

Solfeggio...an analysis

C.P.E. Bach

All compositions studied should be a learning experience, not just memorized. Unfortunately, compositions by the masters are ‘just memorized’ and without the slightest knowledge of what they are made up of. Josef Lhevinne, the legendary pianist of the 20th century, and teacher at the Juilliard school in New York had this to say...[read](#), Also, Dr. Leopold Mannes, founder of the Mannes school of music in New York had this to say...[read](#).

In light of the above, the following is what the Solfeggio is made up of. *You won't find it in any theory manual.*¹

First off is the key signature of three flats; Bb, Eb, and Ab, the first three letters of the word, ‘bead’. This is the key signature for ‘Eb’ major. However, the work is in the ‘relative’ key of ‘C’ minor, the sixth degree of the major scale. The key of ‘C’ minor retains its own identity and ‘relative’ only to its ‘mother’ major scale of its tonic, ‘C’ major.

The first triad in the left hand is a ‘C’ minor triad, arpeggiated. The second triad is a ‘G’ major triad, also arpeggiated, but with the ‘Bb’ of the signature cancelled to ‘B-natural’. The minor 7th, ‘F’ of the dominant (x) is present in the right hand. The right hand scale in the treble of the second measure contains the major 6th ‘A-natural, and major 7th ‘B-natural, of the ‘C’ minor scale the characteristic intervals of the ‘melodic’ minor scale. The characteristic intervals of the ‘normal’ minor scale are the minor 3rd, minor 6th, and minor 7th, taken from its ‘mother’ major scale, ‘C’ major in this case.²

The image shows a musical score for the first two measures of the Solfeggio by C.P.E. Bach. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of three flats (Bb, Eb, Ab). The first measure shows a C minor triad (Cm) in the left hand and a G major triad (Gx) in the right hand. The second measure shows a C minor triad (Cm) in the left hand and a melodic line in the right hand. The score is labeled 'Cm VI' at the top left.

¹ Read ‘[Conventions](#)’ in relation to the methods of analysis.

² While the key of C minor is ‘relative’ to the key of ‘Eb’ major, minor scales are relative to their own ‘mother’ major scale and retain their own identity. If one were to choose ‘Eb’ major in this case, ‘Bb’ is the 5th note, and Ab the 4th note of the major scale that are cancelled, but these notes have nothing to do with the characteristic intervals of the minor scale.

The next two lines are identical to the first two lines, above.

When arpeggiated chords are paraphrased into ‘block’ chords, their notes of the chords may more easily be seen. The harmonic rhythm is in half-notes, i.e. two beats for each chord. The first chord then, is ‘C’ minor with its characteristic interval of a minor 3rd, ‘Eb’. The next chord is an ‘F’ minor chord with an added 7th in the right hand, ‘Eb’. Its characteristic intervals then, are the minor 3rd, ‘Ab’ and the minor 7th, ‘Eb’. Measure six start with a ‘Bb’ major triad with its characteristic interval of the major 3rd, ‘D’. The following chord is on ‘Eb’, with its characteristic intervals of a major 3rd, ‘G’ and a major 7th, ‘D’. It is an ‘Eb’ major 7th chord. The last three notes make up the 3rd-5th-7th degrees of the chord, as they did in the previous measure on ‘Fm’. Note that ‘I-IV-VII-III’ are part of the normal diatonic minor key circle, as contrasted with the diatonic major key circle.

While it may look like the ‘G’ minor section begins at measure 9 with the tonic on ‘G’ minor, it is prefaced by the ‘II – V’ in measures 7 and 8. All key indications are in relation to the prevailing key signature, in this case ‘G’ is III of ‘E-flat’ major, so we may say that the piece modulates to the key of the mediant, ‘III’.³

³ Refer, if necessary to the [Functional names of scale degrees](#).

The line below is identical to the line above, an octave higher.

The change in identity, below, from ‘G’ minor to ‘G’ dominant (x) by way of the minor 3rd, ‘B-flat’ to the major 3rd ‘B-natural’ indicates a modulation to the key of ‘C’ minor. ‘C’ minor now becomes the tonic (I). The 14th measure moves from the tonic ‘C’ minor (I) to ‘G’ dominant (V).

