The MAYRON COLE PIANO METHOD

Four-Part Voice Writing

A Note from the Composer

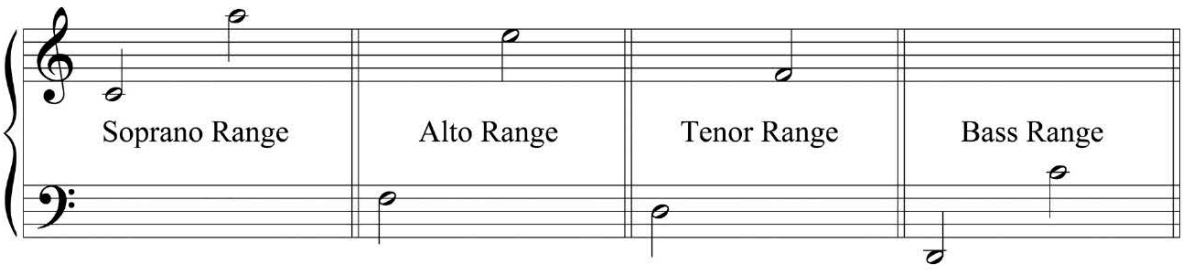


Dear Students,

The following few pages are dedicated to the art of FOUR-PART VOICE WRITING. This is a skill that only a few people need to have but it is a skill that is required for college level music theory students. If you do NOT intend to take music theory courses in college, you may skip these pages. For those of you who intend to study music in college, I have tried to make four-part voice writing as easy to understand as possible. There are definite rules to the voice writing skills, so let's get going with FOUR-PART VOICE WRITING.

Mayron Cole

In four part voice writing the four "voices" are soprano (highest tone); alto (middle voice); tenor (lower middle voice); bass (lowest tone of the four voices). The abbreviation for the four voices is **SATB** = soprano, alto, tenor, bass. Below are the ranges for the four voices:



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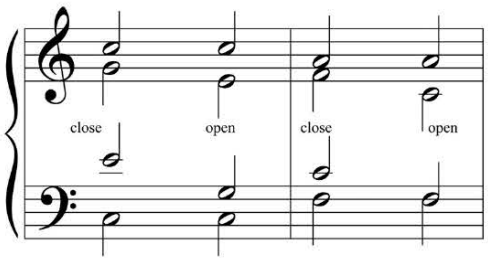
The Rules...

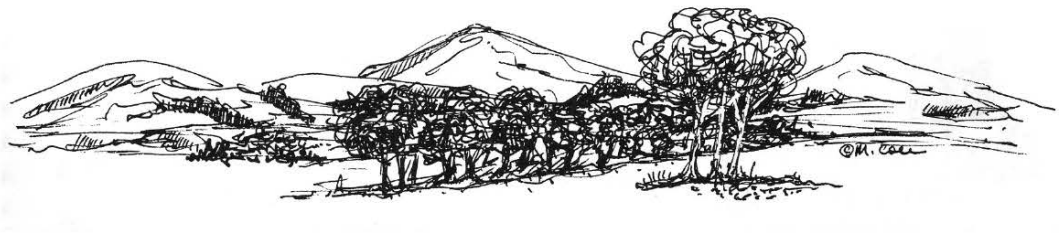
Here are some of the rules for correctly writing four-part voices:

1. **Close Position**: This is when the three highest voices (tenor, alto, soprano) are the closest they can be without skipping a note of the chord. The distance between the soprano and tenor is less than an octave.



2. **Open Position**: This is when the distance between the soprano and the tenor is an octave or more. Also in open position, another note of the triad can be inserted between the tenor and the soprano.

Look at the above examples. You are writing FOUR VOICES but with a THREE NOTE chord. Obviously, one note must be used twice—but which note? Answer: The root of the chord is usually doubled. The above examples use two root notes, one third, and one fifth.



3. **Voices should not be crossed**. This means, do NOT allow the alto voice to be lower than the tenor or higher than the soprano voice. Do not allow the tenor voice to be lower than the bass.

