Class Notes for Counterpoint

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book is designed to provide you with a solid foundation in counterpoint. Our department’s belief is that counterpoint is something that should be part of our everyday music making. It is a way to hear music. It is way to understand music. UMass is unique among music programs in that we teach counterpoint in the first semester of a five semester core curriculum. At other schools, the subject, if taught at all, is often relegated to an elective. I would like to acknowledge the influence of Heinrich Schenker’s Kontrapunkt (1910) and Felix Salzer and Carl Schachter’s Counterpoint in Composition (1969) in preparing these materials. In addition, I would like to thank my counterpoint teacher, Miguel Roig-Francoli.

Most importantly, I owe a great deal of thanks to my teaching colleagues Jessica Embry, Adam Kolek, Michael Vitalino, Daniel Huey, and Sara Chung for their hard work, insightful suggestions, and generous help in preparing this text.
Introduction

What is Counterpoint?

Lat.: contrapunctus, from contra punctum: “against note.”
(Fr. contrepoint; Ger. Kontrapunkt; It. contrappunto)

Counterpoint is a broad term for interacting yet independent voices. Since the earliest forms of polyphony, musical textures have been made up of multiple “lines” of music (or “voices”) that combine to form vertical sonorities. Studying counterpoint teaches us how to recognize and understand those lines. Counterpoint is the essence of what we call “voice leading.” The vertical aspect of music is described as “harmonic.” The horizontal aspect of music is described as “melodic,” or “linear” when talking about individual lines and “contrapuntal” when talking about how those melodies interact with each other.

Counterpoint is not a style or a genre. It’s not even a compositional technique. It’s a principle that is the foundation of much of the music we listen to and perform. The next time you are in chorus, orchestra, wind ensemble, or any other multiplayer group, try listening to a different part while performing your own. The interplay of your part with your neighbor’s is counterpoint.

We will study counterpoint using the “species” approach. This approach comprises five species\(^1\) or levels. This approach was codified by Johann Joseph Fux in his *Gradus ad Parnassum*\(^2\), first published in 1725. Fux did not in any way “invent” counterpoint or its teaching. Nevertheless, his species approach was pedagogically groundbreaking.

\(^1\)You may remember from biology that “species” is the most specific level in the classification of living things. It’s interesting to think about all of the counterpoint species as being different, yet still members of the same family or genus.

\(^2\)The title translates to *Steps to Parnassus*. Parnassus was the home of the Greek god Muses and became known as the home of poetry, music, and learning.
for its conciseness. It became basic training for many musicians, including giants such as Beethoven, Mozart, Mendelssohn, and Brahms. The principal point of the species approach is to learn how to control dissonance. The first species allows no dissonance. The second permits metrically unaccented dissonance in the form of passing tones. The third presents dissonance as passing tones and neighbor notes. The fourth teaches us how to control metrically accented dissonance in the form of suspensions. The fifth species is often called “free counterpoint” and can broadly be described as a combination of the preceding four species. We focus on species one through four partly because of time constraints, but also because fifth species borders on (or embraces) 16th century stylistic composition, which is not particularly beneficial to your education at this point.

Why Study Counterpoint?

“All musical technique is derived from two basic ingredients: voice leading and the progression of scale degrees.” —Heinrich Schenker

The primary reason for studying counterpoint is to train and to develop your ears and mind, so that you can aurally engage in fundamental musical actions and develop your musical intuition about these actions. Have you ever heard a piece of music and had the feeling that you “knew where it was going to go?” This is musical expectation or intuition.

One thing you will learn in this course is that notational symbols really hide more than they make explicit. What do notes on a page tell us? Essentially they tell us when and where to put our fingers and when to press, pluck, bow, or blow. They define physical actions. This is not music—neither are the sounds your instrument makes. (If your cat walks on the piano, is that music?) Sounds become music when we interpret them, infer relations between them, or simply understand that they are working together to form something greater than themselves.

