

UNIT 17: SEQUENCES

Composing music involves the organization of musical ideas into variable sized units. These units, ranging from the terseness of a motive to the lengthy construction of a period or section, help to determine the form of the composition, and enhance our understanding of its performance. The logic of a piece is also dependent upon a balance between unity (repeated ideas) and variety (new ideas). One compositional technique which relates to both these statements is the SEQUENCE. This device, highly favored by composers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, was used to reinforce a motive, build a phrase, or to facilitate a modulation.

By definition, a sequence is a melodic figure which is repeated at a different pitch level. The original idea and each of its repetitions are called LEGS or SECTIONS. Certain characteristics of a sequence are generally recognized.

1. In order to be called a sequence there must be a minimum of two legs. Theoretically you may have as many legs as you wish but good taste and the interest span of a listener usually limits the number of legs to three or four.
2. The interval between the first note of each leg is the same. For instance, if the melodic idea (first leg) begins on C, the second leg begins on D (a 2nd higher), then the third leg will maintain the interval of the 2nd and begin on E.
3. The legs of the sequence proceed in the same direction, either all upward or all downward. In #2 above the pitches C, D, and E were all upward. It would be unlikely to have a sequence with C, D, and then down to B.

Example 17.1 Vivaldi-Bach - Organ Concerto in D minor (3rd Mvt.)

D minor: i iv⁷ VII⁷ III⁷

continued . . .

VI⁷ ii⁷ v⁷ i⁷ VI⁶

Theorists have categorized sequences into several different varieties, three of the most common being: diatonic, modulating, and false.

In the DIATONIC sequence (Example 17.2) all the pitches are in the same key. This means that the number of the interval is maintained (2nds, 3rds, etc.), but the quality (minor, major, etc.) may be different.

Example 17.2

DIATONIC Leg 1 Leg 2 Leg 3

In the MODULATING sequence (Example 17.3) each leg is in a different key. This is a very convenient way to modulate.

Example 17.3

MODULATING

F Maj: G Maj: A Maj:

In the FALSE sequence, some pitches of the melody are literally repeated and others are shifted to a new pitch as in the diatonic sequence.

Example 17.4

FALSE



Drill 17.1

Write your own sequence. Try a melodic one first, writing a diatonic sequence, then altering it to form modulating and false sequences.

Write a second one with harmony. Use the progression of descending fifths as illustrated by Vivaldi in Example 17.1. This progression is frequently used in sequences.

Drill 17.2

Sequences abound in the literature. Take time to identify them in the music you play or teach. It can be almost as much fun as going on a treasure hunt and winning the prize.