

Hidden fifths and octaves –

What's the real truth behind the rules?

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Hidden fifths and octaves – rules described

Harmony textbooks describe **hidden (or direct) fifths and octaves** which involves two of the parts moving to a 5th or octave:

a leap in both parts makes the hidden 5th more prominent... ... while stepwise motion in one part reduces the effect



Textbook authors are divided in their opinion regarding which situations hidden fifths and octaves are acceptable and which should be avoided. They do agree however that hidden fifths and octaves between the outer parts can sometimes have a negative effect. In order to understand the discussion about hidden fifths and octaves, it is necessary to observe the general effect of the interval of a 5th and octave between the outer parts. The octave – and sometimes the 5th – has a tendency to stand out and therefore make an individual chord more prominent in a piece. This type of prominence can be suitably placed at the end of a phrase, which adds weight. The 5th and octave are therefore used sparingly within the phrase. If they are used, their exposure can be reduced by introducing one or both voices by step in contrary motion to the 5th or octave. As well as this, these intervals (the octave in particular) are often placed on a weak beat (described in detail on third page "Use of the octave within a phrase"). Sometimes the outer voices will move in similar motion to the interval of a 5th or octave, forming hidden fifths/octaves. Similar motion increases the emphasis which can be minimised if one of the voices moves stepwise – which is recommended in the textbooks.

Here are two examples of commonly occurring hidden octaves:

- (a) with a leap in the melody and stepwise motion in the bass
- (b) with stepwise motion in the melody and a leap in the bass – which is the most common.

Haydn: Symphony No 81, II
J. S. Bach: St. John's Passion, No 20 Chorale

The effect of hidden fifths and octaves is diminished: 1) with an increased number of voices 2) in more dissonant harmony 3) with the increased complexity of the harmonic weave 4) with an increased number of notes in common between the chords.

Hidden fifths and octaves are acceptable when they occur within the *same* chord, even with a leap in both voices (see bars 5-6 in the last example on page 3).

For understanding the rules of hidden fifths and octaves the use of intervals between melody and bass must be studied

In much of the music that was shaped during the Baroque period, the melody and bass formed two-part writing that was completed by chordal instruments such as the harpsichord ('Figured bass'). Intervals were chosen so that the two-part writing could sound complete. This ideal continued during the Classical period, as the outer parts in 2- and 3-part writing dominated at the time in a more prominent way as well. During the Romantic period 4-part writing became the norm, which meant that the fullness between the melody and bass diminished in importance, eg the interval of a fifth was used to a greater extent than during the 18th century. Despite this, the technique is basically the same. As the music during the 16th century often had three, four or more parts, it is possible to find several fifths and octaves between the outer parts. The method of choosing intervals between the melody and bass in the 18th century, forms the basis for the description below, but is largely applicable to music during the preceding and following centuries.* (see the last page)

The interval within a phrase

The interval between the melody and bass within a phrase are carried out almost exclusively by thirds, sixths and dissonant intervals eg fourth, tritone, seventh, ninth.

stable beginning	thirds, sixths and a diminished seventh (d7) are used within the phrase	stable end of phrase	example of common dissonances with resolution
Interval: 8 6 6 3 3 6 6 6 d7 6 7 5 8			7 3 9(2) 6 d5 3 4 6

C G7/D C/E G/B C D7/A G/B C6 C#°7 G/D D7 G G7 C G7/F C G7/B C Dm/CG/B

Beethoven: Piano Sonata op 14 No 2, II

Use of the fifth and octave at the beginning of the phrase and in cadences

Fifths and octaves between the melody and bass can be found more frequently at the beginning of the phrase and in cadences, where these intervals can occur by placing the root of the chord in the bass. Fifths and octaves can be placed anywhere in the cadential chords, as shown in the examples below:

C: IV	V or V ₄₋₃ ⁶⁻⁵	I ⁶	I	V	IV	I
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Use of the octave within a phrase

The octave is used very sparingly within the phrase because it lacks the tension which is necessary to drive the music forwards. When it is used, it is usually stepwise in contrary motion with the melody. The octave is usually placed on an unaccented or relatively unaccented beat. This counteracts the accent which normally occurs as the result of an octave – which is preferably placed in a cadence. The normal use of the octave is shown below:*

All of these can occur on different degrees of the scale:

the octave occurs as a result of stepwise contrary motion (bars 2-3 show variations of b 1) stepwise neighbour notes the 5th or the 3rd of the triad ascends by step to form an octave in the next chord

C G7/D C/E Dm C/E G Am Dm/F C/E C G7/D C F Dm Am Dm

Use of the fifth within the phrase

The 5th is a little richer than the octave, so it is more frequently utilised within the phrase. This interval is often introduced by stepwise motion as the melody and another voice move in contrary motion. (This does not apply to the first bar, which is explained in the last example below.)

All of these can occur on different degrees of the scale:

the fifth can also enter on an accented beat very common voice leading the fifth (often accented) enters by step from the 7th cycle of 5ths (Am-Dm) using a descending 3rd

C G Am G G7 Am G#°7 Am FΔ G Am Dm

Other uses of the fifth/octave including hidden fifths and octaves

See below for further use of the fifth/octave as well as a common type of voice leading where both voices move in the same direction to a fifth or octave, 'Hidden fifths and octaves'.

fifths and octaves with a repeated note in the melody fifths and octaves when rearranging the same chord hidden fifths and octaves can be used: when moving within the same chord ... or when one of the voices moves by step.

C Am C/E C C C/E C C C/E C C G C G C

* It is important to emphasise that there are situations where the principles below do not apply, for example simple bass parts based on the root of the chord and which take part in an accompaniment. The relationship of the intervals between the melody and bass is of subordinate importance:

The image shows a musical score for Schubert's 'Waltz op 18 No 6'. The melody is in the treble clef and the bass is in the bass clef. The key signature has two sharps (F# and C#). The tempo is marked 'pp'. The bass line consists of simple chords: Bm, F#7, Bm, F#7, Bm. The intervals between the melody and the bass are labeled: 'octave' (between B4 and B5), 'fifth' (between D5 and A3), 'octave' (between F#5 and F#4), and 'octave' (between C#5 and C#4).

Schubert: Waltz op 18 No 6

Note that if the melody or bass contains nonharmonic notes, the interval is calculated from the note of resolution of the nonharmonic note.

The image shows a musical score for J. S. Bach's 'Helft mir Gottes Güte preisen', Cantata No 16. The melody is in the treble clef and the bass is in the bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The tempo is marked 'pp'. The bass line consists of chords: E/G#, Am, Am/C, Dm6, E7, Am. The melody contains nonharmonic notes. The interval between the nonharmonic note and the note of resolution is labeled 'the interval is described from the note of resolution'. The intervals are labeled: '3 (+8)' and '6 (+8)'. The nonharmonic notes are marked with 'pp'.

J. S. Bach: 'Helft mir Gottes Güte preisen', Cantata No 16