Many of you may understand what I am talking about, but you don’t have a way to verbally describe these experiences—something you will need to do quite often in the professional world. One of the most important features of music theory is that it allows us to talk to each other. It is a common language with which we can discuss some very important features of the music that surrounds us in our daily lives. Moreover, music theory provides a way to get beyond the notes by describing the relationships that literally make music. Must we always experience music “theoretically?” No. Of course not. There is a time and place for everything. However, music theory has
been around as long as music itself and, for better or for worse, it has played an indispensable role in its development and evolution—the two are inseparable.

The theory of counterpoint is not a theory of composition. While you will frequently compose examples during the course of our study, it behooves you to keep this important distinction in mind. This is not to say, however, that your composed examples ought not to be musical. They should be. The more attention you pay to achieving musicality in your examples, the greater and more rapid your development as a sensitive, thinking musician will be.

The study of counterpoint follows a logical path. We restrict ourselves to exercises that focus on one or two musical problems at a time. Once solutions are mastered and internalized, we introduce new problems in a cumulative fashion. The final result is a complex musical texture in which you understand why every note is where it is and where every note is going. It is not enough to know the notes and chords; we need to go farther and learn to understand the relations between them.

We do not exist in isolation. Over the span of a thousand years, Western composers have learned to control the simultaneous and successive combinations of musical tones. Our subject of study here at UMass embodies topics and issues that have engaged musicians, performers, teachers, and composers for millennia.

A General Consideration

The study of counterpoint (and of music theory in general) is cumulative. This means that what we learn in week two still applies in week ten. Moreover, you likely won’t be able to do the work in week ten unless you have a solid command of the material from week two. Because of this, descriptions of techniques and concepts are more detailed at the beginning of the text and become shorter and more to the point as the text progresses. For example, in the first week of study we will spend a good deal of time learning how to write good melodies. Later in the semester, writing good melodies is not the goal, but is rather the first step in a larger project. It will be assumed that you can write a good melody and therefore it won’t be explained again. You can always refresh your memory by looking back at an earlier part of the text.

Remember:

Your understanding of material tomorrow depends on your understanding of material today.
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Chapter 1

The *Cantus Firmus*

*Lat.: “fixed melody.”*  
(Ger. *fester Gesang*; It. *canto fermo.*)

The term *cantus firmus* is Latin for fixed melody or song. Its plural is *cantus firmi*. The term is most often associated with medieval and Renaissance music and represents a pre-existing melody used as the basis of a new composition, but it is also associated with the teaching of counterpoint. Traditionally, the origin of *cantus firmi* is plainchant (sometimes called “Gregorian” chant). Composers of the Renaissance would take a *cantus firmus* and write one or more complementary melodies (counterpoints) against it. It is this idea of each note of one voice part (i.e. a “point”) against (i.e. “counter”) another voice part that gives rise to what we think of as “counterpoint.” We will begin our studies by learning to write *cantus firmi*. Since it has its origins in plainchant, a *cantus firmus* is vocal and not instrumental in nature. This doesn’t mean that you can’t play it on your instrument. It means that when you write a *cantus firmus*, you must write it *idiomatically* for the voice. (I can play lots of things on the guitar that I can’t sing, but everything I can sing I can play easily on the guitar.) In fact, being able to easily sing your *cantus firmi* (and later, your *counterpoints*) is a good way to check your work.

Composers have long used the voice as a guideline because it is the most basic, natural, and universal instrument. We still use it as a metaphor when we discuss instrumental music. For example, we can talk about the “soprano” line in a Beethoven piano sonata or the “singing” quality of the clarinet in Brahms’s famous quintet.

Recall that counterpoint is the study of voice leading. Voice leading is the way two or more independent melodic lines interact. When two or more voices are singing
simultaneously, we call that a \textit{polyphonic} texture. Composers didn’t start writing polyphonic music until around 1100 CE. Before that time, composers concerned themselves with writing only single lines, principally for voice. Over the centuries, the \textit{cantus firmus} has become an integral part of the teaching of counterpoint. It is the first step a student takes towards understanding what is often called “free composition.”

