Musical motion & multiple voices

Examples by Zach Sheets

In music, there are four types of motion: parallel, contrary, similar, and oblique. Parallel is two voices moving the *same* number of steps in the *same* direction. Similar is two voices moving a *different* number of steps in the *same* direction. Contrary is whenever two voices move in *different* directions. Oblique is when one voice is the *same* and the other voices *moves*.



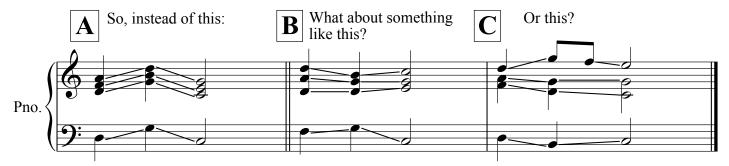
These are just some definitions so that we have a clear vocabulary to talk about musical motion and musical "lines" (a group of notes that move together in a phrase is often called a "line").

Let's think about all this in terms of singers for a moment. Imagine one singer singing all the top notes, another singing all the middle notes, and a third one singing all the bottom notes. If I connect the voices with lines, see how they all move in parallel? Each singer loses his or her individual quality and just becomes part of a larger "chunk" of motion.



All parallel!? Say it ain't so! <u>Sometimes</u> this can work well as a very specific effect, but usually it's just an accident, and it tends to sound **blocky** and **stiff**.

Let's take a little progression from D minor to G major to C major (II-V-I), and see three possibilities. Version A is all in parallel, whereas versions B and C use different kinds of motion.



Rather than moving together in a clump, each "singer" has a unique line. We'll hear four different, intricate lines, rather than everyone jumping as a big group. It gives the harmony a much richer, fuller, intriguing quality. Remember that the 3rd of a chord can also be in the bass, and that the root of a chord can occur in more than one voice; this will give some flexibility in which notes can appear where.

Want to find out more? Check out these podcasts: http://www.vtmidi.org/podcasts.htm, made by Music-COMP senior mentor and resident harmony master Erik Nielsen.