4. In four-part voice writing:

When the **root** note of a chord is in the bass, the chord is in **root position**.

When the **third** of a chord is in the bass, the chord is in **first inversion**.

When the **fifth** of a chord is in the bass, the chord is in **second inversion**.

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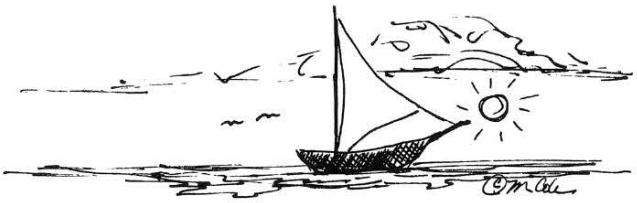
5. **Parallel Motion (when two voices move in the same direction)**: Avoid parallel motion between the two outer voices (soprano and bass).

6. **More Parallel Motion Problems**: Parallel motion between any two voices that form perfect unisons, octaves, or fifths is forbidden!

7. **Contrary Motion**: Two voices moving in opposite directions are the strongest type of motion. When moving the outer two voices (soprano and bass) try to always move those two voices in contrary motion.

8. **Avoid Large Leaps**: Remember you are writing for singers. Have compassion for them and avoid large interval leaps in the four voices.



Remember...

1. When writing four-part music, you should mix close and open position chords!

2. The distance between any two adjacent voices should not exceed an octave.
Exception: The distance between the bass and tenor voices may be more than an octave.

3. An easy way to change your four-voice chords from close to open position is to move the tenor voice in the close position up to become the alto voice in the open position. Both the tenor voice tone and the alto voice tone remain the same (enharmonic) but are written differently on the staffs. Be sure that SOPRANO and TENOR voices have “up” stems and ALTO and BASS voices have “down” stems.

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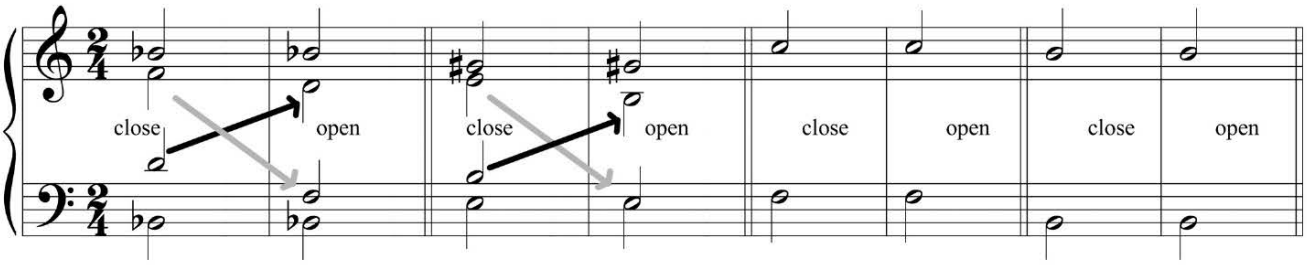
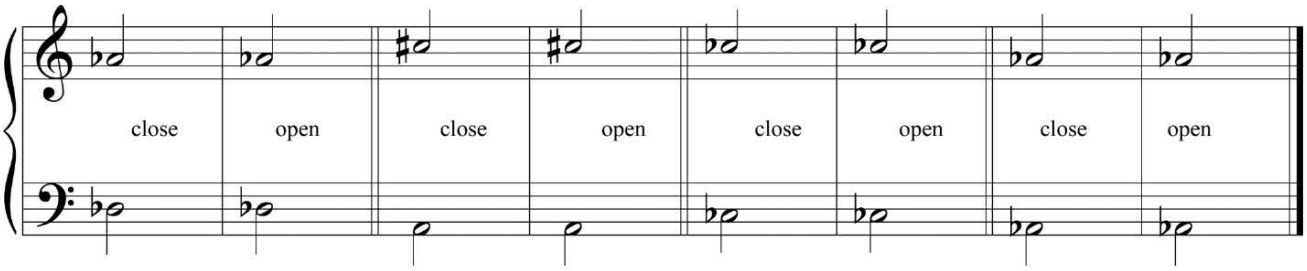
Let's Try Our Hand at Four-Part Voice Writing...

