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Voice-leading analysis of music 2: the middleground

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Introduction

This is the second of three courses. It continues on from the discussion of voice-leading analysis begun in AA314_1 *Voice-leading analysis of music 1: the foreground* and which will continue in AA314_3 *Voice-leading analysis of music 3: the background*. This course returns to the study of Mozart's harmonic style that was begun in AA314_1. Once again, we will analyse the voice leading of extracts chosen from the piano sonatas. At the end of AA314_1, you saw that analysing the 'foreground' of the music – that is, the structure outlined by the consonances in the harmony – leads on to the discovery of deeper levels of structure. These deeper levels of harmony are what you are going to study here. The term used for this larger-scale structuring is the 'middleground' . However, the basic techniques used to describe it are just the same as those introduced in AA314_1 which analyse the foreground.

Before you begin, you may wish to revise the ideas that were introduced in AA314_1, especially familiarising yourself with the terms **analytical notation**, **arpeggiation**, **background**, **consonance**, **consonant skip**, **diminution**, **dissonance**, **foreground**, **middleground**, **neighbour note**, **passing note**, **prolongation**, **reduction**, **register transfer**, **resolution** and **suspension**, which are listed in the glossary for this course. In this course you will be meeting extracts from all the complete sonata movements to which you listened at the beginning of AA314_1, so you may wish to listen to these whole movements again. In Section 3 of this course you will need a pencil and some manuscript paper in order to complete the activities.

The aims of this course are:

- to develop voice-leading analysis;
- to introduce the concept of the 'middleground' of harmonic structure.

The materials upon which this course is based have been jointly authored by Robert Samuels and Howard Wilde.

This OpenLearn course provides a sample of Level 3 study in Arts and Humanities.

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand more deeply the complete movements from Mozart's sonatas, studied both here and in the course 'Voice-leading analysis of music 1: the foreground'
- recognise extracts from other Mozart piano sonatas
- recognise typical techniques used by Mozart to organise the harmony of complete short sections within musical works
- understand the use of symbols in voice-leading graphs of the middleground of harmonic structure
- relate this sort of graph to the score of the music it analyses.

1 Introduction

1.1 Voice-leading concepts

Here are some ideas to explain why analysis of voice leading can help our understanding of Mozart's music.

- Ordinary chord-function analysis (using roman numerals) is not able, on its own, to explain the sense of logical continuity in Mozart's music.
- Order and coherence are, in part, produced in Mozart's style by smooth linear patterns of notes, hidden within the individual parts (or 'voices') of the music.
- These smooth lines can be identified at several different levels: in the music as the composer wrote it (that is, the 'surface' or 'foreground'); in the underlying 'skeleton' of the harmony; and at a number of levels in between.
- **Each** of these levels obeys the basic rules of counterpoint, in which dissonances must resolve – as passing notes, neighbour notes or suspensions – to consonances.
- Analytical notation can be used to show the relationships between these levels, by representing them using noteheads, stems and slurs.

In this course you are going to look in more detail at these deeper levels of the structure. In AA314_1, you saw that analysing the voice leading of a passage can often reveal connections we would otherwise miss – you may remember, for instance, that bars 3–4 and 5–8 of Mozart's Sonata in C, K545 have the same underlying structure, despite being completely different on the surface (see AA314_1, Example 14). These connections become more visible when we look at deeper levels of harmonic organisation.

1.2 Moving beyond the foreground

As you know, the essence of analysing the foreground of a piece of music lies in distinguishing between consonant and dissonant notes. Dissonant notes, whether passing notes, neighbour notes or suspensions, are all **subsidiary** to the consonant note to which they resolve. The same goes for arpeggiations, where the subsidiary notes are consonant. In all of these cases, we can say that the subsidiary notes **elaborate** the main (consonant) note.
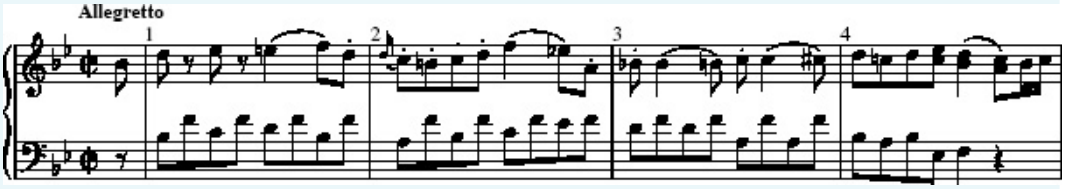
The big difference, when we look deeper into the structure of the music, is that we discover that some **consonant** harmonies (notes or chords) elaborate, or are subsidiary to, the main harmonies. This is what defines the 'middleground'. You may have noticed that this was the case when we analysed the opening of the last movement of Mozart's Sonata in B flat, K570, in the video clips in AA314_1.

