

THE CHORALE CURRICULUM

Chorale 2

S: 3 2 5 4 3 1 1 2 3 2 1 2 3 2 1

A: 1 → 7 1 7 1 ^b7 6 6 1 7 1 1 1 7 1

T: 5 5 5 5 5 5 4 4 5 5 6 6 5 4 3

B: 1 4 3 2 1 3 4 2 5 4 3 4 5 5 1

Piano Reduction (C Major)

The Chorale Curriculum: Using Numbers To Ignite Our Students' Musicianship

By Dr. Eric Laprade

Introduction & Goals

As a music teacher, two questions I constantly reflect upon are *how do I best serve the students I have the privilege to teach?*, and *why do we do what we do?* While these questions can lead to any number of topics and discussion points, one specific area to consider is the role of large ensemble pedagogy in each child's development and how we, as music teachers, can intentionally nurture and develop students' fundamental musicianship in the ensemble setting. Along the same lines, how can we re-imagine the traditional "warm-up" in an ensemble class as a time to ignite and nurture students' fundamental musicianship? These questions have guided the development of a **Chorale Curriculum**, which uses scale-degree based chorales to develop students' active-listening skills, pitch sensitivity, audiation, tone, and technique in both the in-person and at-home learning environments. While many of these skills are often developed passively through the study of repertoire (e.g. tuning a chord, adjusting balances, "lower the third!"), this model seeks to intentionally develop these skills within each individual student. This reimagining of the traditional "warm-up" time in each rehearsal seeks to create a laboratory for aural, technical, and creative development. Using a simple scale-degree based chorale, *Figure 1*, this article will explore the pedagogical and creative possibilities embedded within each chorale and offer a model that can be applied in any ensemble setting.

Why Numbers?

The logical first question is, *why scale degrees?* The use of scale degree numbers, in place of traditional notation, presents many unique opportunities for maximizing the flexibility and applicability of each chorale. The chorales can easily be transposed to any of the 12 major keys or 12 minor keys. In addition, students may learn and perform any of the four parts in each chorale in any combination of instrumentation and ensemble size.

Scales degrees also present an entry point for students to see, hear, and understand harmonic function.

At the Core: Singing and Playing

At the core of the chorale curriculum is the opportunity for students to sing and play the chorales in four parts. Each chorale may be performed in all twelve major keys, with the possibility to also study and perform in minor keys with minimal alteration. It is often beneficial to scaffold the teaching of each chorale, having the entire ensemble

play and sing each part prior to splitting into SB and SATB divisi. This helps to reinforce a rehearsal culture of learning and investing in all parts of the repertoire being studied. To scaffold the introduction of singing, have students learn and sing each part as a group, sing the soprano and bass in divisi, and finally sing SATB in divisi. This is an effective way to incorporate daily singing into the curriculum, build confidence and independence in each student's voice, and normalize singing as an essential part of any instrumental curriculum. Ask different sections to play and sing each chorale, both in sectional rehearsals and in the full ensemble rehearsals, as a way for students to develop a section sound and section-dispositions (e.g. group breaths and releases), and other ensemble members to develop their critical listening skills and understanding of ensemble timbre. Engage musical leaders in the ensemble to play and sing a chorale as a way to provide an aural exemplar for younger students. Conversely, invite the youngest students in the ensemble to sing and play the chorale for their peers to build confidence and comfort in the ensemble setting. To develop instrument-specific skills, ask brass players to buzz the chorale on mouthpieces and have mallet percussionists play multiple parts at the same time through the use of 1-4 mallets, or have them play 1-3 parts and sing the other part. To further differentiate, ask for four volunteers to perform and sing the chorale at the beginning of each rehearsal. This self-selected 'assignment' encourages students to develop their musicianship outside of the classroom, builds confidence in individual performances, and provides an outlet for students to perform with their friends in sometimes atypical instrument combinations.

The chorales may be customized to engage with repertoire being studied and performed. For example, play and sing chorales in the specific key-areas of repertoire being studied. This foundational exercise will develop student's comfort with the harmonic content of a given piece. In addition, one may sing and play the chorales in repertoire-specific instrument combinations. For example,

if you are performing Gustav Holst's *First Suite in E-flat*, have the euphonium, tuba, and string bass students perform a chorale in E-flat major as a preparatory exercise for the opening measures of the piece. Similarly, the chorales present an opportunity to scaffold and teach rhythmic, dynamic, and articulation content from repertoire that is studied and performed. In fact, the addition of rhythmic motives on each chord provide an opportunity for students to focus and clarify the elements of pulse, articulation, note-length, releases, and style.

A broad takeaway from the initial exploration of the playing and singing possibilities of scale-degree based chorales, is that it is less the content and more how the content is used that creates opportunity. To that end, much can be achieved through how goals are framed when playing and singing the chorales. One exercise that is particularly effective is to have students listen to their peers while playing and singing the chorales. Ask students to choose any part (SATB) and instruct them to listen to their peers and figure out which part one of their classmates is performing. After playing the chorale, ask students to identify the student they chose and which part they think they were playing. With younger groups, this could be first presented when students are only playing either the soprano or bass parts. Conversely, challenge more advanced students to listen for and identify the parts that multiple students are performing. This exercise will help to develop students' active and critical listening skills in the ensemble setting.