First, identify the major chord notes with which you are working. The first two measures below have been done for you.



Major Chord: B♭ D F E G♯ B ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___



Major Chord: ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

Now It's Time to Fill-In the Notes... Using Rules #1 & #2

An easy way to change your four-voice chord from close to open position is to change the tenor voice (close position) to become the alto voice (open position). When the tenor voice becomes the alto voice, the tones remain the same, but the positioning of the two voices looks different when written on the staff (see black arrows above that show the tenor voice becoming the alto voice)

You can also see in the above close and open position chords that the alto in the close position chord moves down an octave to become the tenor in the open chords. (See gray arrows above.)

Complete the measures above. answers on page **152**

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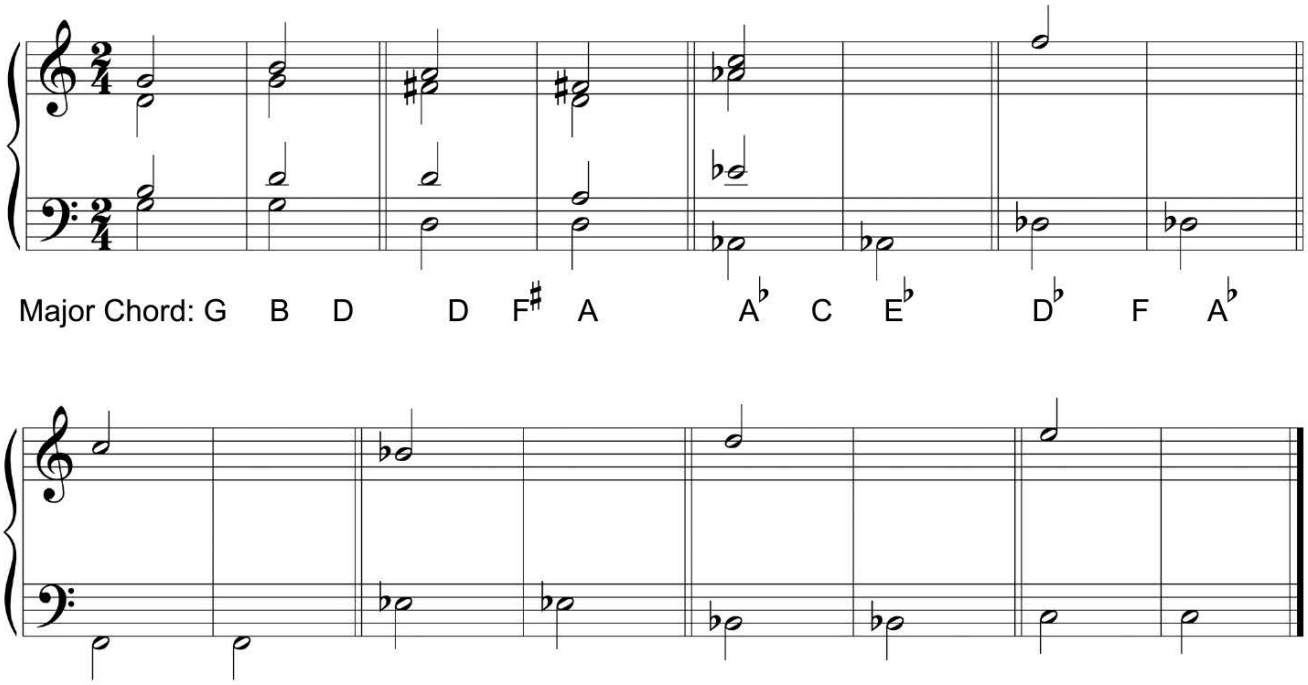
Connection of Repeated Triads... Using Rule #4

The root note of the chords used below is in the bass!



