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Cycle of 6ths Progression: Annotated Bibliography

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Professor Ellwood Colahan

Intro to Graduate Studies

Assignment 4

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Cycle of 6ths Progression

Annotated Bibliography

The Cycle of 6ths is a chord progression that I first heard about from the Jazz guitarist Ted Greene, who was a skilled music theorist and had two books published on guitar harmony and chord progressions. Ted stated that he first learned of the cycle of 6ths from studying J.S. Bach. You may be wondering what a chord cycle of ____ is? A chord cycle is when you move chords in a certain intervallic pattern, eventually the cycle comes back around to the starting chord. For instance, if you move chords in 4ths starting on C you would have the following; C, F, Bb, Eb, Ab, Db eventually you move through all 12 keys and come back to C. The cycle of 6ths is a similar idea but you move to relative major or minor of each key. For instance: C major to A minor to F Major to D minor to Bb major and so on, like the other cycle you would eventually come back to C major. I have heard of progressions involving 4ths and 5ths, but never 6ths. John Coltrane does use a cycle of 3rds which would be the inverse pattern of 6ths, but the descending pattern is much harder to find. I hope that some of the information provided

here can help shed some light on what they cycle of 6ths is, and why it should be a valuable part of music scholarship.

Bach, Johann Sebastian, and Ivan. Galamian. *6 Sonatas and Partitas, S. 1001-S. 1006, for Violin Solo: With Facsimile of the Original Manuscript.* New York: International Music, 1980

BMV 1001 violin sonata Presto movement has a partial example of the cycle of 6ths from one of J.S. Bach's work. The example occurs in the last movement of the Sonata entitled "Presto." It occurs in mm 17-24. Bach arpeggiates chords in relation to their relative 6ths but doesn't move in order. Bach starts with Eb-Cm then F-Dm then Gm-Eb. Bach only hints at the cycle here and doesn't play through the whole cycle. Stylistically for the time I don't think Bach would have used this progression in full, as the cycle eventually takes you to keys that have no relation to the starting key.

Benjamin, Thomas., and Johann Sebastian Bach. *The Craft of Tonal Counterpoint.* 2nd ed. New York; London: Routledge, 2003.

A very detailed book on the topic of counterpoint with specific study on J.S. Bach. This would be useful to find other examples of the cycle of 6ths, and to see if it might occur when thinking of counterpoint compositionally. Benjamin devotes the last hundred pages is actual music examples of counterpoint. Benjamin also offers modern analysis for many of the selections, which could provide similar examples with other composers focused on counterpoint

within the same time frame or influential (Palestrina). Chapter 3 titled: “Harmonies Related to Chromatic Lines” could be useful in describing Ted’s thoughts on his V7 preceding the vi or VI chord, as this talks about the V to I relationship with Bach extensively.

Felice, Joseph. *A Pedagogical and Performance Edition of J. S. Bach's Violin Sonata I in G Minor, BWV 1001, Transcribed for Guitar: Transcription, Analysis, Performance Guide, Pedagogical Practice Guide, and Recording*, 2013, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Felice has devoted the second section of this dissertation to analysis of the Sonata. Here you will find Felice talking about a cycle of 5ths progression that Bach hints at in mm. 42 of the Fuga. This seems very promising as it is one of the first mentions of a cycle in Bach’s music. He then sequences the cycle into other keys before returning to the original key. The layout of this dissertation is also very easy to read with many musical excerpts to help clarify the analysis.

Hawthorne, Walter. *J.S. Bach’s Inventions and Sinfonias: An Analysis*, 1980, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

This is probably the most detailed analysis I have found on a work of J.S. Bach. Hawthorne does a great job of describing what is happening, but the book lacks musical examples to follow along with the text. Hawthorne analyses individual note lines within each invention, with a broader harmonic structure explained. For instance, before an invention Hawthorne will give a brief chord progression – I, V, ii, IV, I. Hawthorne does no further analyses to the single note lines over this progression. Analyzing single note lines could be beneficial if you could find an arpeggiated chord cycle.

Johnston, Clark. *Jazz Compositions Based on the Chord Progression from the “Goldberg” Variations*, 2011, ProQuest Dissertations and Theses.

Johnston takes the “Goldberg” Variations by J.S. Bach and arranges them for a modern jazz group. This is an excellent source in transcribing some of Bach’s figured bass lines in to modern lead sheets. The harmonic content seems to be limited, but the lead sheets that Johnston has provided are concise and easy to read. The harmony in this work seems to be centered around the I, IV, and V chords, but no mention of cycles. Ted Greene does elude that the cycle of 6ths could be thought of as another progression involve just the I, IV, and V chords, and this could clarify what Ted meant by this.

Jones, Richard D. P. *The Creative Development of Johann Sebastian Bach Volume 1: 1695-1717: Music to Delight the Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2009.

The introduction talks much about regional composers, which could be worth further investigating, as some of these cyclical harmonic ideas could be stylistic to the region. Bach derived most of his harmonic forms from the region as well. In section 1.2 titled “Sonatas and other genres” Jones explores some of the traditional influences on Bach while composing. The region had many influential composers that Bach looked to for inspiration, often referring to these composers in his own work. It is also discussed how *stylus phantasticus* was prominent at the time, and Bach strived to distance his music from it. Jones writes in detail about key signatures and modulations within this section. This could offer further evidence of Bach trying out different chord cycles, as Bach was consciously trying to push the harmonic limits of the time.

