

Counterpoint

Rules and Guidelines on Counterpoint.

INTRODUCTION

These notes assume that you have a comprehensive knowledge of the rudiments of music theory, and that you have a thorough grounding in the harmonic style of J.S.Bach.

COUNTERPOINT and HARMONY

The two disciplines are distinct but not mutually exclusive.

When writing Harmony, the principal objective is to create satisfying sequences of block chords of a mood and character which is appropriate to the style of the given melodic or bass part/line.

When writing Counterpoint, the principal objective is to create simultaneous progressions of different voices which, though harmonically interdependent, stimulate the listener to hear and appreciate each individual melodic line.

It is safe to say, therefore, that counterpoint is the more intellectually demanding of the two disciplines for both writer and listener.

RULES

The rules of counterpoint are essentially the same as the rules of harmony. They depend on the style you wish to re-create. Therefore, in the style of Bach, the rules of melodic progression and the rules (and guidelines) which are pertinent to the style of Bach apply in counterpoint as well.*

GENERAL GUIDELINES and SPECIFIC TECHNIQUES

In order to write counterpoint successfully you should thoroughly acquaint yourself with the following information, and patiently acquire and (hopefully) master each of the techniques described below.

To write good counterpoint one must learn the art of thinking strategically, so as to fully exploit (without breaking the rules) the potential creative possibilities which are inherent in the techniques of counterpoint.

These techniques are : Canon

Imitation

Inversion

Augmentation

Diminution

Sequence

Fragmentation

Melodic Variation

Rhythmic Variation

1st STEP

You must learn, first, how to write a good melody.

ADVICE

1) It must have a strong personality : characterful intervals, a definite rhythmic propulsion and a clear sense of harmonic direction.

2) It must not, ever, be overly complex.

- 3) It should not cover much more than an octave in pitch.
- 4) It should contain enough space to allow counter melodies the chance to register on the ear.
- 5) It should be kept short enough to be manageable.
- 6) It should (very difficult !) contain the potential for a certain amount of harmonic ambiguity. (This contradicts 1 , but the reasons will become obvious later)

2nd STEP

Writing a good counter melody.

ADVICE

As in lesson 1.

Plus :

- 1) It must complement the main melody, and not detract from its character.
- 2) It must have its own individual character and personality.
- 3) It must be harmonically compatible with the first melody.
- 4) It must not be so different as to jeopardise musical cohesion. (very difficult indeed !)

SPECIES COUNTERPOINT

Species Counterpoint is a very difficult to acquire, but invaluable, skill, which has long formed the basis of Contrapuntal Study in many of the World's leading teaching establishments.

Practising good note manipulation skills through the study of Species Counterpoint.

Writing against a "Cantus Firmus", you should become proficient in each species, first in 2 part writing, then 3, and so on.

1st Species - semibreve against semibreve.

2nd Species - minims against semibreves.

3rd Species - crotchets against semibreves

4th Species - syncopated tied minims against semibreves. (1st note is a minim, last is a semibreve)

5th Species - A free mix of Species 1 - 4.

FOR MY U.S.A. USERS : SEMIBREVE =WHOLE NOTE

MINIM = HALF NOTE

CROTCHET = QUARTER NOTE

QUAVER = EIGHTH NOTE

SEMIQUAVER=SIXTEENTH NOTE

MELODIC RULES

To gain the most value from the study of species counterpoint the rules are necessarily very restrictive.

To quote my teacher Nadia Boulanger :- "Everything is forbidden."

- 1) All melodic leaps are allowed except :- a) Augmented Intervals.
- b)Any interval wider than a Perfect 5th.

Notes :- You may leap a minor 6th upwards, but must resolve inwards.

You may leap an octave, but only once per cantus firmus.

You may leap a diminished interval, provided that you resolve it inwards.

2) You may not have more than two consecutive leaps in the same direction.

3) You may not have any sequential melodic patterns.

INTERVALIC RULES GOVERNING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TWO PARTS (1ST SPECIES)

Allowed :- 3rds and 6ths Major and Minor.

Perfect 5ths

Octaves

Unisons

1st inversion of a Diminished 5th.

Not allowed :- Everything else

RULES CONCERNING THE PROGRESSION OF TWO PARTS (ALL SPECIES)

No consecutive 5ths and octaves between bars

No melodic repetition

Avoid more than two parallel movements and never do more than three.

Never have a unison or octave on the first beat of a bar except at the start and finish.

It is wise to avoid the Perfect 5th at the beginning of a bar.

N.B. Contrary Motion is a fundamental ideal in Western/European Music and you must consistently strive to achieve it. Indirect movement (oblique) is O.K.

MELODIC RULES (2nd , 3rd, 4th and 5th SPECIES)

Passing and Auxiliary notes are allowed. They must however only occur on "weak" beats. That is, in a position where the two Harmony Notes which are being linked are in a rhythmically superior position.

NO PAIN NO GAIN

Each Cantus Firmus is to be done 5 or more times. Each example to be different from all the others!