Going Further

While singing and playing the chorales as notated presents considerable opportunity to develop our students' listening, performance, and analytical skills, there are a number of additional learning opportunities embedded in each chorale. These exercises are designed to develop students' technical facility, pitch sensitivity, creativity, and familiarity within a variety of key areas.

- **Bassline Performance:** to further develop each student's physical technique, familiarity with transpositions, and

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Figure 1: Sample scale-degree based chorale

Figure 2: sample bassline melodic motive derived from Chorale 2

Figure 3: sample arpeggiation pattern (notated in Concert F major)

- LEVEL 1:** Label the chord qualities: Major (M), minor (m), diminished (dim), or Dominant 7th (7)
- LEVEL 2:** Level 1 + apply a roman numeral to each chord and label the tonal areas of the chorale
- LEVEL 3:** Level 1-2 + include a figured bass analysis (where applicable)
- LEVEL 4:** Level 1-3 + on the notation, shade/circle any chord members that must be tempered down green and any chord members that must be tempered up red.
- LEVEL 5:** Level 1-4+ choose one line in concert B-flat major, indicate the specific pitch tendencies of your instrument on each note of your selected line. Use a green arrow to indicate any note that must be tempered down and a red arrow to indicate any note that must be tempered up.

Figure 4: Possibilities for scaffolding harmonic analysis

comfort performing in different key areas, create a melodic motive using the bassline of each chorale. *Figure 2* includes a melodic motive derived from the bassline of Chorale 2. Have the ensemble, or individual students, play through the bassline motive in all twelve keys, moving through the circle of fourths. To further develop students' technique, increase the tempo of the exercise, have students add slur or articulation patterns, or have students play two sixteenth notes on each pitch to develop their multiple tonguing. Further, ask brass players to buzz the exercise, have the entire group sing the exercise, encourage mallet players to play/sing multiple parts at the same time, or apply the rhythmic pattern to all four parts and perform the entire SATB chorale through the circle of fourths.

- **Arpeggiations:** Each chorale presents opportunities for students to see, hear, and understand harmonic function. One such opportunity is to have students arpeggiate each chord of the chorale. As a preparatory exercise complete a harmonic analysis of the chorale (see previous page). This could be done as a group in a rehearsal, as a homework assignment, or as a project for students enrolled in a theory class. Once complete, have students arpeggiate each harmony, in time, based on the harmonic analysis. *Figure 3* provides an example of the first two arpeggiations of Chorale 2. For further exploration of these skills, play the arpeggiations in a variety of tempi, have brass players buzz the arpeggiations, sing the arpeggiations, or perform the arpeggiations in all twelve keys.
- **Improvisation:** Each chorale is a prime setting for students to explore and develop their comfort with improvisation. As a starting point, encourage students to create their own melodic line by choosing a different chord member on each chord of the chorale. This 'moving between parts' provides students the opportunity to improvise and create in real time with provided melodic material. A natural

next step is to play each chord for four beats, and have select students improvise half-note lines by employing chord tones on beat 1 and passing/neighbor tones on beat 3 of each bar. The potential to scaffold is endless, as is the possibility for full group improvisation and solo improvisation over the rest of the group playing or singing the chorale.

Flipping the Ensemble Room

The chorale curriculum was first developed in 2020 as a response to running virtual large-ensemble classes. To that end, the vast majority of the exercises and experiences with the chorale curriculum may be realized in both an in-person large-ensemble setting or at home at the individual level. The potential to "flip the ensemble room" in pursuit of developing each individual student's fundamental musicianship is abundant.

- **Harmonic Analysis:** An essential element of each student understanding harmonic tendencies, ensemble balance, and pitch tempering, is a knowledge of the underlying harmonies that comprise music being performed. Ask each student to complete a simple harmonic analysis in order to better understand pitch tendencies at both the individual and ensemble level. While the thought of asking all students to complete a rigorous harmonic analysis might seem beyond the scope of an ensemble class, *Figure 4* presents a number of scaffolded levels for understanding the harmonic content of each chorale. While providing students with the harmonic analysis is certainly an option, educators may find completing the analysis as a large group as a viable alternative.
- **Composition:** As with developing students' technical facility, the bassline enables students to compose within the large ensemble setting. Provide students with the bassline and have them create their own SATB version of the chorale (compose SAT parts above the bassline). While it may seem natural to provide a number of parameters to students to guide their composition, there is also great benefit to asking students to compose from a strictly aural stand-

point, without the limits of part-writing conventions. Consider holding an in-class performance where quartets of students perform their chorales for each other, or incorporate student-composed chorales into the ensemble's daily warm-up.

- **SATB Singing and Playing, Bassline Performance, Arpeggiations, Improvisation:** Through the use of backing tracks and free online tools like BandLab, students can practice, record over themselves, and develop all of the skills and concepts presented above. •

For more information about incorporating the chorale curriculum into your rehearsals, please contact Eric Laprade at lapradee@tcnj.edu



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