The Counterpoint Club
A Chamber Music Podcast

Opus 1, Episode 3: The Well-Tempered Quartet

Ensemble Scales & Chorales

It is important to spend time at the beginning of every rehearsal establishing pitch-center as an ensemble. Episode 3 of our podcast includes a step-by-step guide to the process:

1. Pick a person in the group to start the drone, which will be the root of the scale (e.g. D Major Scale will have a D drone).

2. Choose which direction you will be passing the drone (e.g. clockwise, or counter-clockwise).

3. Everyone, except the appointed "droner" plays the scale slowly in unison over the tonic drone, focusing their "ear energy" on each person's intonation relative to the drone note as well as each person's intonation relative to each other's unisons and octaves.

4. Pass the drone around, until everyone has had a turn at droning.

Another exercise Skyros uses to establish communal pitch is playing through a simple Bach Chorale. These are short, 4-part songs, and tend to have a very clear melody and what we call "homophonic" motion (i.e. the parts move at the same rhythmic speed). The attached score on page 2 is an example of a Bach Chorale we might use to warm up with. This example is arranged for string quartet, but it's important to note that arrangements can be found (or made) for any chamber ensemble, not just string quartets!

With any exercise, it's important to remember what to focus on. Here are a few ways that Skyros Quartet dives into intonation using Chorales:

1. Tuning to the lowest pitch (in our case, most often the cello, though there are exceptions!)

2. Building from the bottom up, one voice at a time

3. Rotating who we focus our "ear energy" on (e.g. 1st violin one time, viola next time, etc.)

4. Isolating Pairs of Pitches (e.g. cello with viola/vln2/vln1, viola with vln2/vln1, vln1/vln2)

5. Building from perfect intervals (e.g. Octaves, 5ths, and 4ths)

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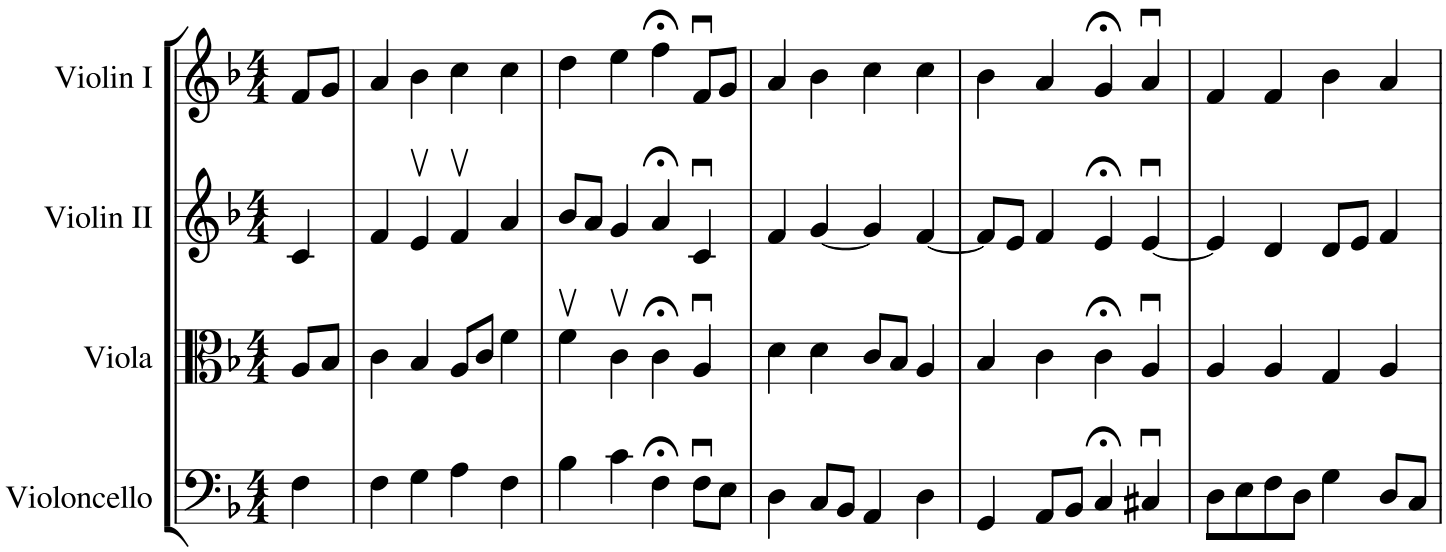
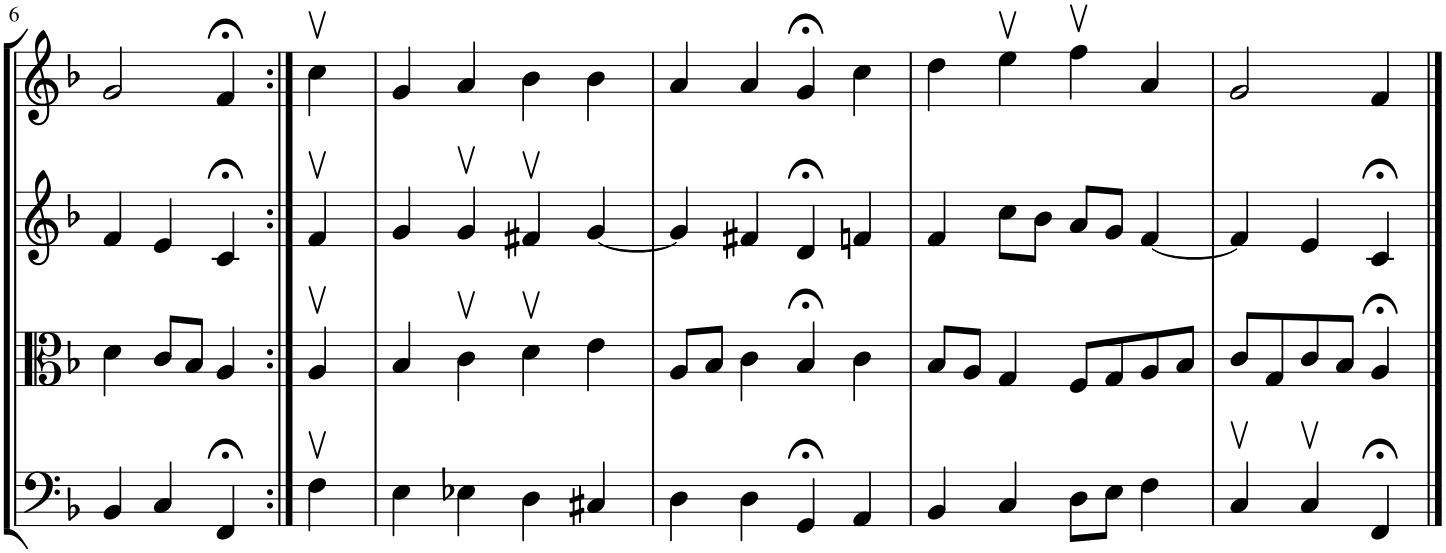
26. O Ewigkeit, du Donnerwort

Bach





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