Romantic and impressionist harmony

Thanks to Ward Meijer amd Walther Pondman, students at the ArtEZ Conservatorium Netherlands, for their inspiration and critical remarks.

In this short text, I will provide examples of a new harmonic world of romantic and impressionist composers. After studying, playing and listening to these examples, the reader wil be able to understand harmonic developments in the 19th century.

The musical harmonic language of early romantic composers (Schubert, Weber, Schumann, Mendelssohn) is dominated by extended tertian harmony and chromaticism. Schubert provides us with his Sanctus (Ab major mass) a nice example with the remarkable progressions of F major, F# minor, C# major, D major, Eb minor, Bb major, B major, C minor and F major. The leading tone then becomes more important and enables the chromatic world of Liszt and Wagner with their complex chords and fast key interactions (which German theorists call 'Leittonharmonik'). Many ideas in romantic harmony can be found later in compositions of the impressionism: new chord structures (tertian and non tertian) and the emergence of modal thinking (i.e. not only church modes but also other forms such as hexatonic, pentatonic scales or scales based on some selection of diatonic and/or chromatic notes). The developments can be summarized in 7 methods.

2.1. Method 1: suspension ('retardatio') (p. 2)

2.2. Method 2: passing note ('transitus') (p. 4)

2.3. Method 3: elision ('ellipsis') (p. 5)

2.4. Method 4: altered or added notes (p. 6)

2.5. Method 5: mixed chords (p. 6)

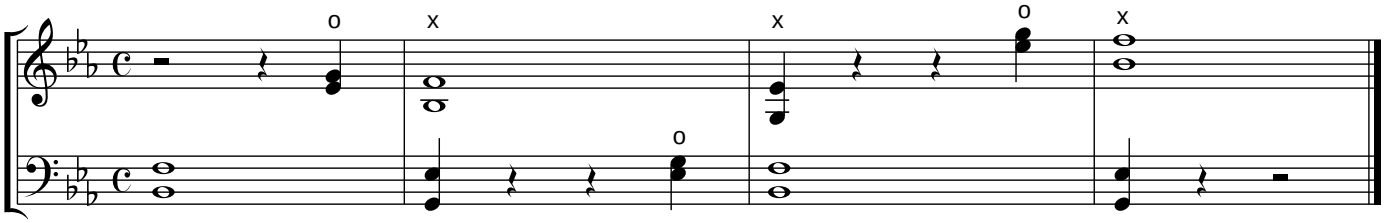
2.6. Method 6: organum techniques traditional chords (p. 7)

2.7. Method 7: organumtechniques new chords, based on fourths and fifths (p. 9)

Before presenting them, I wil first discuss something about the influence of melodic ideas in harmony.

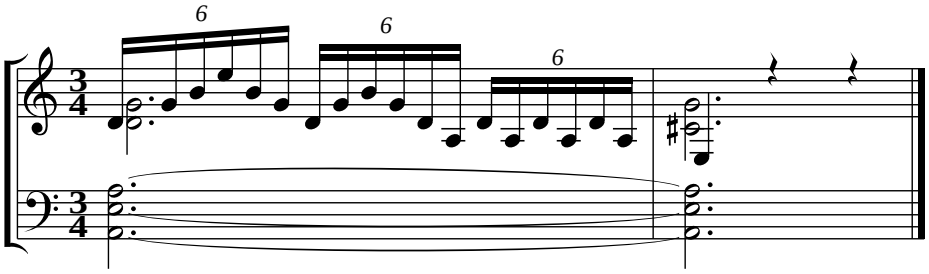
1. Exploring new sounds

Study the following Beethoven example. Question: how to explain the 'o' and 'x' marked sounds?

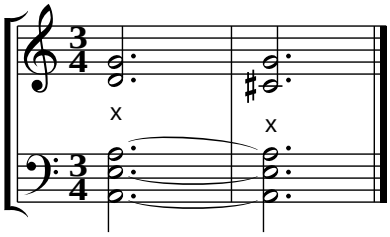


Well, in contrast to many music theoreticians I see the marked sounds as a result of horizontal, melodic and polyphonic thinking: a short E flat melody (G − F − Eb) is made two part by adding a lower voice (Eb − Bb −G). This two part structure is imitated in both voices and the ermerging sounds are the result of this polyphony.

Next case: did Wagner already use quartal chords? Study the next example.



