AQA/OCR A2: Classical string quartet completions

by Alan Charlton

INTRODUCTION

This resource aims to show how many of the challenges presented by Classical string quartet completions can be solved through applying a rational, problem-solving approach. It is based on a worked example from the AQA A2 MUSC5 paper from 2013-14, guiding students from the initial stages through to completion using a step-by-step approach. This experience should give them a solid framework to use on their own their coursework, give them additional tips and ideas for Classical string quartet completions and hopefully boost their confidence when tackling this task.

Exam board requirements

The completion of a Classical string quartet movement is a current option at A2 in the AQA and OCR specifications. OCR require the completion of up to eight stylistic techniques exercises, one of the options for which is Classical string quartets. AQA give a skeleton score, containing most of the first violin part and the opening three bars of the complete texture as one of their briefs in the unit 5 composition and technical study paper.

Activities

The AQA A2 MUSC5 exam paper for June 2014 will need to be downloaded from the AQA website. The string quartet question is section A, section 2 (pages 4-6).

Worksheets are provided at the end of this resource for each main step of the completion of the quartet, together with worked examples. Students can be given the worksheets to complete, either in class or as homework, before comparing their answers with the worked examples as a whole class.

Additional resources

Anthologies of Haydn and Mozart string quartets are published by Dover, and miniature scores of individual quartets by Eulenburg. Haydn’s string quartets tend to have simpler textures than Mozart’s, and are generally speaking more similar to the movements set in A2 questions.

A Student’s Guide to Harmony and Counterpoint by Hugh Benham (Rhinegold Publishing) is an invaluable reference for harmony and counterpoint up to A2, also containing a substantial section on Bach chorale harmonisation.
ClAssICAl stRIng QuARtet COmpletIons

Being faced with a skeleton score of a string quartet with acres of blank staves to fill in can be intimidating. However, if it is approached by breaking it down into simple steps, the task becomes much simpler and the structure of the movement easier to understand.

**Step 1: divide the melody into phrases**

Start by dividing the quartet into sections by putting vertical lines marking the end of each phrase. Play or sing the melody through several times, listening for the natural breaks in the line: if you were to sing it, these would be the places where it feels most natural to breathe. Classical string quartets used in the exam papers tend to be in four-bar phrases, so this should make the task more straightforward. Each phrase will usually end with some sort of cadence.

**Step 2: look for the recapitulation of material**

In most short string quartet movements (which will normally be either the theme of a theme and variations, or one of the sections of a minuet and trio), the material from the opening will be brought back in the later stages of the movement (although it may be varied in some way). The texture and harmony is usually similar at this point, so spotting if and where this happens will save time and strengthen the structure of the movement.

In our example question, the rubric tells us that the blank bars in bars 26-30 should be based on the opening four bars, so this tells us where the recapitulation occurs.

**Step 3: look for sequences**

Melodic sequences – where a melodic pattern is immediately repeated at a different pitch – often occur in these sorts of movements, and the harmonisation and texture of the initial phrase can often be transposed and adapted to fit the subsequent phrase(s), again making life easier and strengthening the structure.

After these three steps, your annotated score should look like the ‘annotated score’ as the end of this resource.

**Step 4: work out possible cadences**

The next step is to work out possible cadences for the end of each phrase, in order to gain an overall view of the tonal structure of the movement. In addition to the perfect and imperfect cadences of chorales, there are various other cadences that are commonly used in the Classical style in which the resolution of the cadence is delayed to a weak beat. Technically, this is known as a ‘metrically unaccented cadence’, but for simplicity we will refer to it as a ‘weak-beat cadence’. The opposite, where the concluding chord of a cadence occurs on a strong beat, is known as a ‘metrically accented cadence’, which we will call a ‘strong-beat cadence’.

The give-away sign of a weak-beat cadence is a melodic phrase that ends with an accented appoggiatura or suspended note on a strong beat (usually the first beat of the bar), falling by a tone or a semitone on a weak beat.
beat (here the second beat of the bar). The two notes are often joined with a slur, and there may be some ornamentation, such as a trill or a turn, before the final note. An accented appoggiatura rising by a semitone can also result in a weak-beat cadence.

It is highly recommended that students be familiar with the following cadence patterns as they occur frequently in this style:

Typical weak beat cadences found in classical string quartets

A good way to start is therefore to mark in whether a cadence looks like it resolves on a weak beat or strong beat:
- Bar 4: weak-beat cadence
- Bar 8: weak-beat cadence
- Bar 12: weak-beat cadence
- Bar 16 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence
- Bar 18 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence
- Bar 20 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence
- Bar 24 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence
- Bar 34 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence

Next, try to identify which cadence(s) would work at these points.

