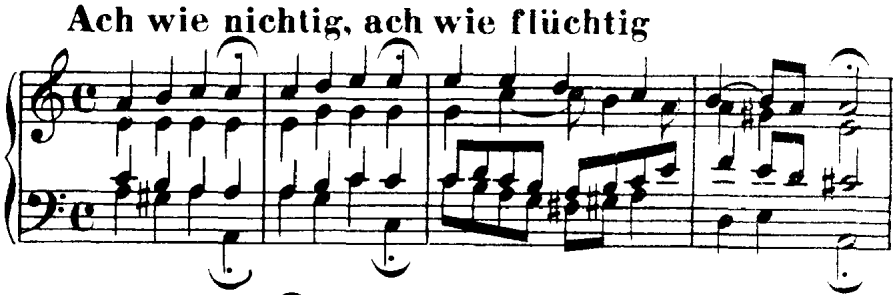
RULES: WHAT ARE THEY GOOD FOR?

"Look, gentlemen, that is the rule; needless to say, I don't write that way"
Anton Bruckner

The following addresses primarily the chorale settings, as opposed to Bach's keyboard practice. Some of the principles apply to both, but many do not (e.g., issues involving range). For obvious reasons, melodic writing tends to be less restricted in Bach's keyboard writing. Augmented seconds can occur (though relatively rarely) within the context of prolongation (of a diminished seventh chord). The limits of the vocal ranges are replaced by physical limits: Bach's keyboard music always lies within the stretch of two hands. Notwithstanding a few examples of acute chromaticism in the chorales, in general chromaticism has the potential to be more pervasive and direct in the keyboard works, though it is almost always motivic, rather than generic. Harmonic rhythm is also less regular in the keyboard works.

Parallel Fifths and Octaves

In baroque SATB voice-leading, the most basic rule cited is to avoid parallel fifths and octaves. In fact, any parallel motion (whether involving perfect intervals or otherwise) has an inherent tendency to reduce the independence of the parts. So *prolonged* parallelism of any sort is not generally encountered, in the Bach chorales at least. This certainly true of fifths and octaves: because of their strong, blended sound, they make two parts sound as one, thus effectively eliminating a voice. There are exceptions, however, even to the parallel fifth rule:



There are a number of similar examples of parallel perfect fifths elsewhere in the chorales. (What sets this particular instance apart from the "bad" kind of parallel fifths?)

Adjacent octaves between real parts are essentially non-existent. This does not include reinforcing (orchestrational) octaves, which don't constitute an additional voice part. For example, the performance of the 4-part chorale settings typically includes a continuo accompaniment. The bass instrument of the continuo group doubles the bass vocal line (as does the left hand of the keyboard) but an octave lower.* So, when the tenor voice descends below the bass voice, which sometimes happens in Bach's settings, the tenor is *not* the real bass part—the octave doubling is still the lowest sounding part.

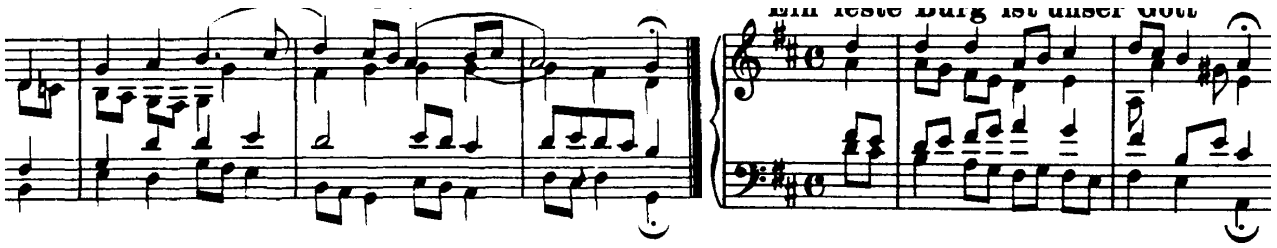
Parallel fourths between two upper parts are fine (notwithstanding the general principle of avoiding excessive parallel motion). They are a common way of harmonizing parallel first inversion chords. Parallel fourths between bass and an upper part are not idiomatic. In fact, even a single fourth above the bass (in the context of a $\frac{6}{4}$ chord, for instance) is usually treated carefully in this style.

* This bass doubling could be taken by one of a number of instruments (contrabass, bassoon, viola da gamba, etc.), each with a slightly different range. As a result, notes might sometimes be shifted up and down octaves as needed. This is one of the reasons Bach doesn't write successive fifths between adjacent parts even when they move in contrary motion, sometimes called anti-parallels (as between tenor and bass).