No, I think the first sound can be explained by a melodic technique, the suspension: the D in the middle voice resolves in the C#, which is part of a dominant seventh chord.



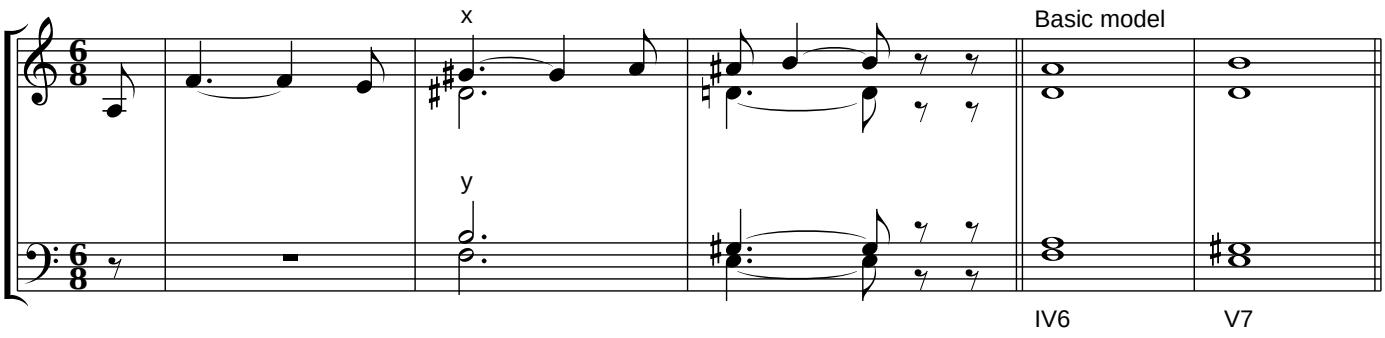
So, let's have always a close look to the influence of melodic ideas on harmony (in fact, a great and easy way of alternative thinking, i.e. a way to go "beyond" functional harmony).

2. Romantic and impressionist harmony: 7 methods

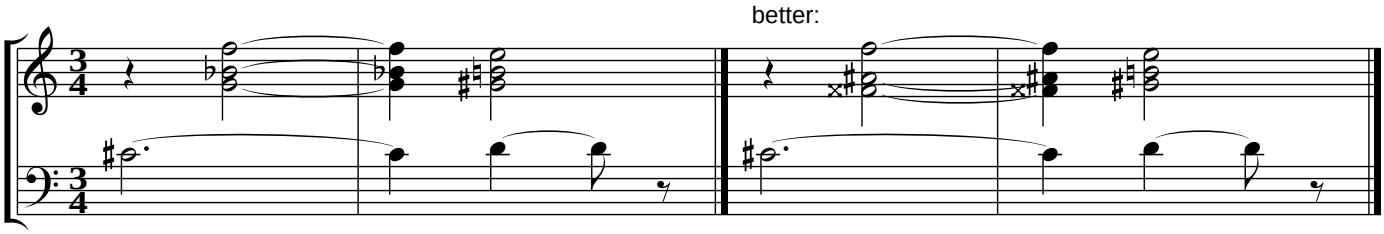
2.1. Method 1: suspension ('retardatio')

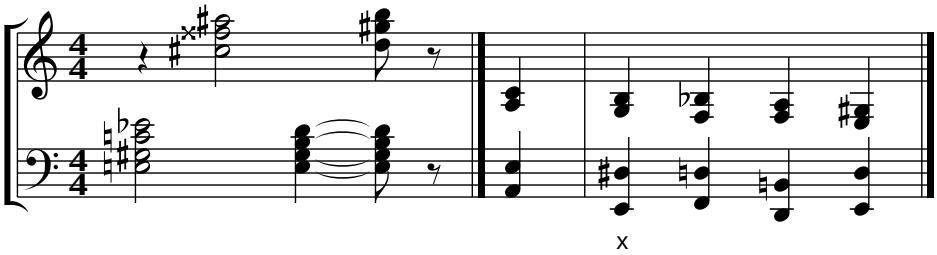
As I showed in my article "Old methods of 'chord construction' in Liszt's Resignazione and Wagner's Tristan" (www.bestmusicteacher.com) many progressions in Romantic music can be explained from baroque voiceleading techniques. The suspension or 'retardatio' is one of them

