

The Phrase

Part One: Definition and Harmonic Structure

The Phrase: Definition

- The phrase is one of most basic of all musical units
- Musicians must be able to express phrases clearly and meaningfully
- A musical phrase might be roughly described as the amount of music that can be presented in a single breath
- A phrase can be more specifically defined as the smallest musical unit that concludes with a *cadence*

Music and Language

- A phrase in music is similar to a verbal phrase in language
- In language, phrases are combined into sentences, sentences into paragraphs...
- Musical units can be combined in a similar way, although the terminology is different
- Verbal phrases are set off from each other by punctuation
- In music, this punctuation is the *cadence*

Antecedent and Consequent

- As with many verbal phrases, a single musical phrase generally lacks sufficient weight to stand on its own
"One day as I was walking down the street"
"I met a man with a wooden leg named Pete"
- The first phrase is *dependent* upon the second
- In music, this dependency is described as an *antecedent-consequent* relationship
- An *antecedent* phrase requires a *consequent* phrase to attain a sense of completion

Degree of Completeness

- The cadence of an antecedent phrase sounds less complete than the cadence in a consequent
- We can categorize cadences as being two kinds: *incomplete* and *complete*
- Half and deceptive cadences sound *incomplete*
- Plagal and authentic cadences sound *complete*, but with differing degrees of *strength*
- An incomplete (or weak authentic) cadence creates the need for one or more phrases to bring a musical thought to completion

Musical Periods

- In language, phrases combine into sentences: complete, well-formed ideas
- In music, one or more phrases combine to form *periods*
- A period is a "musical sentence": a complete, well-formed musical idea
- A period is made up of one or more inconclusive phrases and a final conclusive phrase

Larger Units of Form

- One or more musical periods can be combined into *parts* (or sections)
- A form with two parts is a *simple binary form*
- A form with three parts is a *simple ternary form*
- Simple forms may be complete pieces
- Simple forms may also be combined into larger, *composite forms*
- Composite-form works can be combined into larger, *multi-movement works*

Smaller Units of Form

- Phrases can sometimes be divided into smaller *phrase segments*
- Phrases also contain *motives* (the smallest recognizable musical unit)
- When there are two phrase segments of roughly equal size, we might call them *semiphrases*
- Semiphrases are created by a rest or long note near the middle of a phrase

Types of Semiphrases

- The second semiphrase might be a *repetition* of the first one, perhaps with *variation*
- The second semiphrase might be a *transposition* of the first one
- Semiphrases may be similar or dissimilar in nature (*parallel* or *contrasting*)
- Semiphrases (and other phrase segments) are not as complete as phrases

Harmonic Structure of Phrases

- The *harmonic goal* of a phrase is its cadence
- Phrases generally exhibit some kind of clear *harmonic motion* from the initial chord to the final harmonic goal
- This harmonic motion might take place throughout the phrase or it might be more concentrated at the cadence

Structural Chords

- The endpoints and important harmonic arrivals within a phrase are called *structural chords* (or “harmonic pillars”)
- Structural chords are more important than the *embellishing chords* which decorate them
- Structural chords are usually I, IV, and V (tonic, predominant, and dominant functions)

Harmonic Models

- Many phrases are based on simpler underlying *harmonic models*
- One common model is I – IV – V – I
- Other common models are:
 - I – V – I
 - I – IV – I
 - I – V
 - V – I
- (I – V and V – I phrases are often paired as an antecedent and a consequent)



For next time

- Download and complete homework 3 on harmonic models