Modirzadeh, Hafez. "Aural Archetypes and Cyclic Perspectives in the Work of John Coltrane and Ancient Chinese Music Theory." *Black Music Research Journal* 21, no. 1 (2001): 75-106.

A very interesting article on cycles of 4ths and 5ths which John Coltrane employed in his playing in relation to cycles that already existed within ancient Chinese music theory. This is a good resource to help describe to a reader what a chord or interval cycle is, it also includes many visual examples which are often circular. These circular models would be ideal to visually describe how a cycle will eventually come back around to the chord or note that it started with. Modirzadeh talks about music in relation to Chinese ideology, which is a similar connection to how J.S. Bach thought- it was compositionally tied to the Lutheran church. Ying and Yang ideology was mentioned, and could be thought of opposites, but necessary. Similarly, in music if you take a cycle of 5ths and invert it the result would be a cycle of 4ths. If you take this practice and apply it to a cycle of 3rds then you would have a cycle of 6ths. This could provide further insight to how such a cycle could have been derived.

Norman, Philip B. *A Quantitative Study of Harmonic Similarities in Certain Specified Works of Bach, Beethoven, and Wagner*. New York, Boston: C. Fischer, 1945.

A great study for three renown regional composers. Norman analyses chord progressions with selected works of each composers, then compiles the progressions up quantitatively. I'm sure if Ted Greene found these cycles in Bach's music, then other composers in the region much more familiar with Bach's work would have as well. Starting with Beethoven might be most fruitful, as he idolized J.S. Bach's music. Comparing these chord progressions

side by side will be useful to try and see the development of composers in the region spanning the time frame between the three composers' lives.

Smith, Robert G. "On the cycle of 6ths" Transcriptions by Robert G Smith, October 2016. Access through Tedgreene.com

[http://www.tedgreene.com/transcriptions/assets/Ted Greene and the Cycle of 6ths Parts1-2byRobertSmith.pdf](http://www.tedgreene.com/transcriptions/assets/Ted_Greene_and_the_Cycle_of_6ths_Parts1-2byRobertSmith.pdf)

Robert G. Smith was also a student of Ted Greene. He put together this nice transcription of how Ted thought of the cycle of 6ths as well as time stamps that coincide with the recording. Robert also points out that Ted talks about the cycle of 6ths in a video on his website entitled "Baroque Improvisation", another link to J.S. Bach. Robert has also included guitar chord diagrams that show a guitarist how Ted voice led each chord through the cycle. These diagrams are nice to visually see how the voices move in the cycle.

Ted Greene, Guitarist. Mark Levy, Guitarist. "Lesson with Ted Greene #43" recorded January 28, 1994, Los Angeles, Ted Greene's House. Ted Greene.com streaming audio,

[http://tedgreene.com/audio/MarkLevy/43 TedGreeneGuitarLesson MarkLevy 1994-01-28.mp3](http://tedgreene.com/audio/MarkLevy/43_TedGreeneGuitarLesson_MarkLevy_1994-01-28.mp3)

This is an audio lesson with Ted Greene and his student Mark Levy, mostly where Mark and Ted talk about jazz guitar concepts. This is the first mention that I found Ted describing the cycle of 6ths, right at the 50-minute mark. Ted eludes that it is something not a lot of people are aware of and told Mark Levy to "only show this to people who love it.... If someone doesn't

love it then they shouldn't play it" This statement shows just how special this progression is to Ted Greene. I think Ted just wants it to continue to be special to him, and if everyone knew it and played it, the progression would lose its charm.

Ted Greene, Guitarist. Mark Levy, Guitarist. "Lesson with Ted Greene #46"
recorded August 22, 1994, Los Angeles, Ted Greene's House. Ted Greene.com streaming audio,

http://tedgreene.com/audio/MarkLevy/46_TedGreeneGuitarLesson_MarkLevy_1994-08-22.mp3

Another guitar lesson with Ted and Mark. Ted starts talking about the cycle of 6ths right around the 10-minute mark. Ted then plays through the progression more generally so that Mark Levy gets the idea of how the progression works. Ted then explains how he developed the cycle with the addition of a V7 dominant chord preceding the vi or VI chord. He takes it one step further and specifies that the V7 be played in first inversion, thus creating a stepwise descending base line to accompany the cycle of 6ths. Ted refers to this as an ever-descending base line, as it feels like the progression is constantly moving lower. Ted then talks about how this could be thought of as a V, I, V, i, V, I, V, i series, which could take some further analysis, as Ted only briefly mentions this idea. This would definitely coincide with how J.S. Bach would stylistically think about harmony, as most of his progressions revolve around the I, IV, V chords.

Wolff, Christoph, and Walter Emery. 2001 "Bach, Johann Sebastian." *Grove Music Online*. Edited by Deane Root. Accessed 30 Oct. 2018.

This biography about J.S. Bach was mostly compiled by his son C.P.E. Bach, so the information is very close to the actual source. Chapter 21 titled "Methods of composition" I found to be very useful in some of the ways J.S. Bach thought about composing. Bach was less concerned with imitation of past composers and was more aware of the potential of what could be. It is stated here that J.S. Bach in the solo violin sonatas and partitas he was trying to exhaust specific principles within the music, thus trying to make something new. This is where I have found evidence of cycles of 6ths in BMV 1001 Sonata for solo violin. This chapter's references would be a great jumping off point to find more points where J.S. Bach might have tried to reach out harmonically which was described here.