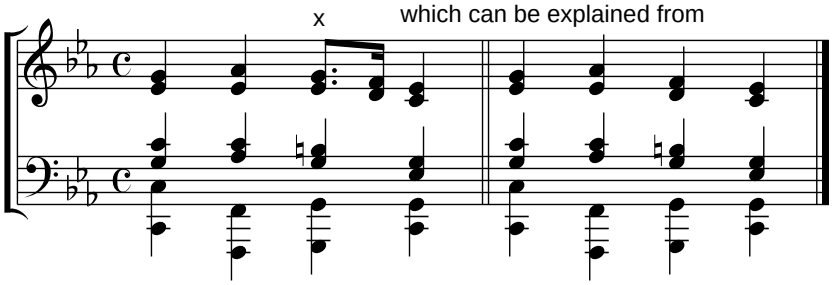
Example: the Tristan chord (x) from Wagner's Tristan and Isolde can be seen as the result of suspensions in a basic model: the upper voice G# as a suspension to A and the middle voice B ('y') as a suspension to an implied A ('implied' means some sort of elision: see method 3).



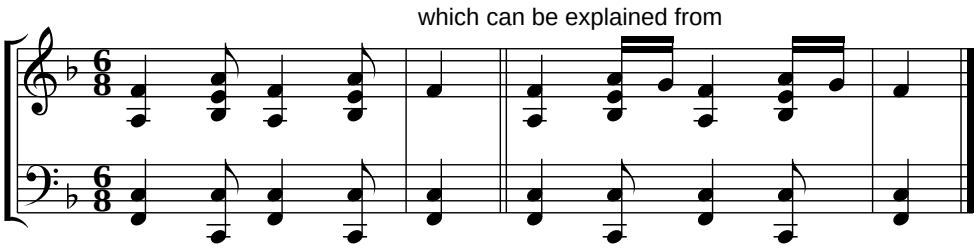
The next examples from Saint Saens, Wagner and Chopin are self−explaining:





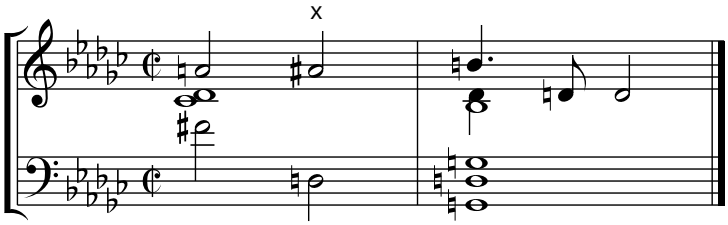


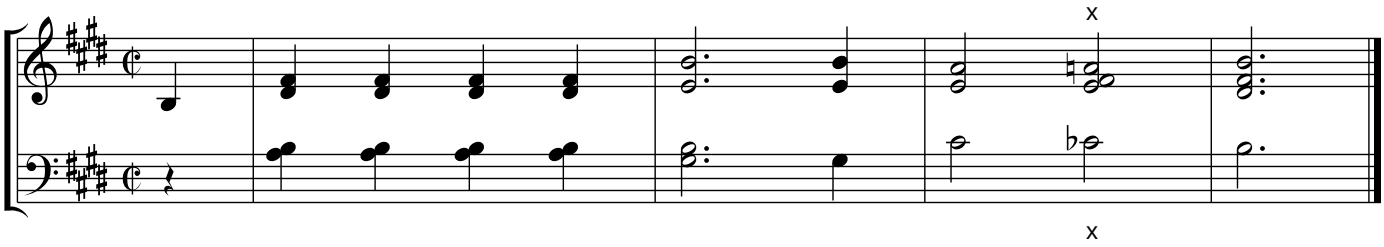
A special case is omitting the normal resolution in the next Chopin example (see method 3: elision).

