

Voice-Leading and Parallelism on Guitar

Ted Greene - 1975-03-09

In the period of time where most of the principles of harmony were summed up (roughly 1600–1900), voice-leading was definitely one of the most important considerations for composers, improvisers, etc. Certain types of similar motion (especially, the similar motion of any 2 parts in octaves, 5ths, or unisons) were pretty much avoided.

To understand this it would help to know a little something about the music that existed *before* 1600. Here is an extremely simplified résumé: (By the way, the period of 1600-1900 is generally referred to as the *Common Practice Period*).

1) Harmony, on the idea of more than one note being sounded at the same time, did not come along until the 9th century. Up until then, music was *Monophonic*, that is only one melody line at a time was heard. Even if 40 people were singing (early music was primarily *vocal* music), they would all be singing the same note. Much of the music of this type that survives are in the category known as *Gregorian chant(s)* (also known as *Plain Chant(s)* or *Plain Song(s)*).

Example: (a simplified imitation of one)

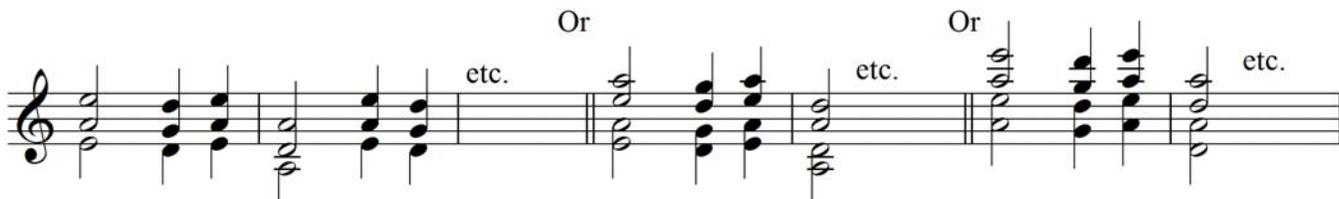
A later development was the singing in octaves of these chants.



2) In the 9th century, experiments were begun with what is known as *Organum* (oír-gan-um), which was the beginning of *Harmony*. Organum consisted of adding a 2nd melody a perfect 4th below (or perfect 5th above) the original melody.

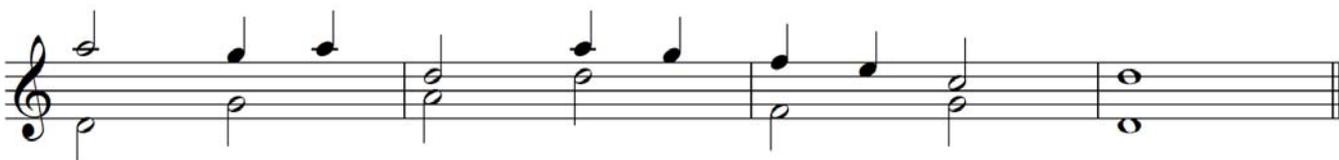


Sometimes the new melody and/or the original would be doubled an octave away. Also, experiments were done with drone basses.



More experiments were tried with intervals of 4ths and 5ths (like putting 4ths *above* the original and 5ths *below*). Then two or three hundred years later, the element of *Contrary Motion* of the different parts was experimented with in the 2nd main kind of harmonic writing which is sometimes called *Free Organum*. The same intervals were mainly used (that is unisons, octaves, 4ths, 5ths) but now sometimes in contrary motion:

Example: (Also notice the different time values.)



There were quite a few other subtle developments before the 17th century, and when one compares the music of say Bach, which all this was eventually going to lead up to, with these earlier types of sounds, an immediate difference to be noticed is that all these bare, open-sounding 4th and 5th intervals and parallel lines have been replaced with triads, 7th chords, and totally independent melodic lines (these features actually were pretty well established by about the end of the 15th century, except for 7th chords).

Apparently, there was a gradual displeasure with the sound of so much parallelism and limited use of intervals, so that musicians kept growing farther and farther away from these sounds until finally rules were established that said: No two parts may move in parallel octaves, 5ths, or unisons; which brings us to the main reason for this page: Whether or not to utilize parallel octaves, 5ths, and unisons on guitar *when working with harmony of the Common Practice Period*.

It is really up to each individual as to how much, if any, he wishes to use these sounds – some may like these sounds more than others. However, I humbly offer this suggestion: *at least be aware of how to avoid these sounds*. The reason? You will have more choices in any situation where parallels would normally occur and also, the avoidance of parallels can produce some very attractive sounds that would not occur to one who *always* has used parallels without further investigation.

Observe:

Given:	Parallel solutions:	Common Practice solution:
 <p style="text-align: center;">IV V vi</p>		 <p style="text-align: center;">C note is optional because of parallel 5th it creates</p>

Much experimenting and study will be necessary if you want to always avoid the old parallels, because the guitar is a very parallel-oriented instrument in its physical layout. But if you are like most people, you won't mind an occasional parallel octave or 5th.

As an interesting sidelight, ever since the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the advent of the music of Claude Debussy, most music has gone back to lots of parallel everything. Debussy, in a style coined *Impressionism*, brought out many beautiful effects through various parallel devices using pentatonic scales, exotic chords, chord streams, and other fresh approaches; but all this is another story and will have to be saved for a later time.

VOICE LEADING and Parallelism on Guitar

In the period of time where most of the principles of harmony were summed up (roughly 1600-1900), voice leading was definitely one of the most important considerations for composers, improvisers, etc. Certain types of similar motion (especially, the similar motion of any 2 parts in octaves, 5ths, or unisons) were pretty much avoided. To understand this it would help to know a little something about the music that existed before 1600. Here is an extremely simplified resume. (By the way, the period of 1600-1900 is generally referred to as the COMMON PRACTICE PERIOD).

① Harmony, or the idea of more than one note being sounded at the same time, did not come along until the 9th century. Up until then, music was MONOPHONIC, that is only one melody line at a time was heard. Even if 40 people were singing (early music was primarily vocal music), they would all be singing the same note. Much of the music of this type that survives are in the category known as Gregorian chants (also known as Plain Chant or Plain Song(s)). Example: (a simplified imitation of one)



A later development was the singing in octaves of these chants.

② In the 9th century, experiments were begun with what is known as ORGANUM (OR-GAN-UM), which was the beginning of HARMONY. Organum consisted of adding a 2nd melody a perfect 4th below the original melody. (or perfect 5th above). Sometimes the new melody and/or the original would be doubled an octave away. More experiments were tried with intervals of 4ths + 5ths (like putting 4ths above the original + 5ths below). Then two or three hundred years later, the element of CONTRARY MOTION of the different parts was experimented with in the 2nd main kind of harmonic writing which is sometimes called FREE ORGANUM. The same intervals were mainly used (that is unisons, OCTAVES, 4ths, 5ths) but now sometimes in contrary motion: (also notice the different time values)



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Complex block containing musical notation for 'GIVEN' and 'PARALLEL SOLUTIONS', and a note stating 'C NOTE is optional because of PARALLEL 5th IT CREATES'.

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