All of the rules in this chapter are intended to insure two things: first, that a \textit{cantus firmus} is singable, and second, that your \textit{cantus firmus} fulfills a basic standard of “musicality.” While the concept of the former should be familiar to you, the concept of the second might not be. What is “musical” is a cultural and historical idea. What is “musical” in India may not be considered musical in the Bronx or in China. In addition, what is musical to a jazz musician might not be considered musical to a strictly legit (the old-school term for “classical”) musician, or \textit{vice versa}. In the United States we primarily subscribe to the musical principles of the Western European music tradition. The reason I say this is to help you overcome the instinct to dismiss rules and guidelines because they don’t conform to your idea of what music is. It’s not that your idea of “music” isn’t valid, it’s just that it is only one of an infinite number of possible “musics.”

Learning to compose and recognize good \textit{cantus firmi} is essential because their characteristics are present in all good melodic lines. We begin with the basic rules. Please keep in mind that the goal right now is to write melodies that are correct according to these rules—not to write the best melody that ever was. For example, while \textit{Essential Elements} may not be as exciting as Sibelius’s \textit{Violin Concerto}, it’s an important first step in learning to be a great musician. Keep your melodies as simple as possible. Simple is good.

![Figure 1.1: A good \textit{cantus firmus} written by Jeppesen](image)

Figure 1.1 shows a model \textit{cantus firmus}. Notice that the range is within a perfect fifth. It is singable in a single breath. There are no radical melodic gestures. Everything is simple and relaxed. It’s beautiful and controlled without force. It has a distinctive but not distracting contour. It has a single zenith climax and smooth gentle motion to the cadence. Sing this example and play it a few times. Memorize it. Try to internalize how little effort it takes to think about it and sing it. All of your \textit{cantus firmi} (and later counterpoints) should have these qualities.
Here are the rules for writing a good *cantus firmus*:

1. Written in alto clef.
2. Begin and end on tonic (\( \hat{1} \)).
3. Must end with the melodic progression \( \hat{2} – \hat{1} \).
5. Must have variety. No single note (or group of notes) should be overly emphasized.
6. Do not repeat notes.
7. Do not outline dissonant melodic intervals.
8. Mostly, but not entirely, by step.
9. Range no more than a tenth.
10. Leaps
   (a) Don’t overuse.
   (b) No dissonant melodic intervals.
   (c) Should be preceded or followed by a motion in opposite direction. Following a leap by *step* in opposite direction is often good.
   (d) If larger than a perfect fifth, then only the octave and the ascending minor sixth are permissible.
   (e) Octave and minor sixth leaps must be preceded and followed by a motion in the opposite direction.
   (f) Two successive leaps are permissible but only if
      i. Preceded and followed by a motion in the opposite direction.
      ii. They split an octave with a perfect fifth on the bottom and a perfect fourth on top.
      iii. They form the pattern third/fourth or third/third (measuring from low to high.)
11. Must have a single and unique climax, either a *zenith* or an *adir*. 
1.1 Discussion

1.1.1 Melodic Consonance and Dissonance

Understanding, appreciating, and learning to control dissonance is an important part of studying counterpoint. However, there is difference between harmonic dissonances and melodic dissonance. For example, the harmonic interval of a second is very dissonant, but the melodic interval of a second is consonant.

Melodic dissonances are:

- Any augmented interval or diminished interval.
- Major or minor sevenths.
- Anything larger than an octave. (This is really just for us.)

Melodic consonances are:

- Major and minor seconds.
- Major and minor thirds and sixths.
- Perfect fourths, fifths, and octaves.