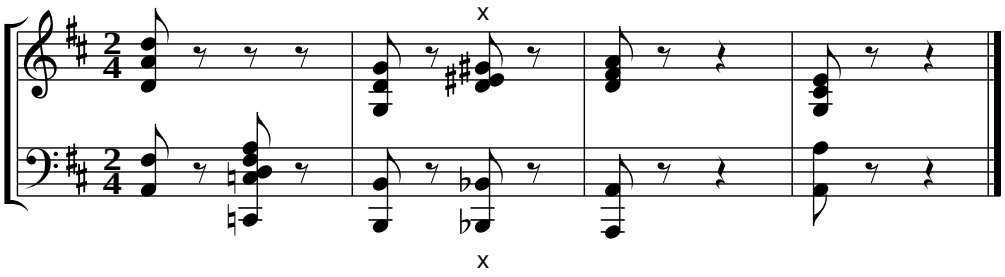


2.2. Method 2: passing note (’transitus’)

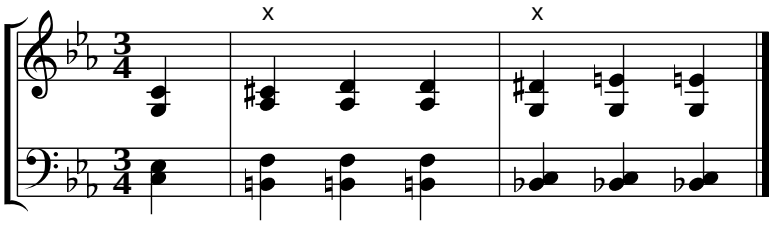
The passing note or ’transitus’ is the second old technique, mentioned in my article "Old methods of ’chord construction’ in Liszt’s Resignazione and Wagner’s Tristan" (www.bestmusicteacher.com). In combination with chromaticism, passing notes lead to exciting sounds. Pars pro toto, a few examples from Chopin, Beethoven and Schumann will do.





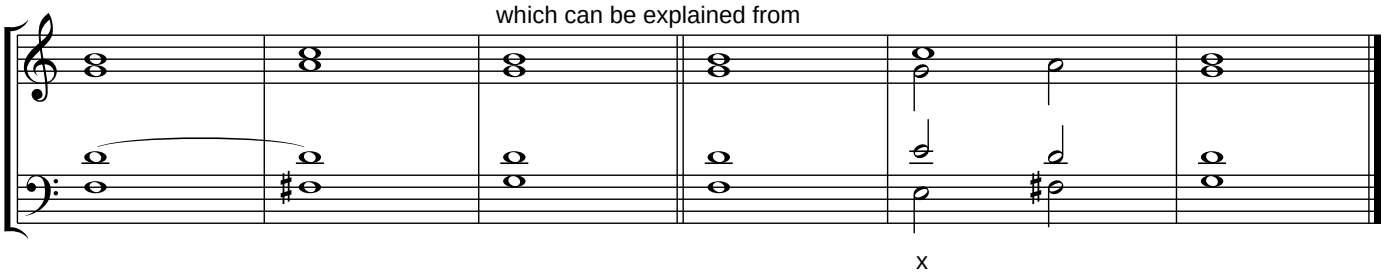


A mixed example from Beethoven:

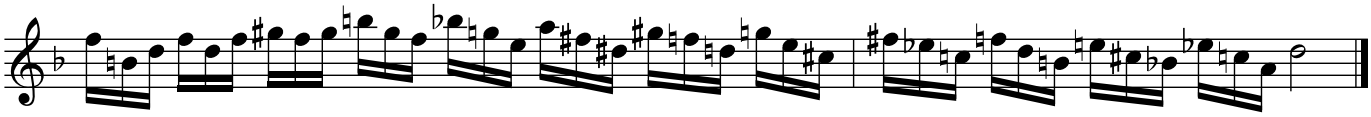


2.3. Method 3: elision (’ellipsis’)

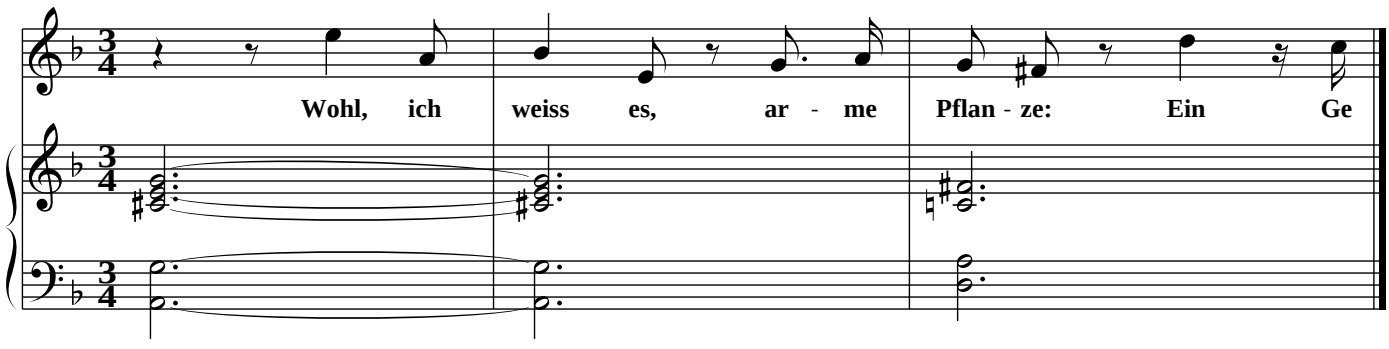
Again experiments of baroque composers seem to be paragdigmatic in not always resolving dissonant chords in a normal way. Hence the progression is unexpected. Bach’s pupil Kirnberger (1771) gives the following example:



One of the most interesting applications of the ’ellipsis’ is from J.S. Bach’s WTC I, D minor prelude (mm. 24−25): a succession of unresolving diminished triads or diminished seventh chords.



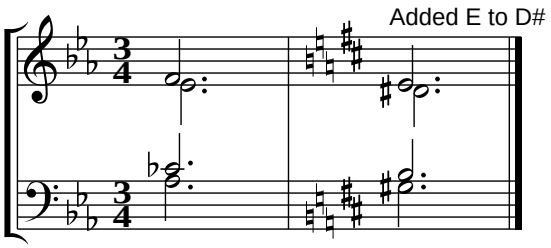
From Wagners Wesendonck songs an example of an one−note−elision which baroque theoreticians called the ’anticipatio transitus’: C# (middle voice) had to resolve to D, which in turn could continue with the passing note or transitus C. However, the resolution D has been omitted. Result: a succession of dominant seventh chords.



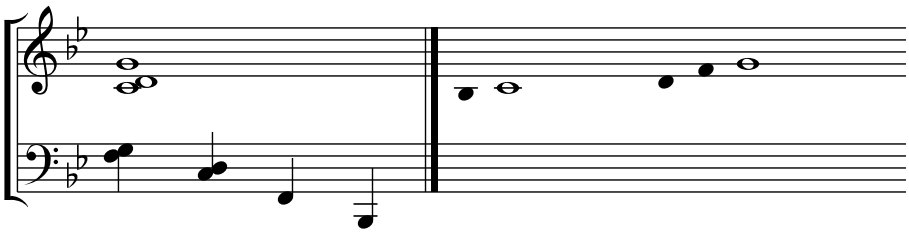
2.4. Method 4: altered or added notes

You can explain altered chords from different theoretical points of view. As already shown, I choose for a horizontal approach: the altered note as a passing note or −which is more or less the same− as a neighbour note.

The same horizontal approach can be true for added notes. Example: in case of triads, an added second below or above the root or an added second below or above the fifth (nowadays these special forms are called an 'added tone chord', e.g. sus2 or add9). An example from Wagner.

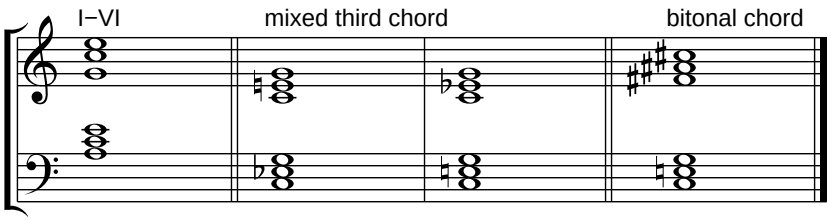


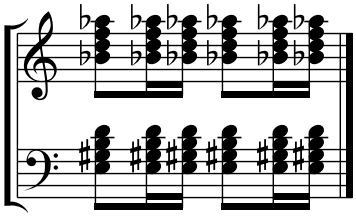
A very interesting example is from Debussy where the interval of a fifth (C−G) is made to sound. Debussy adds a second to the C (i.e. D) and a second to G (i.e. F, lower voice). The B flat in the lower voice can also be seen as an second to C. So the melodic frame of the lower voice seems to be determined by a second to C or G.