Weak-beat perfect cadences are often suspensions, with the bass moving up to the tonic on the first beat of the bar, and the melody line resolving onto a harmony note on the second beat.
- Bar 4: weak-beat cadence of perfect in C
- Bar 8: weak-beat cadence of imperfect in F
- Bar 12: weak-beat cadence of imperfect in C
- Bar 16 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence perfect in C
- Bar 18 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence perfect in F
- Bar 20 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence perfect in B flat
- Bar 24 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence perfect in C
- Bar 34 with upbeat: strong-beat cadence perfect in F

Note that these are a guide at the moment: you can change or modify them later, when the shape of the overall harmonisation is clearer.
Step 5: sketch out a rough harmonisation and work out a possible bass line

Hand out worksheet 1.

After investigating the possibilities for cadences, a good next step is to work out a viable harmonisation and bassline. Some people prefer to work out the harmonisation first and then the bassline, while others may prefer to compose a bassline and, by using that and the melody, complete the harmonisation through a process of deduction. It is equally possible to use a mixture of both approaches. By the end of this stage, the movement, having a continuous harmonisation, should have a clearer sense of direction and structure.

The stylistic traits of Classical string quartet harmony are too complex to cover in exhaustive detail here: the best way to familiarise yourself with the style is to listen to, play and analyse string quartets from the era. Sequencing or copying out a movement in notation software is also a good way of becoming more familiar with the style.

However, note the following general points:

- **In the Classical style, the harmonic rhythm varies constantly.** In a movement in 2/4 for example, a change of harmony may occur after a bar, a crotchet, a quaver, a dotted quaver or after any other rhythmic value. It is often regular for a few bars and often speeds up towards cadences. So although there is a change of harmony at the beginning of each of the first three bars in the example, the harmonic rhythm will not necessarily continue like this.

- **In Classical string quartets, there is often a wide variety of different textures within the same movement.** Some short passages may be monophonic, or in octaves, for example, while others may have two or three separate lines rather than four. Rests are used frequently, so not every note of the melody line will need an accompanying chord.

- **Melody lines are sometimes doubled in 3rds, 6ths, octaves and compound 3rds and 6ths in another part.**

- **Not every harmony needs all three notes of the triad (root, 3rd and 5th):** the 5th is often omitted (see the final chords of the weak beat cadences above).

- **Try to write a bassline that avoids too much parallel movement with the melody line:** good basslines tend to contain mostly contrary motion, or move when the top part is still, or vice versa.

- **The bassline can include large leaps such as octaves and 10ths, but should make sense as a line.**

- **The main intervals between the melody and bass line should mostly be consonant intervals:** compound intervals of a 3rd, a 6th, a 5th and an octave. Dissonant intervals such as compound 2nds, 4ths and 7ths will need resolve somehow by, for example, the melody line falling onto a consonant interval.

- **While writing the bassline, think of the harmonisation too.** This will make the remaining parts more straightforward to complete and give the movement a stronger sense of harmonic direction.

- **It can be a good idea to work backwards from the cadences and forward from the beginnings of each phrase, with the two meeting in the middle of the phrase.**

- **Be aware of the following possibilities for harmonising certain melodic patterns:**
  - A held or repeated note could be harmonised by:
    - a single chord (eg C major)
    - a chord in different inversions (eg C major root, C major 1st inversion)
    - two or more chords in which the repeated note is found (eg C: C major, A minor, F major)
    - a chord progression in which the held note functions as an inverted pedal
  - In a descending scale of five notes, the odd notes (notes 1 and 3) could be treated as **accented** passing notes (2a); or the even notes (notes 2 and 4) could be treated as **unaccented** passing notes (2b). (The same applies for ascending scales.)
  - In an ascending or descending scale of three notes, the second note is often harmonised with a passing second inversion chord (3a and 3b).
  - The **appoggiatura** (a dissonant note on a strong beat that falls or rises by step onto a consonant note) is very common in the Classical style, and is often joined to the next note with a slur. If you encounter one of these in the melody line, the second note is usually the harmony note.
  - **Double appoggiaturas** (5a) (often with the two appoggiaturas a third apart) and **appoggiatura chords** (5b) are also often used.
Examples of harmonies and harmonic progressions in classical string quartets

1a) 1b) 1c) 1d)

2a) 2b) 3a) 3b)

(P = passing note; A = appoggiatura)