Activity 1

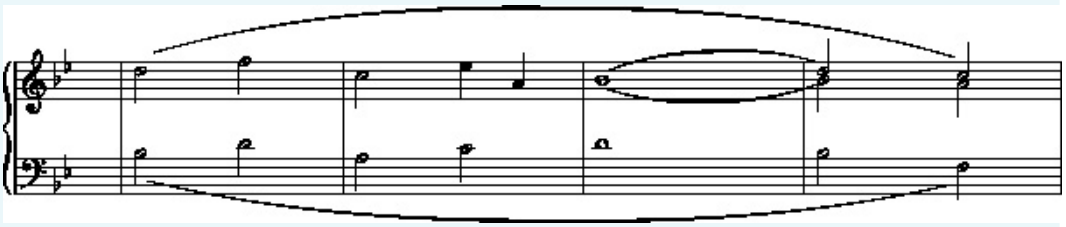
Example 1 is the score of bars 1–4 of the third movement of K570 and Examples 2 and 3 show part of the multi-layered analysis built up in the video clips. Listen to the extract below, and then listen through three more times, first following the score (Example 1), then Level 4 (Example 3), then Level 2 (Example 2). Why does Level 2 omit some of the notes found in Level 4?

Click to listen to Extract 1
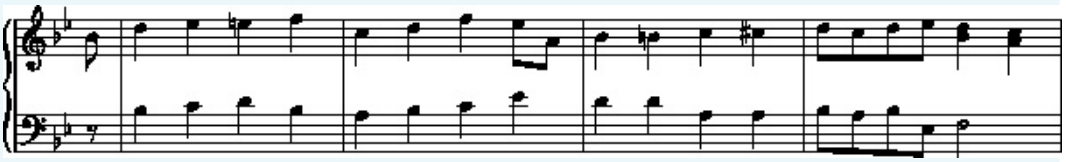
Audio content is not available in this format.



Example 1 Sonata in B flat, K570, third movement, bars 1–4



Example 2 Sonata in B flat, K570, third movement, bars 1–4: Level 2



Example 3 Sonata in B flat, K570, third movement, bars 1–4: Level 4

As was explained in the video clips, the notes that have been removed from Level 4 to give Level 2 are passing notes, which lead in each case between different versions of the same chord. Even though these 'passing harmonies' are consonant within the score (at the foreground), we might say that these notes are **dissonant** at the deeper level. Strictly speaking, this means that Level 2 is a middleground structure, whilst Level 4 is a foreground structure.

Throughout this course, you will be making distinctions between main harmonies and the subsidiary harmonies that prolong them. Just as in AA314_1, the most important consideration in doing this is to trust what your ear tells you about the music. Analysis is not a mechanical or abstract activity; it is rooted in careful listening. Always ask yourself exactly **what** you hear in any individual passage, and then how this can be expressed using analytical language or notation. Some new techniques will be needed to analyse middleground harmonic structures, but we will still be dealing in this course with relatively short extracts from Mozart's piano sonatas. Although I want to show how Mozart organises whole self-contained phrases, those I have chosen are no longer than eight bars. The techniques you will learn here, however, can be applied to much longer stretches of music. Do not worry, though, that you will be expected to produce complicated analytical graphs yourself. The aim of all the AA314 courses presenting

voice-leading theory is to enable you to **understand** what an analytical graph says about the music. The analytical activities you are asked to do yourself are all directed towards this end, and as a result, there is much more emphasis on **reading** graphs presented to you rather than writing or annotating your own.

2 Melodies within melodies

In this course we introduce two new concepts that are central to voice-leading theory: **unfolding** and **interruption.** These, especially the latter, tend to occur at a level beyond the musical surface, in what I have called the middleground. They both involve processes that extend over a longer span of time than the foreground features studied in AA314_1. This course will involve listening especially for musical lines that underpin entire phrases.

You probably think of melody as a single strand of music, maybe moving over a harmonic accompaniment. While this is obviously true in one sense, you may know from the start of AA314_1 that the treble and bass lines also have to make sense as a piece of counterpoint. Dissonances, for instance, are normally treated according to particular rules (a suspension, for example, should resolve downwards by step). Instead of thinking of the opening theme from Mozart's Piano Sonata in B flat, K333 as a tune with supporting chords, I asked you to think of it in terms of voices moving against one another, outlining large-scale lines.

This idea can be taken a step further. In some cases, there is not just one voice, but more than one, **within a single treble melody**. This idea, that two or more separate lines may be expressed in a single melodic part, is one of the most important aspects of voice-leading theory.

The clearest examples of this device, which is sometimes called ‘pseudo-polyphony’, are found in music of the late Baroque. We are going to look briefly at an extract by Vivaldi in order to see this at work.

Activity 2

Listen to Extract 2, from a flute concerto by Vivaldi, following the score given in Example 4. How many strands can you hear in the flute's melody line?

Click to listen to Extract 2