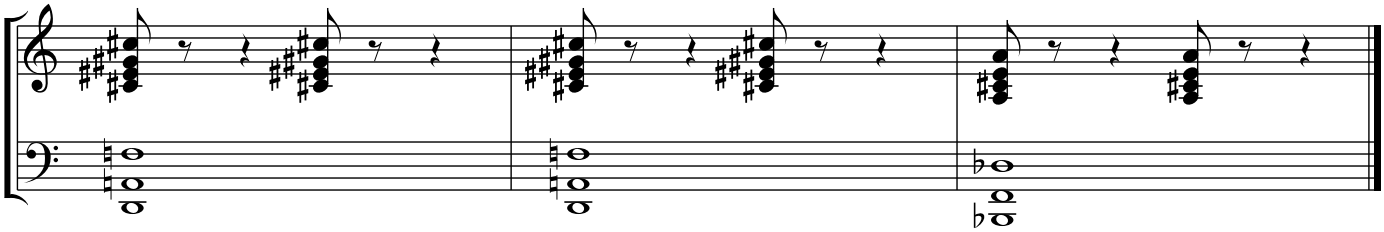


2.5. Method 5: mixed chords

A mixed chord is a combination of two chords, which can be identified by Roman numerals. Example: you can mix chord of I with chord of VI . A special case is I withaltered I, also a mixed third chord or split−third chord with both major and minor third, usually separated by an octave or more. It can be seen as a form of bitonality, which combines chords from different keys. After some basic examples, two from Mahler and Puccini will follow.