The harmonisation could be completed by the students individually, or as a class, phrase by phrase. Once complete, compare it with the model answer, which shows a possible solution.
Andante \( \frac{j}{=} 56 \)

**Completion of the harmony**

**Simple bass line**

**Chords:**

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<tr>
<th>Chords (Roman numeral notation):</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>Vb</th>
<th>vi</th>
<th>II</th>
<th>V4</th>
<th>V</th>
<th>IV</th>
<th>Ib</th>
<th>V7c</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>Vb</th>
<th>I</th>
<th>Ic</th>
<th>V</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>C major:</strong></td>
<td>F</td>
<td>C/E</td>
<td>Gm</td>
<td>Csus4</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Bb</td>
<td>F/A</td>
<td>C7/G</td>
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<td>G7</td>
<td>Dm/F</td>
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**Violin 1**

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**Music Teacher July 2015**
Note the following points:

- In bar 3, the model uses a chord of V7 on the last quaver, with the bass moving to a C on the first beat of bar 4. This treats the F in the melody in bar 4 as a suspension. However, the 3rd of the chord is needed on the second beat of bar four, so this is supplied in one of the inner parts. An alternative is to keep D minor for the last quaver of bar 3, then move to V7 on bar 4 beat 1, resolving onto I on bar 4 beat 2.
- The first and third notes of the group of semiquavers in bar 5 beat 2 are treated as accented passing notes.
- Bar 6 uses a passing second inversion chord referred to above: Ib-V7c-I.
- Note the contrary motion of the bass between bar 6 beat 2 and bar 7 beat 1.
- Bar 8 uses a Ic-V weak beat cadence.
- In bars 9-10 a modulation to the dominant (C major) occurs – notice the B natural in the melody in bar 9, the leading note of C major.
- Bars 9-11 beat 1 also shows a standard progression in the Classical style for harmonising an ascending scale.
- The harmonisation of bar 11 beat 2 treats the first and third notes of the group of four semiquavers as dissonances.
- Bar 12 is harmonised as a weak beat imperfect cadence of Ic-V.
- In bar 14, the two G sharps are treated as chromatically altered lower appoggiaturas.
- The cadence in bars 15-16 is treated as a Ic-V7-I strong beat cadence in C (perfect cadence).
- The harmonic progression in bars 17-18 is transposed up a perfect 4th in bars 19-20. This matches the sequence in the melody in bars 17-20.
- In bar 21 and bar 22, the melody outlines a chord in each bar: a diminished chord in bar 21 and a D minor chord in bar 22. The harmonisation therefore also fits in with these chords.
- The phrase modulates to C major in bars 23-24, ready for the return to F major for the reprise of the melody in bar 27.
- The held C in bars 24-26 is harmonised simply as a C major chord, with the flattened 7th (B flat) added on the pause chord. Further interest can be added at a later stage.
- Bars 27-31 are harmonised in the same way as bars 1-5.
- The final two bars are harmonised as a perfect strong beat cadence with the progression iib-V7-I.

Note that this is only one possible harmonisation. It is not fixed in stone: it can be changed and elaborated at a later stage.

**Step 6: transform the harmonisation into idiomatic and stylistic appropriate textures, and Step 7: add performance directions**

Hand out worksheet 2.

General points:

- Remember that each instrumental part should make sense as a line on its own. Avoid lines that leap excessively or which have little interest (eg a succession of minims on the same note).
- Look for changes of mood and character in the melody and create textures that match.
- Look at the dynamics and articulation in the melody: these may give you a clue as to possible textures at those points. Staccato notes in the melody, for example, may indicate a staccato texture in the rest of the parts.
- Think about how the rhythm in the accompanying parts might complement the rhythm in the melody. At points where the rhythm in the melody is fairly still, there could be more rhythmic interest in the accompanying parts, and vice versa.
- In harmonies lasting, say, a whole bar, remember that you can introduce rhythmic interest through the use of melodic movement in the accompanying parts; by using repeated notes; or by adding other rhythmic material, such as rests or dotted notes.
- Try to avoid over-repetition of a particular textural idea. With the opening crotchet–quaver rest–quaver rhythm, for example, think carefully how much longer this will continue for.
- Use rests carefully. Rests can help introduce lightness to a texture, preventing it from sounding too heavy and relentless.
- The cello part in a Classical string quartet often contains leaps of an octave, particularly around cadence points.
- Spacing between different parts in the texture is not like that of a Bach chorale harmonisation: there can be
large gaps between different parts. 'Overlapping parts' where, for instance, the viola is higher in the texture than the second violin, are not uncommon in string quartets.