Major Chord: G B D D F♯ A A♭ C E♭ D♭ F A♭

Major Chord: ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___ ___

Surely you remember playing triads in three positions: root, 1st inversion, 2nd inversion. That knowledge is needed for writing the upper three voices in this exercise. The upper three voices (SAT) are in close position and form either of the three chord positions listed above. The bass note is given telling you which major chord is being used. Go to a keyboard and play the indicated chord with your RH in close position. (Reminder: the TENOR note will be part of the RH chord, but it will be written using the bass staff.)

When two triads are written in succession and contain the same spelling (same notes) but with different soprano notes, you may write both chords in the same position (close) by simply moving the upper three voices in similar motion. Above are some samples plus chords for you to write. Remember, you are going to move the upper three voices in the same direction (move the upper three voices either UP or DOWN).

Complete the measures above.

answers on page **152**

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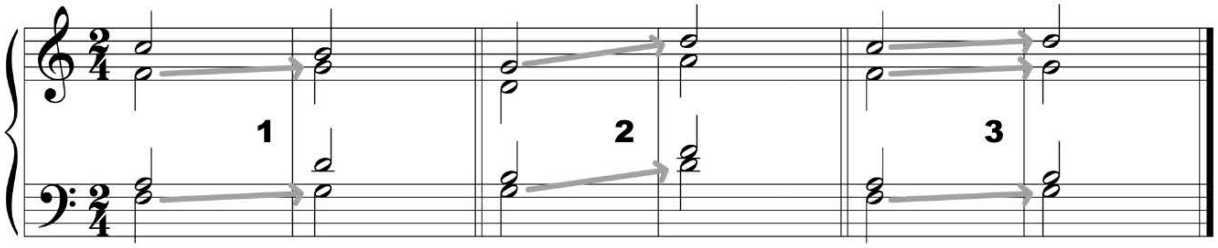
Parallel Motion That Can Be Bad!... Rules #5 and #6

Avoid parallel motion in OCTAVES and in FIFTHS. Look at the first example below. The alto and bass voices are moving in parallel octaves! This is bad! Really bad!



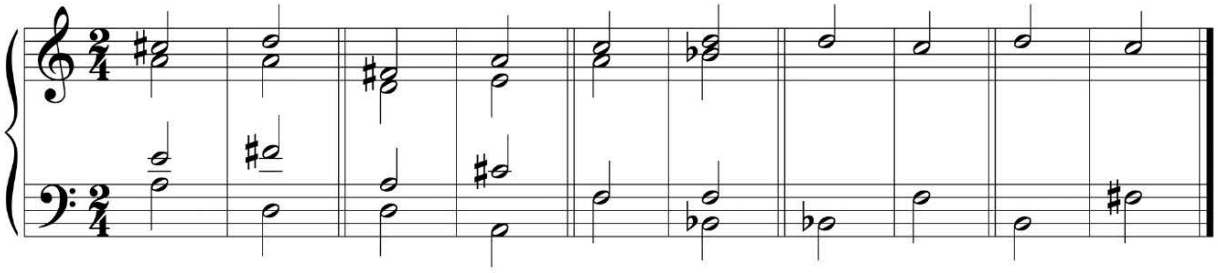
Major Chord: F A C G B D G B D D F A F A C G B D

Look at the second examples above. The soprano and bass voices are moving in parallel voices. Oooops! The alto and tenor voices are moving in parallel thirds which is OK!

Look at the third example above. The soprano voice and the alto voice are moving in parallel 5ths. The alto voice and the bass voice are moving in parallel octaves. It can't get any worse!

Move Soprano and Bass in Contrary Motion... Using Rule # 7

In the above examples, you can see that when the B voice moves down, the S voice moves up! And in the last two examples (that you are to complete) you see that the B voice moves up and the S voice moves down. This Rule 7 is one rule you should memorize!