1.1.2 Contour and the Climax

Contour describes the “up/down” or “high/low” pattern of a melody in pitch space. A good melody will have a distinctive and varied contour. This ensures that the listener remains interested and engaged. A good cantus firmus has a unique high point or a unique low point called a climax.

A climax is a point of rhetorical forcefulness (e.g. “the climax of his speech...”), the point of highest dramatic tension (e.g. “the climax of the movie...”), or simply the culmination of a series of events. In melody writing, climaxes are divided into two types: a zenith (a high climax) or a nadir (a low climax). When you write your melodies, you might want to try to write from the beginning to the climax, then from the climax to the cadence.
Figure 1.2: Dos and Don’ts for double leaps.

1.1.3 Steps Versus Leaps

The treatment of leaps is one of the most important considerations when writing a melody. We will be very strict about what you can and cannot do. While we’ve listed the rules above, we’ll take the time to go over them again. Never write a dissonant melodic interval (a diminished fifth or an augmented fourth, or a major or minor seventh). A single octave leap or an ascending minor sixth is OK, but not a major sixth. Leaps of a minor sixth and octave must be both preceded and followed by change of direction. Occasionally two successive leaps in same direction are allowed, only when (1) both are preceded and followed by changes of direction, (2) the two intervals span a perfect octave in the pattern 5/4, but never 4/5 (measuring from low to high), and (3) 3/4 (never 4/3) good and also 3/3 so long as qualities follow the pattern of minor/major or major/minor, never major/major or minor/minor. See Figure 1.2 for some examples.
Chapter 2

First Species in Two and Three Voices

The combination of two or more voice parts to form a single musical gesture is one of the hallmarks of art music in the Western tradition. There is a kind of paradox in polyphony. The voices should be as independent as possible, but their combination, the way they interact, must be strictly controlled. In a way, they are both independent of each other and dependent on each other. We learned how to write a cantus firmus in Chapter 1. In our ensuing exercises, a cantus firmus will be provided (see the Appendix) and your job now is to write a counterpoint against it. You will compose your counterpoint melodies following most of the same rules you learned for cantus firmus writing. There will be a single climax, motion mostly by step, leaps must be treated properly, etc. The difference will be in the beginning and ending.

At the beginning, counterpoints (abbreviated CTPs) can start on 1 or 5 when above the cantus firmus (abbreviated CF). Counterpoints must begin on 1 when below the CF. Permissible beginnings are shown in Figure 2.1.

Counterpoints (CTPs) end with the scale degree progression 7–1, complementing the cantus firmus’s 2–1. This cadential combination is so important that it has its own name: the clausula vera and its variants are shown in Figure 2.2. The clausula vera (CV) is Latin for “true closure” and is the ultimate goal for a piece. Look at the end of almost any Renaissance, Baroque, Classical, or Romantic piece of music, and you will find a CV.
Figure 2.1: Permissible opening intervals for two-voice counterpoints.

Figure 2.2: Three permissible clausula vera.
Figure 2.3: The four different types of contrapuntal motion.

2.1 Contrapuntal Motion

There are four ways that voices can move against each other (see Figure 2.3):

1. **Parallel.** Both voices move in the same direction by the same melodic interval.

2. **Similar.** Both voices move in the same direction by different melodic intervals.

3. **Oblique.** One voice moves against another voice which does not move.

4. **Contrary.** Voices move in opposite directions, either away or towards each other.

These four motions are presented in order of increasing independence. Parallel motion gives the least sense of melodic independence. Contrary motion gives the greatest sense of melodic independence. Perfect intervals are very strongly related to each other. Remember that these intervals are formed by the first three partials in the overtone series. In fact, two notes that are a perfect fifth or an octave apart blend together so well that they can easily be mistaken for a single note. Special care must be given to these intervals because they can rob voices of their independence. Just think about how independent two melodies would be if played in unison or at the octave! That said, a good counterpoint will have a variety of these types of motion. In first species in two voices, we will not use oblique motion often, if at all.
2.2 Two Voices

