

Calculating and Singing the Melody Sequences in Fauré's Song "Les Matelots"

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Abstract

This workshop explores a song by Gabriel Fauré, *Les Matelots*, Op. 2, No. 2, composed ca. 1870 and first published in 1876. The song's text is by Théophile Gautier and gives a picture of the sailor's life, that is, the music of a trip. Throughout the song, the music explores regions that are distinct from the original key (modulations). These modulations sometimes are repetitions of the melody on a higher pitch. We are going to observe, calculate and sing these repetitions, called sequences. The music trip in this trip music gets to its destination as it reaches the final tonic chord with the French word "Dieu" at the peak and end.

Keywords: music, Fauré, song, scales, chords

1 Introduction

Fauré's music has been deeply analyzed before in a book written by Carlo Caballero [1]. There he points out that Fauré's free modal interchange provides for a multitude of scales that have a tonal unity at a deeper level. There is a modal ambiguity, with minor-major alteration of the third and sixth grades. In this workshop we are going to apply Caballero's observation to one of Fauré's songs, *Les Matelots* [2].

2 Objectives

The objectives of this workshop are the following:

1. To study a historical and cultural approach to the French composer Gabriel Fauré and one of his songs.
2. To apply mathematics to musical distances: To add whole tones and half tones. To count intervals. To construct chords.
3. To comprehend the concepts of tonal scale, key and mode (major third versus minor third, major sixth versus minor third).
4. To learn how to transpose a scale one third up.
5. To sing the song *Les Matelots* by Gabriel Fauré.

This workshop is addressed to teachers of students around the 7th to 9th grade age.

3 Presentation

Since we are going to discuss a song, I find it relevant to answer a previous question: How does the music match the lyrics in this song? *Les Matelots* contains three strophes with the same music. They all share the same melody and harmony. Since it is a strophic song, Fauré does not alter the music according to the meaning of the words.

As for the meaning of the poem, it contains a metaphor: the sailors represent all men. Throughout the poem there is a question implicitly asked: how is it that the sailors (men) are able to travel in the blue desert, living in the abyss, constantly avoiding the land? At the very end of the song the solution is provided: because they are headed by God ("Nous marchons avec Dieu!"). This last word "Dieu", Eb, is enhanced by the music in three different ways: it coincides with the final note; it is the highest note in the song; and, it is the tonic of the tonality Eb.

We will apply mathematical analysis to two different melodic patterns. First, we will explain the whole tone scale, illustrating it with the ascendent scale in measures 17-18. The distance between two consecutive notes of a major scale is one whole tone, except between the grades 3-4 and the grades 7-8, where there is a semitone. In the minor scale the semitones are placed differently: between the grades 2-3 and the grades 5-6. Here we want to make the point that Fauré's music alternates modes. Second, we are going to carry out the mathematical analysis of a modulation. The melody in measures 3-6, after the modulating process, becomes the melody in measures 7-10. The modulating process consists of applying a very simple algorithm: every note in measures 7-10 (melody in G minor) equals the same note in measures 3-6 (melody in Eb major) after adding two whole tones to it.

4 Practical Activity

1. Recitation of the song's poem and translation into English (3'). Brainstorming about this song's context (3'). Comparison between a sailing trip and a musical trip based in this song (2').
2. Observation of the white and the black keys in a pianoforte; Addition of tones and half tones (2'). Calculation of the distance, tones and half tones, between every two notes; Count of the intervals in the scale in measures 17-18 of the song *Les Matelots* (7').
3. Reading and listening of the melody (3'). Transposition of the melody in measures 3-6 of the song two tones up into a minor mode (7').
4. Handclapping of the song's rhyhm from measure 10 to 16 (3'). Spelling and pronunciation of the words (5') Practice of voice exercices (5'). Performance of the song with piano accompaniment (10').

References

- [1] Carlo Caballero. *Fauré and French Musical Aesthetics*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003.
- [2] Gabriel Fauré. *Sixty Songs*. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1990.