Major Chord: A D D A F B♭ B♭ F B F♯

Complete the measures above. answers on page **153**

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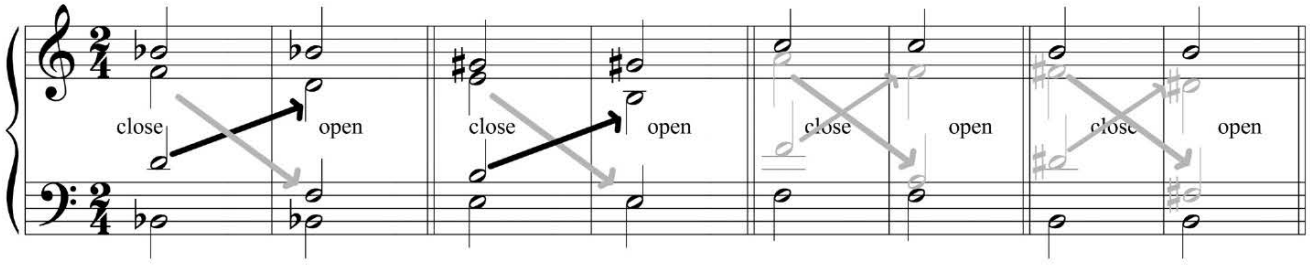
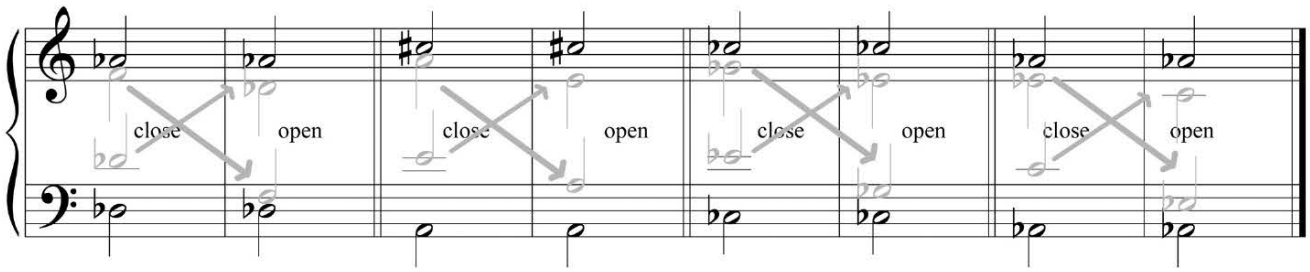
Answers from Page 149