In first species, there is a one to one relation between the CF and the CTP. In other words, for every one note of the CF, there is a CTP note of equal value. In all counterpoint exercises, we are very concerned about the quality of intervals created between the voices—the harmonic intervals. In first species in two voices we can only have harmonic consonances between voices and special care must be given to perfect fifths, octaves, and unisons. The basic rules for first species in two voice are as follows:

1. Written with no meter with one CTP note for every CF note.
2. When written above CF, CTP is in treble clef. When written below CF, CTP is in bass clef.
3. Use only consonant harmonic intervals: perfect fifths (P5), perfect unisons and octaves (PU and P8), major and minor thirds (M3 and m3), and major and minor sixths (M6 and m6).
4. The P4 is a dissonance in two voices.
5. The PU is used only to begin or end a phrase in first species, never within the phrase.
6. Perfect intervals approached only by contrary motion never parallel or similar motion.
7. Only exceptions are “horn fifths” or “horn octaves,” defined similar motion 3-5, or 5-8 when the top voice moves by step.
8. Never write consecutive P8s or consecutive P5s (either parallel or antiparallel).
9. No overlapping of voices.
10. No voice crossing.
11. No more than three parallel thirds or parallel sixths in succession.
12. Strictly diatonic (except for leading tones in minor modes, mixolydian, and $5 - \hat{6} - \hat{7} - 1$ in minor). Add altered notes only at cadence, not mid-phrase.

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1We will abbreviate interval names. Perfect intervals will be written “P” with the numerical size; minor intervals are indicated with a lower case “m”, major intervals with an upper case “M” with the numerical size; augmented and diminished intervals are indicated by “A” and “D” respectively. Often we will be discussing intervals in a general kind of way and therefore refer to them just by numbers.
You are required to label all harmonic intervals in every counterpoint exercise. Examples of overlap and voice crossing are given in Figures 2.4 and 2.5. A complete first species counterpoint is given in Figure 2.6. Play through it. Try playing one part while singing the other. Once you can do that, swap parts. In Figure 2.6 the climaxes and CV are labeled. Notice that while the climaxes occur at the same time, they are of different types.

For composing in two voices in general (all species), observe the following guidelines:

I. Write CF in alto clef and CTP in treble clef if above CF or in bass clef if below. It is much easier to adhere to spacing rules this way.

II. **Label all intervals** with generic numbers, either between or directly below the two voices.

III. Equally good independent voices in opposition.
IV. Climaxes must be at different times or of different types.

V. Begin with a PU, P5, or P8.

VI. If counterpoint (CTP) is above the cantus firmus (CF), then CF begins on 1 and CTP begins on 1 or 5.

VII. If CTP is below CF, then CTP begins on 1 (and so does CF).

VIII. End on a PU or a P8 as part of clausula vera (CV).

IX. Don’t exceed a tenth between voices. Don’t extend beyond octave too often. (When absolutely necessary, it’s OK to transpose the CF up or down an octave in order to conform to this range limitation.)

2.3 Steps for Writing a Good Counterpoint

Here are five steps that will help you succeed at writing counterpoint. We present them here in the first species chapter (and they apply mainly to two-voice writing), but you should refer to them for every species and make the necessary adjustments as you go. **Never write a counterpoint with the idea that you’re going to write it correctly the first time.** Sketch out ideas. Write in pencil. Cross things out. Move things around. Make corrections. If one solution isn’t working out, then toss it in the trash and start again. This is the normal way to work. You will be a lot less frustrated if you understand and accept this process.

1. Look over and sing through the cantus firmus. Identify its climax, mode, and range.
2. Choose a starting pitch for your counterpoint. It must be either an octave, unison, or fifth if above the first note of the cantus firmus, or an octave or unison if below (never a fifth below). Choose a note that will allow you to move in contrary motion with the cantus firmus without the voices crossing.

