction´ in Liszt´s Resignazione and Wagner´s Tristan' and 'Romantic and impressionist harmony'). The Bach examples above show a new technique, horizontalization of chords.

Did Bach influence Chopin in his Mazurka op. 50, 3? What to say now? Still, I don't know. However, the only thing I can say (and predict) is that more complex harmonic progressions in Chopin's work can be easily described by linear expert techniques as we find in all compositions of Johann Sebastian Bach.

About the author:

Reinier Maliepaard, psychologist, software engineer, musician and teacher at the ArtEZ Conservatorium Netherlands (music theory and music history). Maliepaard maintains several internetsites as www.bestmusicteacher.com en www.artezmusictools.nl.

His freeware music notation programm MC Musiceditor (Windows) can be downloaded at www.mcmusiceditor.com

---

This article has been typeset with MC Musiceditor 6.1.2 (www.mcmusiceditor.com − www.bestmusicteacher.com)