

Counterpoint

Supplement 5

"...where other composers do what the notes wish, the notes do as [your name here] wishes" — *Martin Luther*
"I wanna have some fun." — *Samantha Fox, Recording Artist and Bimbo*

Fifth Species (2 parts)

Finally, you get to write a line that is somewhat more like music, and you're given a chance to use all your newly acquired contrapuntal biceps, triceps and quadriceps to create a beautiful line. The list of restrictions presented here should be considered great-grandfatherly advice, culled from centuries of probing into the music of Palestrina et al, that will give you a greater chance of writing a good line that a composer of the day would have been proud of. The advice and restrictions are much more stringent than what is found in Fux, so you may as well just put your copy in your bookcase and reminisce about it dreamily in years to come.

In fifth species, counterpoint is written in mixed note values against a cantus firmus that continues to move in whole notes. It is important to create variety in the melodies: four whole notes followed by eight quarter notes followed by two half notes, etc. is abrupt, lacking in continuity, and somewhat fishy besides. Rhythmic contrasts should be used smoothly and evenly. Just as skips require compensation in steps, so do rhythms require compensation. So after longer note values, a need is felt for shorter ones, and vice versa. Note the beginning of the *Sanctus* of Palestrina's Marcellus Mass:



San ----- *ctus, San* -----

The first note is syncopated, that is, tied over into the next bar. The downward movement of the two quarters which follow act as a sort of resolution of the syncopation, and also circle around the next strong note, the whole-note B, giving that note a natural feeling of completion for the time being. It still has the energy for the line to continue, and notice how the next strong note, D, is also circled, in a more complex way, giving it both a sense of completion and a greater energy for continuation. The largest skip for the passage is saved to introduce the high point, G, which also begins a text repetition. The accumulated energy from the skip is dissipated by smooth quarter-note stepwise motion down. Jeppesen compares this tune to a noble and gracefully splashing fountain. You will note that the line is not overtly dramatic, as this is not the point of a good line. The high point is entirely "natural" and while stressed rhythmically is not the longest note of the line.

In a general sense, you will want to strive for lines that grow higher slowly with evolving high points leading to a climax somewhere between halfway and three-fourths of the way through the exercise. Lines that involve gradually lower and lower register work less well. Rhythmically, you should strive for lines that begin in long notes, move gradually towards quicker notes towards the climax, and then relax rhythmically after the climax. But don't be mechanical! Don't try to get too fancy, either, because you will invariably end up writing an awkward line.

Dotted whole notes and dotted half notes are both allowed now, either attacking at the same time as the cantus firmus note, or attacking on the half of the CF note and suspending over the next CF note.

Changes of "species" in the counterpoint are generally most effective when off the beat of the cantus firmus — on the weak half, or 2nd, 3rd or 4th quarter of the cantus firmus note. It may be fine to change species to coincide with the attack of the new cantus firmus note, but you should listen to it with great care. Don't let the beat of the cantus firmus combine with "gear-shifting" in the counterpoint to

form large recurrent pulses over-articulating the flow of the phrase.¹ This gear-shifting will always make the counterpoint sound clunky and lumpy. Avoid long continuous accelerations or decelerations (o o d d d d d d d d d o o for instance). By all means avoid repeated rhythmic patterns, both as short rhythmic motives (d d d d d d d d d for instance) and in the antecedent/consequent sense.

The composite rhythm of the two voices should provide an attack on each half note, from the second note of the cantus firmus up to the cadence. The exception: a dotted half followed by a quarter (d. d) is fine against a whole note in the cantus firmus.

Despite the maxim given above, don't put all the longer note-values in the lower notes of the counterpoint — the line will become sluggish. Rarely, if at all, should you use a quarter note for the climax. If you do, be sure there is a longer note somewhere not more than a third below it in the line. Do not put all the long notes in the lower and upper registers, either, with third species elevators riding up and down between them: the line will be incoherent.

The meter of the counterpoint exercise will now be $\frac{4}{2}$ or C with four half-notes to the measure (or two cantus firmus whole notes). Distribute the cantus firmus so that the last note begins a measure and is notated as a brevis — 2 whole notes (or longa — 4 whole notes, if you choose). Don't use a brevis or longa elsewhere. In free writing (later, not now) the whole tied to a whole across a barline (the duration of a brevis) may be used at the first entrance of either voice.

A dotted whole, either attacked on a downbeat, or as a whole tied to a half in the next measure, may be used at the opening of a phrase, attacking with the first note of the cantus firmus. The dot, or suspended half, is treated as a fourth species suspension and must be resolved accordingly if the suspension is dissonant. A whole note may be used as the penultimate note of the counterpoint, coinciding with the penultimate note of the cantus firmus if no better (suspension!) formula is available there. If so, the whole note should be the leading tone. (In free writing the whole note is often the opening gambit: in fifth species, however, do not open with the whole note attacked at the same time as the first cantus firmus note: it fails to establish the rhythmic independence of the lines).

