

COUNTERPOINT

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the study of counterpoint is to learn to listen to and conceive of music in terms of its linear structure, as opposed to its progression of chords. To write a contrapuntal line is to write a beautiful musical line which combines with at least one other musical line with certain restraints on the possible vertical combinations.

A beautiful contrapuntal line has the following qualities: it is singable by the human voice; it is balanced in its use of steps and skips, being dominated by neither; it has a well-conceived design; it agrees in mode with the other contrapuntal lines; and it differs in design from all other contrapuntal lines with which it is combined. To achieve these qualities, the following rules are to be observed:

Rules of thumb:

A cantus firmus, usually derived from the hymn and chant literature, forms the basis of all counterpoint exercises and is to be considered immutable.

Any "white note" is available to the counterpoint.

Dissonant harmonic (vertical) combinations are not allowed.

The counterpoint and cantus firmus should have different climaxes. The climax may not be the last note, but may be the first note.

The climax of the line should be heard only once.

Counterpoint above the cantus firmus must begin on a unison, perfect fifth, or octave.

Counterpoint below the CF must begin on the unison or octave.

The counterpoint must end on a unison or octave, and in two parts it is preceded by the seventh degree of the modal scale. In Dorian, Mixolydian and Aeolian modes, the seventh degree must be chromatically raised to form a leading tone here.

No parallel or direct motion to a perfect consonance is allowed.

There must be variety in the use of harmonic intervals; all sixths, all thirds, etc. is bad.

No more than three consecutive sixths, thirds, or tenths.

Relentless upward motion or relentless downward motion, particularly when there are skips, is not allowed.

Two skips in one direction should be followed by motion in the other direction.

Melodic skips of an octave are permitted; otherwise, no skip may be larger than a minor sixth.

Any skip larger than a fourth must be followed by motion in the opposite direction.

The use of skips and steps should be balanced both statistically and over the course of the counterpoint — i.e., the counterpoint should not begin with all skips and end with all steps.

No melodic leap of an augmented interval or of a tritone is allowed; similarly, an augmented or diminished interval (especially a tritone!) must not be outlined in two, three or four consecutive tones moving in the same direction.

The interval between two adjacent voices must not exceed a tenth. In two parts, enforcement of this rule is not strict.

Consecutive semitones in the same direction are not allowed.

Avoid repetitious motivic structure or other interruptive articulation of the line (into antecedent/consequent, ABA, etc.). The line must be heard as a single unit and not a combination of several units.

The counterpoint should not “mirror” the CF.

Do not return to a single note too frequently.

Take care that the opening sonority is not repeated in the middle of the exercise (e.g., if the CF returns to its opening note, harmonize it differently); similarly, avoid more than one instance of exactly the same perfect consonance, except at the extremes.

Any chromatically altered tone must immediately move by step in the same direction of the chromatic alteration (flatted tones must go down, sharped tones must go up).

The voices may not leap simultaneously in direct motion more than once per exercise.

(When two consecutive melodic intervals are both rising, the larger (if any) should come first; if they are both falling, the larger should come second. In first species, this rule may be violated by one diatonic degree.) Enforcement of this decree will be somewhat lax at first.

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Perfect consonances: Unison, perfect fifth, octave.

Imperfect consonances: Any third, any sixth, any tenth.

Dissonances: Second, Perfect fourth, tritone, seventh, ninth, any augmented or diminished interval.

ules particular to first species:

A tone may be repeated, but only once, and only once per exercise. A leap of an octave counts as a repeated tone.

Chromatic tones allowed are B \flat in Dorian mode, G \sharp in Aeolian mode, F \sharp in Mixolydian mode, C \sharp in Dorian mode. The last three may only be used as the penultimate notes in the counterpoint. (Later their use will be freer.) E \flat will soon be added to this list.

The long list of rules will evolve as we progress from species to species. In general, the faster your line moves, the more stepwise it should be. Rules for outlining tritones and dissonant intervals will differ depending on the overall speed of the counterpoint line.