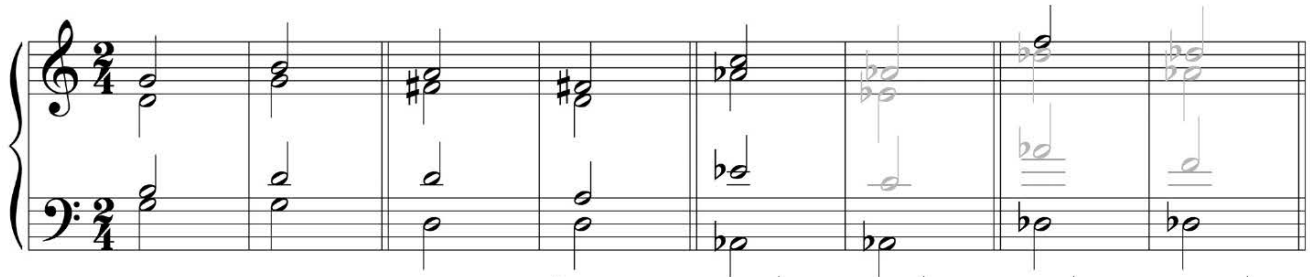


Major Chord: B♭ D F E G♯ B F A C B D♯ F♯

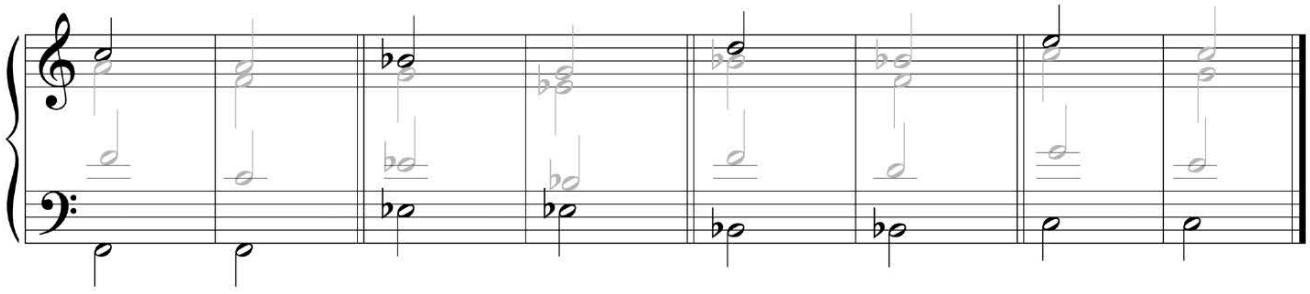


Major Chord: D♭ F A♭ A C♯ E C♭ E♭ G♭ A♭ C E♭

Answers from Page 150



Major Chord: G B D D F♯ A A♭ C E♭ D♭ F A♭



Major Chord: F A C E♭ G B♭ B♭ D F C E G

F R E E P I A N O M E T H O D . C O M
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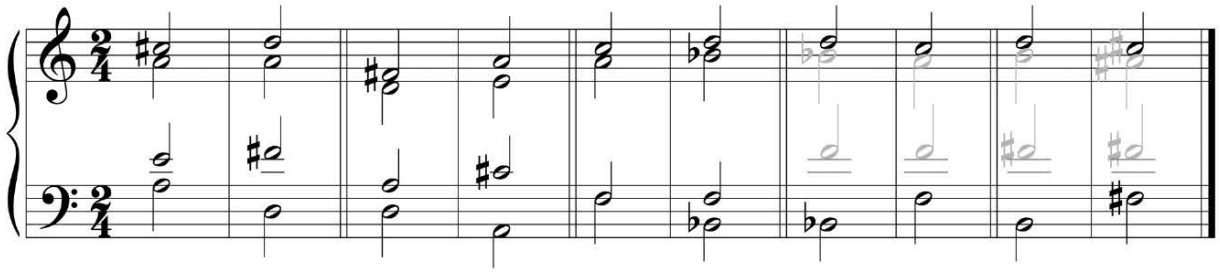
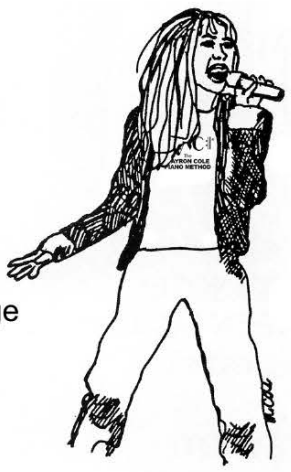
Answers from Page 151

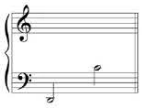


Major Chord: A D D A F B♭ B♭ F B F♯



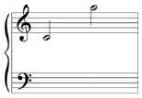
DO YOU KNOW?

place the correct answer in the blank

A.  _____

B. Open Position _____

C. Contrary Motion _____

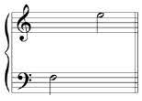
D.  _____

E. Close Position _____

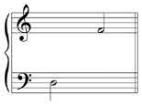
F. Large Leaps _____

G. Root Position _____

H. 2nd Inversion _____

I.  _____

J. SATB _____

K.  _____

1. Soprano Range
2. Alto Range
3. Tenor Range
4. Bass Range
5. The fifth of a chord is in the bass
6. Abbreviation for Soprano, Alto, Tenor, Bass
7. Strongest type of motion
8. Soprano to Tenor is an octave or more
9. Tenor, Alto, Soprano are the closest
10. The root note of a chord is in the bass
11. Should be avoided when writing for singers

answers on page 154

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