- There may be places, particularly in sequential passages, where you can use imitation between parts. Imitation need not be exact: creating an imitative line that imitates the rhythm and basic shape of another can create the same effect.

Students should now attempt to transform either their own simple harmonisation or that of worksheet 2 into a complete string quartet texture. Once complete, they should compare it with the model answer. Note that the model answer is only one possible completion and is therefore not necessarily the 'right' answer: it should be used to make students aware of possibilities that they might not have occurred to them.
General points:
- Notice how the model answer contains many different textures, and that they often grow out of each other, rather than appearing suddenly:
  - bar 4 is more legato than the opening three bars: the subsequent phrase (5-8) is also more sustained.
  - bars 9-10 are in a legato crotchet rhythm; bars 13-14 are a variant of the opening three bars.
  - in bars 13-15, a texture based on the rhythm of the accompaniment in bars 1-3 has been created. Each bar now begins with two quavers, giving the phrase a stronger rhythmic impetus than at the opening, matching the mood created by the mf dynamic in this phrase.
  - in bars 16-20, semiquaver movement is introduced and there is imitation between the cello and second violin /viola.
  - in bars 21-23, the accompaniment is in quavers, in homorhythm with the first violin.
  - in bars 24-25, semiquavers return again in a repeated idea leading to the pause chord.
  - bars 27-30 are an elaboration of bars 1-4: a countermelody in semiquaver movement has been added in the second violin, the viola doubles the first violin an octave lower, and the first violin and cello are an octave higher than at the opening.
  - bars 31-34 begin as an elaborated version of bar 5, but the texture is richer, with more semiquaver movement in the viola part.
- Notice how the cello part has been developed from the previous version:
  - more quaver movement has been created, using harmony notes (eg bar 7) and passing notes (eg bar 11).
  - in bars 16-20, a new line, mostly using semiquavers, has been created around the cello line of the previous version using repeated notes and lower appoggiaturas, covering a wide range and with a downwards octave leap at the end of each phrase.
  - in bars 21 and 22, a melody in contrary motion to the first violin melody has been created, based on the same harmonies.
  - octave leaps have also been introduced in bars 23, 25 and 31.
- The added parts now make more use of melodic dissonance, giving both the melody and the harmony more interest:
  - passing notes have been added in several places, for example in bars 4 and 30 in the lower three parts, creating movement that propels the music forward into the next phrase.
  - there is extensive use of lower appoggiaturas, which are sometimes sharpened, as in the second violin and viola parts in bars 17 and 19.
  - lower and upper auxiliary notes are used extensively in the second violin countermelody from bars 27-29, with the lower ones often being sharpened; the rest of the notes in this line are harmony notes.
  - lower appoggiaturas and auxiliary notes are also used in the viola part in bar 8 and bars 31-32, and in the cello part in bar 34.
- The harmony and harmonic rhythm have been altered in places, to create more flow and interest:
  - in bar 4, a first inversion C major chord has been introduced on beat 2.
  - in bar 7, the quaver bassline creates four different chords from the original two: I-I7d-Ivb-iib.
  - in bar 10 beat 2, the chord has been changed from first to second inversion.
  - in bar 11, the quaver bassline creates four chords rather than two: I-I7d-Ivb-iib.
  - in bars 21-22, the bassline moves in contrary motion to the first violin part, using three different inversions of the chords in each of these bars in the process.
  - in bar 23, four chords have been used instead of two, creating a feeling of drive towards bar 24.
  - in bars 24-25, an alternation between C major and F minor has been used to add interest to the inverted pedal C.
  - in bar 34, a 4-3 suspension has been added in the viola.

CONCLUSION

In this resource, we have seen how it is possible to develop a fairly elaborate string quartet completion by breaking the task down into more straightforward stages. However, this will only produce good results if combined with thorough knowledge of the Classical string quartet style. This only comes from extensive and repeated listening to recordings of works from this era, and ideally from playing them. It is only through this musical knowledge that you can tell instinctively whether or not something ‘sounds right’ and is the best guide to this complex, yet ultimately highly rewarding topic.
Worksheet 1: compose a bass line and simple harmonisation of the given melody in the style of a classical string quartet

Violin 1

completion of the harmony

simple bass line

Andante \( \frac{d}{e} = 56 \)
Worksheet 2: compose parts for violin 2, viola and cello based on the given harmonies and bass line

**Andante** \( \text{\textit{j} = 56} \)

Violin 1

Violin 2

Viola

Violoncello