

Harmonising in the middle – Sidmouth Folkweek Workshop 610 Weds 5th August 2015

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Summary

This is intended as a sheet to remind you of what was talked about in the workshop.

Analogy of the notes in the pool

In the pool there are notes which all look like wooden stepping stones. The notes all have a label of a note in the SCALE of the tune you are harmonising.

However, the stepping stones might be floating or might be anchored very firmly to the bottom of the pool.

The player of chords controls which stepping stones are anchored and the ones he/she anchors are in the chord being played and you can find this out so you know which ones won't wobble when you land on them.

When you are on an anchored stepping stone, you are moving from a solid base and can go anywhere. When you are moving from an unanchored one, it's a good idea to move to an adjacent anchored one. If you have an unanchored one next to you, it's OK to go via that to the anchored stepping stone beyond it. However, the anchoring will change as soon as the chord changes!

When you are moving from an anchored stepping stone, you have a solid base and that is enough for you to leap to any other stepping stone, anchored or not. The notes NOT in the scale are like logs that bob around between anchored and unanchored stepping stones. They are quite unstable, so it's a good idea to get off them quickly to an adjacent anchored point.

What Key?

All the notes in the scale of the key are likely to be good notes and their goodness will vary according to the chord being played.

Be aware that the tune might shift key – easy to spot if there are any notes in the tune that have changed from the scale you started in. Tunes can dip into other keys for a very short while and come back to where they started.

The scales of minor keys are consistent on their first 5 notes (e.g. E minor: E F# G A B) but the sixth and seventh notes need listening to. E.g. Maybe C# D# going up and C and D on the way down will work. Or sometimes C and D work in any direction. Or something in between. Listen to the tune and pick the most appropriate at each point. Clock it as something to be aware of.

Sometimes the scale of the tune might not be major or minor. It can be modal. In that case, work out the scale for that tune. For example, Rambling Sailor has a home key of D, but has a C natural not a C#.

What Chord?

The bass is going to play various chords which will contain notes from the scale being used at that point in the tune. You need to know what those chords are going to be.

What Notes to play?

Remember the stepping stones in the pool..

In G major, the notes (the scale) are G A B C D E F# G.

If the chord is G major the harmony ("safe") notes are G B D

If the chord is C major the harmony notes are C E G

If the chord is D major the harmony notes are D F# A

If the chord is E minor the harmony notes are E G B

Notice that any note in the scale is either a harmony note or next to one.

1. From a harmony note, you can jump to any other harmony note without fear.
2. From a harmony note, it's generally a good idea to step to a non-harmony note.
3. From a non-harmony note, it's normally a good idea to step to a harmony note next to it.

4. If the note is the one below the key you are working in (called the “leading note”, for example F# in the key of G), whether or not it is a harmony note (dependent on the chord being played) it normally works well to get to the adjacent tonic.
5. If the non-harmony note is the 6th of the scale (e.g. E in the key of G) it is OK to step up to the next note and it sounds good if in a short space of time you get to the tonic (e.g. the G)
6. To whizz up or down an octave or any big leap, generally best done on a harmony note – unless it sounds like you’re continuing a scale e.g. G A B C, the D below the C. E and so on.

Rhythm

Your harmonisation needs a rhythm.

Does it sound like a good rhythm on its own?

Does it complement the tune’s rhythm? Does the chord player play a rhythm – does it complement that?

Choose the same rhythm or maybe contrast?

Sequences and Patterns

Think about going up or down part of the scale. If it doesn’t work on the starting note you choose, try another one starting with the next one up or down.

Often, arpeggios (just using the harmony notes in sequence up or down) work well

If the tune has a pattern, every two bars, try to make your harmonisation repeat its pattern every two bars.

The pattern might repeat, maybe at the same pitch or a note up or down.

Playing a pattern gives more freedom to clash with the notes in the tune.

Contrary or not?

Your harmonisation can be strong in contrast or similar to the tune.

For example, if the tune ascends upwards, you could be parallel to it. Try a 3rd apart. (For example, if the tune starts ascending on a B, try the G as a starting point and if that is horrid, try the D. If you analyse the tune and the chords, you should be able to predict which will work better.) Do note that tracking a tune slavishly in this fashion will come a cropper at some point (and becomes boring to listen to), so only use this for some of the time.

Contrariwise, your harmonisation might contrast nicely by descending against an ascending tune – a pattern and a contrast in one!

What about all those other notes NOT in the scale?

In the key (scale) of G major we are talking about C# D# F G# and Bb (aka A#). They can be used as a gentle seasoning only and think about sliding onto the adjacent harmony note afterwards. They can sound delightfully cheeky in the right context.

They might also pop up when the key of the tune is changing e.g C# to go to D major or D# to go to E minor in which case you could be dealing with a different scale and chords.

The Sound of Silence

Your harmonisation can have rests and gaps in it.

Sometimes it’s good to let the tune carry on by itself.

The effect of you playing in between gaps of silence can emphasise what you’re playing.

Sometimes you can sneak in something great from you when the tune is static or at a rest.

LISTEN!

Do listen to what you’ve created.

A duff note is probably right next to a better note.

So, there’s this tune to harmonise....

1. What is the scale? What notes are there?
2. What chords are going to be played – what are your harmony notes at every point? Perhaps make a skeleton of harmony notes for every chord change?
3. What is the rhythm being played – how much contrast, similarity, silence?
4. Are there any changes to another key – what is the scale during those periods? It might be transitory or many bars.
5. What patterns might you use? Does the tune have any?
6. Listen and hone until happy.
7. Don’t forget to make it playable – and easy to remember if you play from memory.