Measure 15 changes much the same way; from ‘C’ minor to ‘C’ dominant (x) with the resulting modulation to ‘F’ minor, the key of the Super-tonic (II)

Measure 17 continues in the key of 'F' minor. The minor scale takes its identity from the major scale. 'F' major has one flat, 'B-flat' in its signature. When the major 3rd of the scale is changes to a minor 3rd , the result is the melodic minor scale. 'E-flat from the prevailing signature of three flats must be cancelled because the 'mother' 'F' major scale contains only one flat. 'A-flat' is retained as the minor 3rd.

Musical score for measure 17. The piece is in F minor. The bass line features a descending eighth-note pattern. The chords are Fm (I), Cx (V), and Fm (I). The treble clef part has a melodic line with a chromatic alteration (E-flat) in the second measure.

The following line is exactly the same as the preceding line, but an octave higher.

Musical score for measure 19. This is an octave transposition of the previous measure. The bass line is now in the treble clef, and the treble clef part is in the bass clef. The chords and Roman numerals (I, V, I) remain the same.

Measure 21 has four arpeggiated 'F' minor triads in different positions descending. 'D-flat' major triad in the following measure keeps 'F' and 'A-flat' as the major 3rd and 5th of the 'D-flat' major triad, but they were the root and minor 3rd of the preceding 'F' minor triad. Interesting! Do you see it?

Musical score for measure 21. The bass line features four descending arpeggiated Fm triads. The second measure contains a DbM triad. The Roman numerals are I and bVI. The treble clef part has a melodic line.

The treble of measure 23 retains the major 3rd and 5th of the ‘D-flat’ major triad. However ‘D-flat’ in the bass of the previous measure moves down a half-step to ‘C’, the major 7th, that becomes a major seventh chord with the 7th in the bass. The bass in the next measure moves down another half-step to ‘B-natural’, the major 3rd of the dominant (V). The minor 7th is ‘F’, and step-wise moves on up to ‘A-flat’, the same ‘F’ and ‘A-flat’ of preceding four measures! However, in the ‘G’ dominant chord ‘F’ is the minor 7th and ‘A-flat’ the minor 9th. How ‘bout that! This demonstrates how two notes can function differently within different chords. Pay attention! Bach knew what he was doing.

The next two lines show consecutive dominants (x) over Circle functions, I-V-I-IV-VII-III-VI. Now, ‘C’ ‘G’ ‘F’ ‘Bb’ ‘Eb’ ‘Ab’ are normal Circle progressions in a minor key.

‘A-flat’ dominant (x) however, is spelled with an ‘F-sharp’, an augmented 6th. But ‘F-sharp’ is enharmonic with ‘G-flat’ the minor 7th. Therefore the augmented 6th and minor 7th are enharmonic, meaning they are the same key on the piano. So, why ‘F-sharp’? Because, when the chord is inverted in the 29th measure, ‘F-sharp’ then moves up a half-step to ‘G’, the 5th of the ‘C’ minor triad in the following measure. Therefore VI moves to I with the augmented 6th helping the smooth progression. If the augmented 6th were spelled with a minor 7th, ‘G-flat’, this minor 7th would move down to ‘F’, the major 3rd of a ‘D-flat’ major triad – a wholly different progression.⁵ It’s sheer genius!

⁵ The Christmas song, ‘Oh Holy Night’ contains the same wonderful progression. Can you find it?

28

Bbx Ebx Abx Abx Cm Gx

VII III VI VI I V

The remainder is self-evident, but go ahead and write out the identities and functions anyways!

31

33

This work contains 35 measures, whereas 36 is the norm. The final ‘V-I’ could be spread out with the dominant on the 4th beat and the tonic in measure 36.

Bach did not write those last chords. He ended the piece on the single note, ‘C’ possibly as a surprise. ‘Only thirty-five measures? Oh well, big deal!’ – he might have said.

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