

Principles of Spelling in Chromatic/Multi-tonal Music

By Steve Bloom

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One of the big difficulties I have confronted, as a composer of music in which I use no key signature, is spelling. Some have called my work “atonal,” but I actually think a term like “multi-tonal” or “poly-tonal” is probably more appropriate. In any case, since there is no single tonal reference, I often compose passages where spelling constitutes a significant challenge.

In order to think through my own practice in a systematic way I sat down recently to create a list of considerations that guide me. When I asked for thoughts about that list from NYC composer Daniel Felsenfeld, he suggested that others might also benefit if I shared my approach more widely. Points 1 through 8 below are essentially what I sent to Daniel. Point 9 is his addition.

The elements enumerated here should not be thought of as rules, because it's quite impossible to follow all of them all the time. Think of them, instead, as guiding principles. They are not presented in any strict order of priority. Still, there is a tendency for those that come first on the list to take precedence over those that come later when conflicts occur, as they often do. Under such conditions we just have to make the most satisfactory choice available under the circumstances. Often there will not be a single “right” choice for a particular note or passage, with the other possibilities being “wrong.” There is simply a choice to be made, with positives and negatives inherent in all of the possibilities. It is then necessary to go ahead and make a choice—based on art as much as on science. On occasion all choices seem unsatisfactory and we just have to select one way to spell a note, or set of notes.

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- 1) We are guided primarily by what will make a particular passage easiest for the performer.
- 2) Written intervals on the staff should reflect the most common occurrences of the interval in question. For example (a difficulty that occurs quite often), minor thirds should be written as minor thirds whenever possible, not as augmented seconds. C to E-flat, not C to D-sharp. G-Sharp to B not A-flat to B. B to C-Sharp and E to F-Sharp should be written as seconds, not as thirds (B to D-flat and E to G-Flat). This is most important for vocalists who have to find the next note to sing from the last note, or else from a cue provided by someone else. But it's a primary consideration in instrumental music too.
- 3) Whenever possible maintain a consistency in a particular passage of using either sharps or flats, not mixing them indiscriminately. In particular, if there is a phrase or passage that would fit into a particular key were we using a key signature, use the sharps or flats appropriate for that key.
- 4) Do not use a sharp and a flat on adjacent notes. (If anything approaches an absolute rule, this is it.)
- 5) Use sharps for passages that are moving from a lower note to a higher note. Use flats for passages that are moving from a higher note to a lower note.
- 6) Avoid passages that are written natural-sharp-natural-sharp-natural or natural-flat-natural-flat-natural of the same note whenever possible. Use adjacent notes instead, applying a sharp or flat as needed.
- 7) Avoid creating passages where the same note is expressed as both a flat and a sharp in close proximity to one another. One exception to this rule might be when we have a passage going up and one going down in close proximity, with the same note occurring in each passage.
- 8) In general what counts is the position of a note in its melodic line. This is especially true for instrumental music where individuals are reading only their own parts. Keyboard and other music (including vocal music) where individuals are either producing chords or need to relate the notes they are singing to the notes being sung by others, should prioritize the harmonic structure however. In these cases the most important principles are summed up in points #2, and #3 above.
- 9) Some instruments play more naturally in either sharps or flats. This can influence our choices when all other considerations seem to be equal.