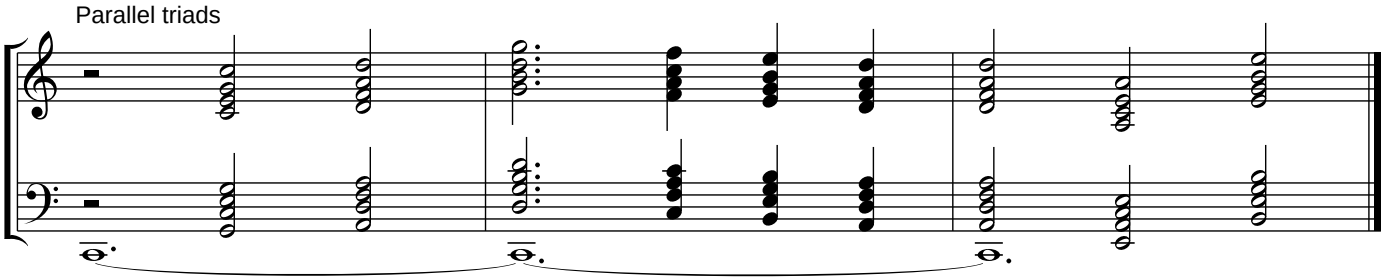


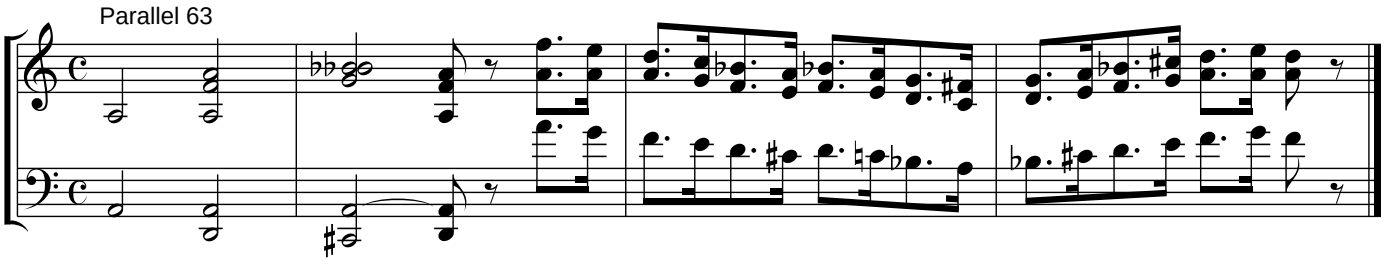


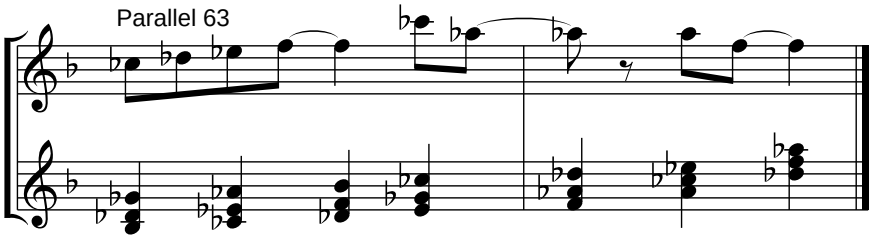


2.6. Method 6: organum techniques traditional chords

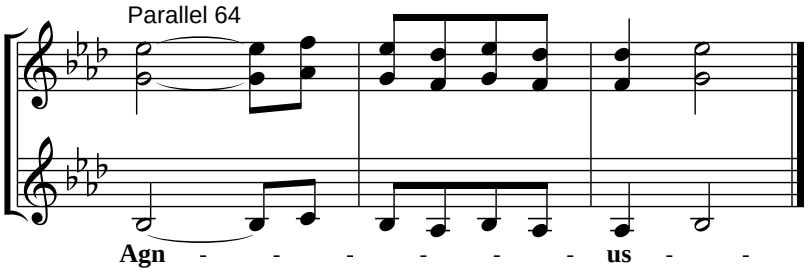
Intervals and chords in parallel motion are very common in romantic and impressionist music. We can classify this as a organumtechnique, referring to medieval practices, where chords are making a melody to sound. This melodic−harmonic principle can be applied to the work of many composers. A few examples from Schubert, Grieg, Debussy, Ravel, Caplet and Puccini:



