

Four-Part Harmony

Four-part harmony divides melody and chords into four separate parts, also referred to as "voices". Each voice operates in (more or less) a designated range or region. Each part or voice is named according to the standard choral model from top to bottom:

Soprano }
Alto } on the treble clef
Tenor }
Bass } on the bass clef

Stems for the soprano and tenor always point up. Stems for the alto and bass always point down. This helps to make it clear which notes to follow when two parts share a staff.

Each voice or part contributes to a note in the chord, with one note in the chord doubled (since most chords only need three notes). The soprano part often carries the most conspicuous melody, but each part really follows its own melodic path. However, any of the parts can be used to make non chord tones (non chord tones are not limited to the soprano line).

In the accompanying examples, the same basic music is written-out twice. In the first example, all notes are chord tones. In the second example, some non chord tones have been added in different parts (and labeled) to show how enriched the texture can be made by just a few embellishments. Compare the two different audio versions of these examples.

Notice that in both examples some of the chords are inverted. This is a common feature in four-part textures that allows the bass part to have a particular melodic contour—reinforcing the idea that each part is actually a melody to some extent.

C: I V⁶ I⁶ IV⁶ I₄⁶ V⁷ I IV₄⁶ I

anticipation appoggiatura passing tone neighbor tones