Treat weak halves tied to strong halves as in fourth species. Do not use more than three such suspensions in a row, as the rhythmic independence will be lost. (Later, ornamentation of the suspension will be introduced).

The half note means exactly what it did in second species. Either it is the first or second half of a cantus firmus whole note, not in the middle (rhythms such as d d d and d d d are not allowed). In other words, a half note always occupies the time of a strong quarter and a weak quarter. An isolated half may be weak or strong, but a pair of consecutive halves works best as weak-strong (n.b. a rhythm such as d d | d d exhibits gear-shifting characteristics that make it an awkward rhythm). A string of three consecutive halves (don't use more) is more frequently used beginning on a weak half.

Dotted halves are attacked only on strong quarters ("1" or "3" — d. d, not d. d) Leaving a dotted half, treat the "dot" as a third quarter in third species and the quarter which follows as a fourth quarter in fourth species. (E.G. if the quarter which follows it is dissonant it must resolve by step in the same direction, etc.) A dotted half may also appear rhythmically as a weak half tied to a strong quarter. The rule of suspension does NOT follow for this strong quarter (it only applies to *half notes*), therefore the suspended quarter *must* be consonant (there is one exception, in fourth species ornamentation, which we'll get to shortly).

An isolated quarter note can be used to follow a dotted half or half-tied-to-quarter — it should be treated as a third species weak quarter, except for something we'll get to later. Any group of quarters greater than one will be called a "string" of quarters. You may not use a string of quarters longer than 9

¹ David Lewin inserts a joke here: "On manual transmission, you move your foot up, not down, to engage a new gear."

in a syncopated part of the measure for the word "descendens," which means "descended," (just like it looks) also forces the line down for another motetism. Do you notice the rhythmic crescendo in this example?

N.B. Note that the Palestrina example here has a key signature of one flat. If you prefer, you may transpose your cantus firmus up a fourth or down a fifth and add the key signature of one flat. If you do so, G# should be omitted from your chromatic vocabulary and Ab added. Aeolian will now be a 'D' mode and C will need to be sharpened at the cadence and B will need to be naturalized.

Questions and Answers

What's wrong with our lines when you mark "segmented" or "lonely" on them? A "lonely" note or set of notes is isolated in register from the rest of the line. A longer passage of registrally separated notes is one segment of a segmented line. The effect of such registral isolation is to split your line into a combination of more than one line. You have heard "multilinear" tunes all your life in music of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, etc., and it often seems right based on those models to form segmented lines by leaping into foreign registers and abandoning them. In the tonal models, however, you understand both in hearing and in analyzing that the registral segmentation involves "motion into another voice." In other words, you hear tonal lines in terms of underlying multivoice counterpoint. In modal counterpoint, the surface counterpoint and the underlying counterpoint are one and the same. Therefore, there can be no "motion into another voice," since there is no "other voice;" so registrally segmented lines are not good lines.

What's wrong with ending on the high point? The cadence should be a point of relaxation, not of tension. Vocal tension is highest in higher registers, therefore cadences on high points are not points of relaxation.

Why aren't there any Lydian cantus firmi? Simply because there isn't much Lydian sixteenth century polyphonic vocal music. These composers preferred modes where the fourth and fifth degrees of the scale formed perfect consonances with the first degree.

You said don't change species at the same time a cantus firmus tone changes, but all the Palestrina examples do this. Not so. Quarters are always introduced in the middle of a whole note, or following a dotted half; halves are often introduced after a dotted whole. Besides, Palestrina's examples are lines used in free counterpoint that is not moving against unrelenting whole notes. As you'll find out in free writing, something usually happens to the rhythm in another voice to take away from the seeming accents and gear shifts on strong whole notes.

What's wrong with building a line from rhythmic motives? The lines have to have a unity in and of themselves, and building a line from rhythmic motives turns a line a collection of little pieces of lines that resemble each other, not a single organic line.

My counterpoint looks good and follows the rules, but I don't know what it sounds like. Either you should a) play it at the piano and find out or b) not play it on the piano and never find out.

Why do I have to use alto clef in every exercise? I'm your father and I say so. Besides, one day you will write for the viola and you don't want to admit any viola player is smarter than you, do you?

What does "Sorry, Tennessee" mean on the third page? I don't get it. It's a very obscure quote from a TV advertisement for Dreyfus Liquid Assets. I thought it would be funny. I may have miscalculated.

Really, what does good fifth species counterpoint look like? You could sit here staring at these nice fonts (Adobe Caslon, Lassus, Shpfltnat). Or you could turn the page.