

How to compose: some advice from a 18th century musician.

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1. Introduction

Heinrich Christoph Koch (1749-1816), a German court violist, composer and music theorists wrote a treatise 'Versuch einer Anleitung zur Compositions', which tried to instruct the beginner in the art of composition. The second Volume and a large portion of the third Volume of Bach's 'Versuch' deal with the mechanical rules of melody. Many aspects of melody are covered, such as differences between phrases in terms of their endings and the degree of completeness, and differences in weight between incises of musical phrases. Most interesting is his discussion on different methods of melodic expansion, i.e. methods of extending a small basic phrase into a phrase with larger dimensions. Koch offers many examples of his methods. Paradigmatic is his example of enlarging a eight-measure period into a thirty-two measure period.

There is no other comparable discussion on expansion techniques in the music theory of 18th century. We can find a single remark on this topic in the treatises of Kirnberger and Daube. Riepel deals with some aspects of melodic extension, but neither so systematically nor so detailed as Koch does.

The purpose of this article is to show how easily we can compose a song and a choral prelude with the help of Koch's ideas. First of all, we introduce some expansion techniques with illustrations from Koch and Bach.

2. Expansion techniques

Koch differentiates three expansion techniques:

- 1) repetition,
- 2) addition of one or more appendices,
- 3) expansion of complete melodic sections, based on more complex forms of repetition.

2.1 Technique 1: repetition

Bach's first expansion technique is repetition. According to Koch, the simplest and most often used expansion technique. The purpose of repetition is for reinforcement or modification of what has been said (II, 155/156). One can repeat the whole phrase or parts of it (one or two measures). Koch gives several ways to avoid an uninteresting and tedious use of repetition:

- a) repeat a phrase or a phrase-segment but with different harmonies,
- b) repeat a phrase or a phrase-segment but use the technique of voice exchange (e.g. substitute the upper voice with a inner voice and vice versa),
- c) repeat a phrase or a phrase-segment but with figuration of the main notes of the melody (e.g. use ornaments as drills, slides, passing and changing notes),
- d) repeat a phrase or a phrase-segment but decrease or increase the number of accompanying voices (e.g. four- part versus two-part),
- e) repeat a phrase or a phrase-segment but with dynamic differences (e.g. forte-piano),
- f) repeat a phrase or a phrase-segment but change the 'layout' of the accompanying voices (e.g. change their rhythmic pattern).

Example 1 is from Bach's 'Versuch' (Volume 11, 426, 427 and 428). A four-measure phrase is expanded into a five-measure phrase through repetition of the second measure. This repetition is then varied by means of figurative, dynamic differences and voice exchange (see above b, c and e).

The image displays four musical staves in treble clef, 3/4 time, illustrating variations of a four-measure phrase. The first staff, labeled 'original phrase', shows measures 1, 2, 3, and 4. The second staff, 'expansion', repeats measure 2 as '2a' and adds a fifth measure, with a reference to '(II, 426)'. The third staff, 'decoration', features a 'piano' dynamic for the second measure and a 'forte' dynamic for the third measure, with a reference to '(II, 427)'. The fourth staff, 'voice exchange', shows the second measure with a different harmonic texture, with a reference to '(II, 428)'. All staves end with a double bar line.

Example 1

Bach's choral prelude Herr Gott, nun schleuss den Himmel auf (BWV 1092) shows that simple repetition is an effective means of composition. Before ending the phrase Bach

wrote - as an interruption- a set of varied repetitions (see example 2).



Example 2

2.2. Technique 2: addition of one or more appendices

With the addition of one or more appendices, -Bach's second expansion technique- the ending of a phrase or of a larger melodic section receives more emphasis en thus becomes more important (111, 191-205). This technique includes either a varied repetition of the final notes of a phrase or an addition of a phrase with new melodic material. This appendix itself can of course be expanded in a similar way. Example 3 is from Koch (III, 226/227) and shows expansion through two appendices. The first appendix is a repetition of what is previously heard and the second is of new melodic material.



Example 3

Example 4 is from Versus 3 of balms 'Herr Jesu Christ, dich zu uns Wend'. After the interesting change in register of the final notes of the phrase (bars 26-27) Böhm added a new closing phrase.



Example 4

2.3 Technique 3: expansion of complete melodic sections

Koch's third expansion technique is based on more complex forms of repetition of complete melodic sections (III, 205- 230). Koch outlines three different ways of expanding of complete phrases:

- a) The first way is a repetition of a phrase-segment on another step of the scale ('Versetzung'). If the repetition appears in another key the term used is 'Transposition'. Several repetitions can also form a sequence (progressions).
- b) The second way includes continuation of an idea within a phrase, e.g. repetition of rhythmic pattern, a metrical formula or a melodic figure ('Passagie').
- c) The third way is the parenthesis or interpolation.

This involves the insertion of new melodic material between two segments of a phrase or between a phrase and its repetition. The parenthesis forms a contrast to its musical environment, e.g. achieved through contrast between major and minor keys.

A few examples will illustrate these techniques.

Example 5 deals with expanding a two-measure phrase into a four-measure phrase (III 215/216). The first expansion (bar 1a) includes a free repetition of bar 1. The second expansion (bar 1b) is a continuation of a rhythmic figure from bar 1 and bar 1a (see above item b).



Example 5

In example 6 a phrase in c-major parenthesis in c-minor (see above is expanded by means of a item c).



Example 6

In his choral prelude 'Jesu, meine Freude' (BWV 1105) Bach wrote a rhythmic continuation of the metric formula of the melodic notes a' - b'-flat: a quaver+crotchet (see example 7). This rhythmic figure is repeated three times with the 'circulus' as melodic frame. After reaching the melodic notes a'-b'-flat the original closing segment of the phrase is heard (see above item 2 and 3).



Example 7

In the closing phrase of Bach's 'Jesu, meine Freude' (BWV 1105) a similar technique is used. Only the melodic frame ('circulus') has been varied (example 8).



Example 8

3. How to work it out?

On www.bestmusicteacher.com we have demonstrated how it is possible to compose a song for soprano and a choral prelude for organ with Koch's expansion techniques. While composing, you will experience that Koch's techniques will generate a lot of ideas for you. The examples above were in the baroque or galant style, now we look at writing a song in a free style (however, inspired by medieval composers) and a prelude in a romantic style, based on a 19th century Dutch hymn composed by Johannes Bastiaans. It will be evident that you can compose in any style with help of Koch's methods.

