

Monteverdi's Gloria for 8 voices M 29

Learn about suspensions

It would be nice to hear these on your keyboard

In order to sing Monteverdi (and loads of music) you need to understand suspensions so you can approach and hold them with confidence. Singers are wary when their note clashes with someone else's. Our instinct is to assume we're singing the wrong note and back off. Just what you shouldn't be doing. Then it really will sound like an error. It'll also deprive the music of some of its energy.

A suspension is a planned clash. It has three stages - preparation, discord, resolution.

It's quite a mechanical process. The composer decides on a sequence of two chords and looks for a note in the second one that is one note lower than in the first one. (Well behaved suspensions fall when they resolve).

Look at the example. It's a G major chord followed by a C major chord.(i)

in (ii) the chords are laid out in 4 parts so that the voices move more smoothly from one chord to the next.

There's just one note that moves down one step from the first chord to the second - the top part, dropping from D to C. (iii) The held on D clashes with the rest of the chord

The diagram shows three stages of a suspension in G4: (i) preparation: a G major chord (G, B, D); (ii) discord: a C major chord (C, E, G) with the D from the previous chord held over; (iii) resolution: the D note moves down to C, forming a C major chord (C, E, G).

The most popular place for a suspension in the Gloria - and lots of other pieces, is on the penultimate chord of a perfect cadence. It adds excitement and energy and seems to make the tonic chord even more strongly a point of rest.

The discord is best on the strong beat.

Find bar 49 in your score. (2.46 on the recording). A grand perfect cadence.

Activity 30 explains why it ends on an A major chord. Example i sets out the chords without any of the extra excitement.

Example ii puts in the suspension. It's in Alto 1, who delay moving down to the G# they "should" be singing, making a lovely clash with the B in Soprano 1 and Alto 2. What about the Tenor 2 part you say? You may well say that, but it isn't a suspension. It's a lovely bit of decoration, a great flourish, filling in the gap between two notes of the E chord - and along the way, adding seasoning, with brief discords of the D and the C.

The diagram shows two examples of a suspension in the Alto 1 part: (i) preparation: Am (A, C, E) and E (E, G#, B) chords; (ii) discord: Am (A, C, E) and E (E, G#, B) chords with a G# note held over from the previous chord.

Sometimes, we're tantalised a bit more with a more ornate suspension - as in bar 86. The second sopranos, having hung onto their A across the bar line, overshoot the G#, go down to an F# and finally get back to where they should be. Monteverdi puts in some more discords in this imitative sequence that can put off the singer who isn't expecting them. The note for the "ni" of "unigenite" briefly clashes with the other part. They aren't suspensions, just little flits down a note and back again, but they add spice, and need to be sung confidently even though they aren't emphasised. Bar 84 has another little discord as the first sopranos descend in smooth quavers while the seconds are still doing "unigenite". It all makes the concordant music in bar 85 even sweeter.

bar 81 (4.35)

The diagram shows bar 81 with the lyrics "fi - li u - ni - ge - ni - te". The second soprano part has a suspension on the "ni" syllable, where the note flits down and back.

bar 84

bar 86

The diagram shows bars 84 and 86 with the lyrics "Je - su, Je - su Chris - te". The first soprano part has a suspension on the "Je" syllable in bar 84 and another suspension on the "Je" syllable in bar 86.