Voice Crossing

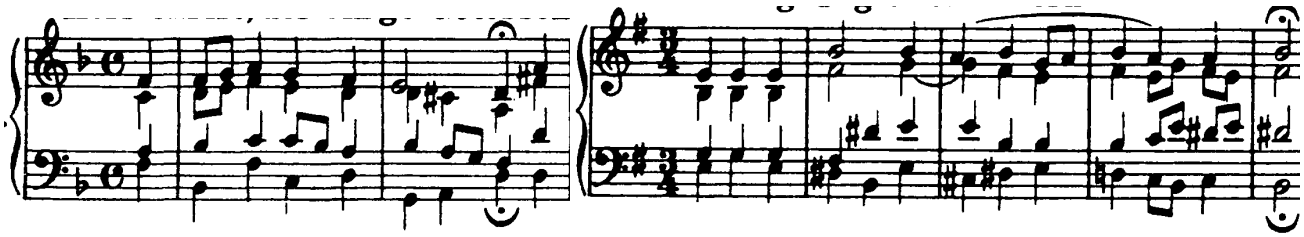
Avoiding voice-crossings is a pretty good rule of thumb, as far as it goes. In the chorales Bach does occasionally write voice crossings between the alto and tenor, much less between other adjacent voices.

(Almost never above the soprano—but there are exceptions.) Voice crossings usually don't last more than two or three beats however. And, as below, they are usually the result of a concern for good or interesting melodic motion in one voice.



Voice Overlap

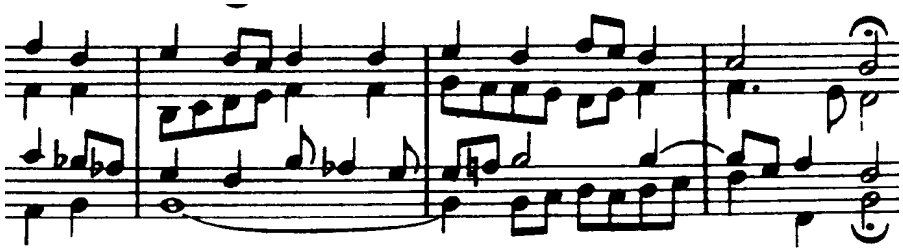
This is a somewhat more flexible principle. In the chorales, Bach usually doesn't write a large voice overlap in mid-phrase. (He will move to a unison quite frequently however, and occasionally to a step above.) From one phrase to another however (i.e., after a fermata), the overlap "rule" is routinely broken, sometimes in two (or even three) the parts. This is usually occasioned by the chorale melody descending low in the soprano range (say, F above middle C and lower).



The reasoning behind this proscription is not that the parts themselves become aurally entangled, but rather that voice overlap often means that two or more parts are lurching unidirectionally.

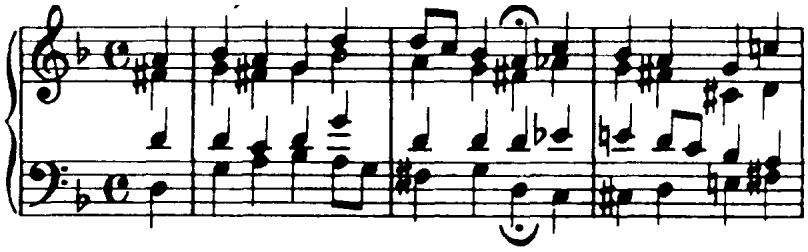
Spacing

In the chorales the spacing between tenor and bass is larger than the spacing between any other adjacent parts. The upper voices do not normally exceed an octave between one another. This principle is, generally speaking, true—though the interest of a melodic line lead Bach to relatively wide spacings from time to time. The need for well-formed and interesting melodic lines, or to complete a chord, can supersede the general tendency for the parts to be in close proximity.



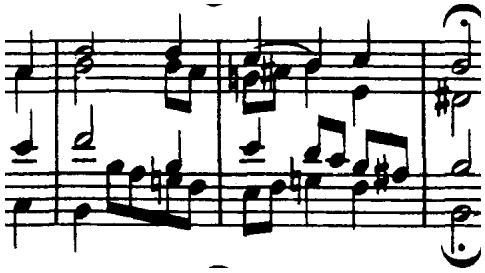
Cross Relations

When an accidental in one voice is adjacent to its diatonic version in a different voice, this is called a cross relation. These are not common in the chorales, though they do occur once in a while, especially for expressive textual purposes. Note, though, that a cross relation does not occur when a single voice has the two adjacent versions of the scale step, even if the diatonic version is doubled in another voice previously.

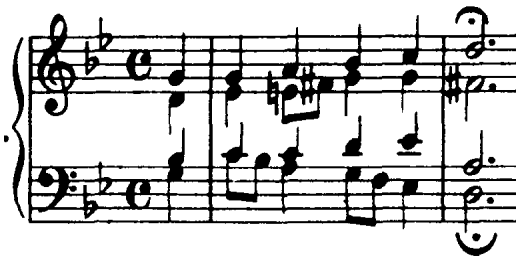


Melodic Intervals

Augmented Seconds: This is the only interval that Bach consistently avoids in vocal writing. There are *almost* no examples:



Tritones: This is not an issue; Bach writes plenty of melodic tritones, both in the chorales and elsewhere. In fact, of the two Phrygian cadence voice-leading patterns he consistently uses in the chorales, one contains a prominent melodic diminished fifth in the tenor:



Augmented/Diminished Intervals: Again, these are relatively common. However, Bach usually 'resolves' the augmented/interval within the same voice. They are particularly prevalent after a fermata.

However: Motion by step or skip is the most prevalent kind of melodic motion by far.