

## Parallel Fifths in Orchestration and when they matter:

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First a recollection, though hardly an anecdote. Every year, in my orchestration classes at the University of New Hampshire and Tufts, to a student: "Surely you see that you have blatant parallel fifths between the first violin and the bass!" To which the student replied: "Oh! I didn't know that wasn't allowed in orchestration. -- This isn't a harmony class, is it?"

Next, the recognition that parallel octaves are found everywhere in instrumental texture and especially in the orchestra, and parallel fifths often turn up as well. I think it was Brahms who recognized that parallel first-inversion triads, when doubled at the octave, inevitably resulted in parallel perfect fifths between. Obviously this was no matter of concern because one hears doubled triads, not prohibited parallel intervals.

Nevertheless one occasionally finds examples of parallel fifths in part-writing that, for reasons of *orchestration*, become unduly prominent -- prominent enough for me to notice them, anyway. Though I give short-score illustrations here, so that the fifths can be readily seen, the following discussion is most fully understood with orchestral scores in hand.

The image shows a short-score illustration for strings, measures 25-26. The music is in D major and 2/4 time. The upper staff (treble clef) is marked *sf* and contains a melodic line with a dotted half note on the downbeat of measure 25, followed by a quarter note on the downbeat of measure 26. The lower staff (bass clef) is marked *f* and contains a bass line with a dotted half note on the downbeat of measure 25, followed by a quarter note on the downbeat of measure 26. The two staves are connected by a brace on the left. A line points from the text "(wind doublings omitted)" to the lower staff. The music shows parallel perfect fifths on the downbeats of both measures.

EXAMPLE 1 (above). Haydn: Symphony No. 100 ("Military"), third movement (Minuet), mm. 25-26. The basic harmonic progression is I to ii in D major, with sequential part-writing which emphasizes, rather than dilutes, the parallel perfect fifths on the downbeats of these two measures. Upper voice: Flute, Oboe 1, Violins I. Bottom voice: Oboe 2, Violas handing over to Cellos and Basses *down* an octave. Haydn covers the parallel problem, but only somewhat, by changing the lower register to form antiparallel fifths. Referring to the orchestral score, note also the disposition of the horns. Horn 1 (sounding A), *if* Haydn had sustained it for a full dotted half, would have emphasized the stepwise motion to (sounding) B even more; so he carefully breaks the line by arpeggiating it upward to (sounding) D before moving to the B. Horn 2 sounds D and doubles the downbeat of the bass. I think that Haydn covers the parallel fifth problem with consummate skill, but not complete success. But he probably didn't believe,

nor do I, that the problem mattered musically in any case; it matters, really, only to theory teachers.

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Trp.

Vc., Cb.

Horns, Trb.

(Vn., Vla., Ww. omitted)

*ff*

*sf*

EXAMPLE 2. Schumann: Symphony No. 1 ("Spring"), first movement, measure 13. The progression is from IV to V; compare m. 4, where the same motive is harmonized with IV to ii. Here Schumann's intended part-writing is seen in the polarity of bass E-flat to F (Trombone 3, Cellos, Bases) and upper-voice E-flat to C (Flute 1, [maybe] Bassoon 1, Violins I and II); he counts on the upper voice of the heavily-weighted violin chords to show the part-writing. But unfortunately, what leads the upper part is not the violins or flute, but Trumpet 1, B-flat to C, forming egregious fifths with the bass. Can one put this down to Schumann's inexperience in orchestration? Probably; but so what? Schumann was such an imaginative composer that he often accomplished miracles in his orchestral works, despite occasional flaws that a more orchestrationally or conductorly savvy composer might have avoided.

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2 Fl., 2 Harps

*ff*

Tutti

*sf*

EXAMPLE 3. Berlioz: *Symphonie fantastique*, second movement ("A Ball"), mm. 365-366 (fourth and third measures from the end of the movement). The progression is vi to V. The intended voice-leading is from C-sharp to E in the uppermost part (Flute 1), but this is completely drowned out by the Violins I, C-sharp to B, forming quite obvious parallel fifths with the bass. The harps are in the upper texture, too, but they don't share this doubling and you can't hear them anyway. (I pointed out this example in the fourth edition of the Piston *Harmony* but removed it from the fifth edition). As in the case of the Schumann, there's probably nothing to be done about this.

1 Adagio

Fl., Cl. *p*

Vn. div. *pp*

Horns 1, 2 *p*

Vc., Cb. *p*

EXAMPLE 4. Bizet: Symphony in C major, second movement, mm. 2-3. The progression is iv to III in A minor. The intended voice-leading is from A to C in the top voice, upper half of divided Violins I, contrary motion with Cellos and Basses, D to C. What one hears, however, is the motion of (sounding) A to G in Horn 1 (in F), forming parallel fifths with the bass. Of all these examples, this one is perhaps the most remediable by appropriate attention from the conductor: emphasize upper Violins I a *little* more, and, more difficult, try to hush Horn 1, which is already pushing on the edge of the practical high register even though marked pianissimo with swells, like all the strings.

I'm not going to talk about Debussy, except to say that I love him and his fifths very much.