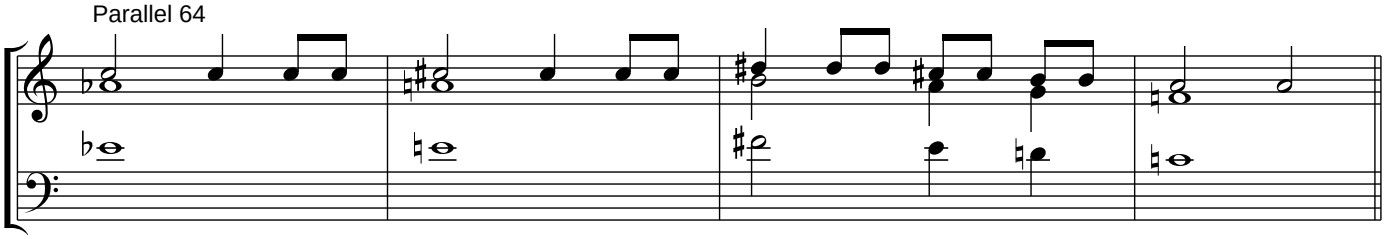




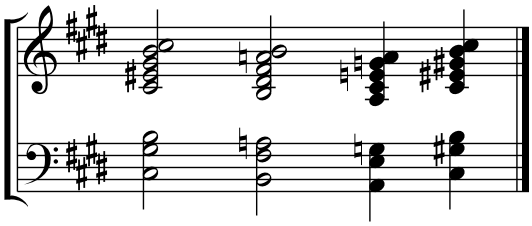
Parallel 64



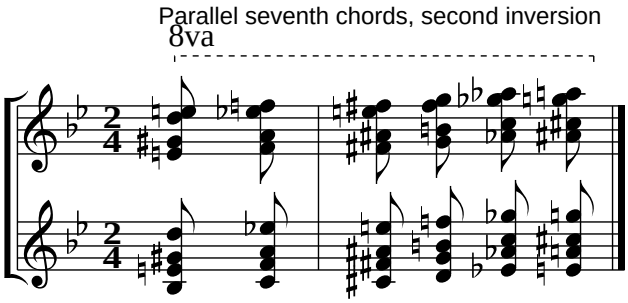
Parallel 64



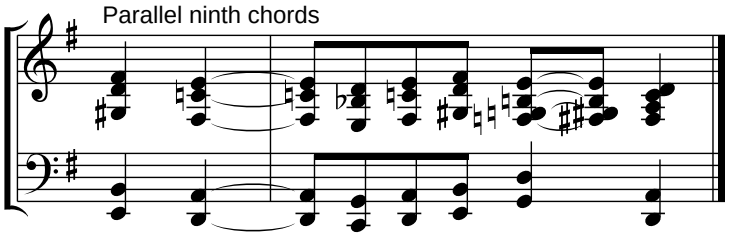
Parallel seventh chords



Parallel seventh chords, second inversion

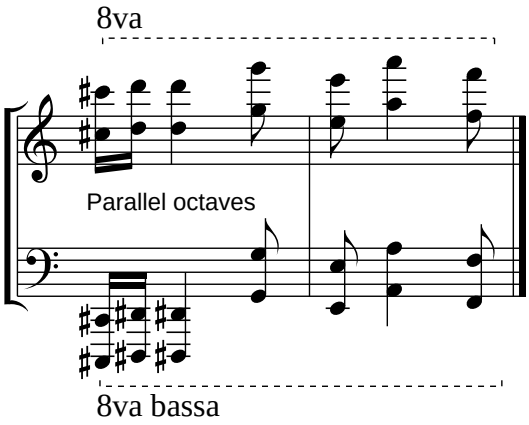


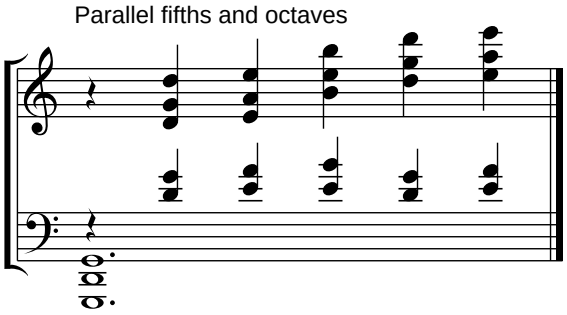
Parallel ninth chords

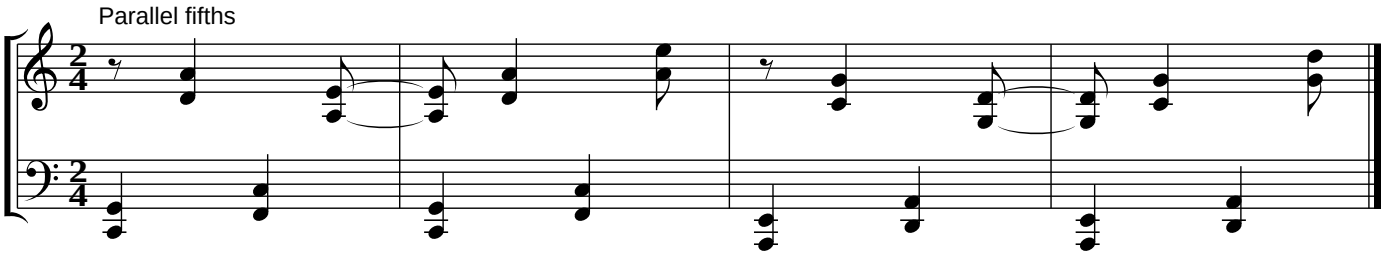


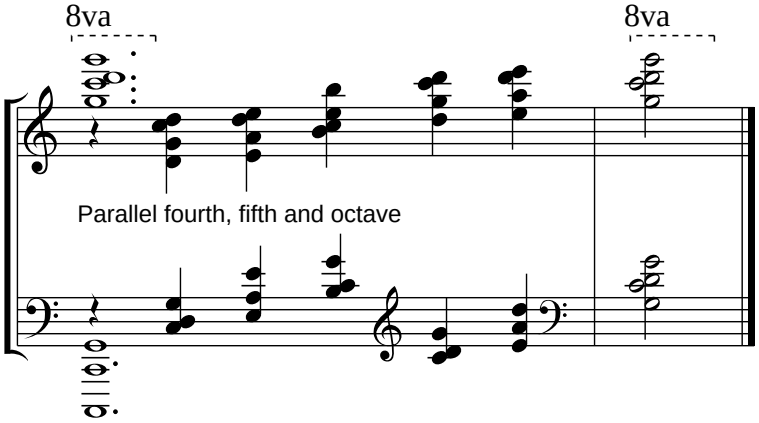
2.7. Method 7: organumtechniques new chords, based on fourths and fifths

Of course, sounds can be built on other intervals than the third. Common are structures based on with fourth and fifth. A few examples from Liszt, Debussy and Satie, starting with easy parallel octaves (which indeed do not represent chords, but are effective in building sounds):

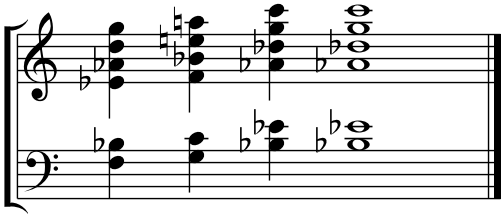








Parallel fourth structures



3. Application of methods

I conclude with a general view. Methods 1−3 seem to be universal, to be found in many compositions of the 19th (and also 20th) century. Methods 4−7 can often be found, especially in late romantic and impressionist works. Some of the techniques shown above are also used in music of the expressionism and neoclassicism, which I will discuss in a next paper.

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 6.1.1 (www.mcmusiceditor.com − www.bestmusicteacher.com)