

# 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*.

Parallel:                      Similar:                      Contrary:                      Oblique:

The image shows four measures of piano music illustrating different types of voice motion. Each measure has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. 1. Parallel: Both staves move up by one step. 2. Similar: The treble staff moves up by one step, the bass staff moves up by two steps. 3. Contrary: The treble staff moves up by one step, the bass staff moves down by one step. 4. Oblique: The treble staff moves up by one step, the bass staff stays on the same note.

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.

The image shows a piano accompaniment with two staves. The treble staff has a series of chords that move in parallel motion, while the bass staff has a single note that stays in the same position. This creates a blocky, stiff sound.

All parallel!? Say it ain't so! Sometimes 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.

**A** So, instead of this:                      **B** What about something like this?                      **C** Or this?

The image shows three different harmonic progressions for a II-V-I progression. Version A is all in parallel motion. Version B uses similar motion. Version C uses contrary motion. Each version has a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff.

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.