3. Compose the counterpoint. It should have mostly stepwise motion, punctuated by a few leaps, a single climax or nadir at a point other than the same point as the CF, and a smooth, arching, singable contour. It also should have a range of an octave or at most a tenth from the cantus firmus at any simultaneity, and cover an overall range of no more than a tenth. Motion between the CF and CPT should be mostly contrary. Write the harmonic intervals between the CF and CPT as you go.

4. The last two notes of the CTP must be 7 − 1 of the mode, forming a CV with the CF. The vertical intervals of the last two sonorities must be either 6—8 if ending on an octave, or 3—1 if ending on a unison. If there is a whole step between 7 and 1 in the mode you are in, raise the leading tone.

5. Check your solution.
   (a) Sing the CTP line. Sing it while you play the CF on an instrument.
   (b) Be sure that there are no parallel fifths or octaves, no melodic or harmonic tritones (diminished fifths or augmented fourths), no more than three parallel thirds in a row, that all fifths and octaves are approached by contrary motion, that the voices do not cross, that there is never more than a tenth between the CF and CPT, that the range of the CPT is no more than a tenth, and that all leaps are correctly treated.
   (c) Recheck all written intervals.
   (d) Copy your assignment over if it is not neatly written.

2.4 Three Voices

We can add a second counterpoint to create a three-voice texture. Rather than calling our two composed voices CTP1 and CTP2, we will call this third voice the accompaniment (ACC), creating the triumvirate: CF, CTP, and ACC. Since you can only put the CV, creating 7 − 1 in one voice we will call that voice the CTP. The ACC does not participate in the CV, but is still present at the scene.

The three-voice texture creates a distinction between the outer voices (fulfilling bass and soprano roles) and the inner voice. In the Renaissance, the three voices would
be equal in weight with no one voice being more important than any other. Beginning in the Baroque, the inner voice took on a supporting, or filling, role. A hierarchy was created such that the outer voices were considered more important than the inner voices. It is undeniable that the outer voices are more audible than a combination involving the inner voice. Nevertheless, except for some special treatment of the bass, we will strive to treat the three voices as equal as possible.

Intervalically, we now have two areas of concern: the interval formed between the upper two voices, and the intervals formed between the lowest voice (the bass) and each of the upper two voices. You will always label the intervals between the upper two voices between or directly below them. You will always label the bass-inner, bass-soprano intervals below the bass, aligned vertically (like this: $\begin{array}{c} 6 \\ 3 \end{array}$ or $\begin{array}{c} 8 \\ 5 \end{array}$). You must label your intervals. We are most interested in the intervals that involve the bass and the upper two voices. It is conventional to place larger numbers above smaller numbers when notating intervals. You should do this as well.

1. No more than an octave between two upper voices (except for one or two notes).
2. No more than a twelfth between two lower voices.
3. Voices may cross, but not below the bass.

Sonorities

1. $\begin{array}{c} 5 \\ 3 \end{array}$ or $\begin{array}{c} 6 \\ 3 \end{array}$ are best. (A diminished fifth between upper two voices is acceptable, but never with bass.)
2. Avoid $\begin{array}{c} 8 \\ 5 \end{array}$ and $\begin{array}{c} 8 \\ 8 \end{array}$ within the phrase.
3. Never use $\begin{array}{c} 6 \\ 4 \end{array}$. 

Figure 2.7: First species counterpoint in three voices.
4. Penultimate sonority must be one of the sonorities in item 1. It must be composed of three different pitch classes.

You will notice as you write in your intervals that the $6_3$ sonority produces a perfect fourth, and in some cases an augmented fourth (!), between the upper two voices—which you were told was forbidden in two-voice writing. The fourth is perfectly acceptable in three-voice writing so long as it does not involve the bass. This is the exception to the “all voices are equal” statement I made above. All the voices are kind of equal, with the bass actually being the most important. Just remember, when you’re writing your intervals below the staff, you should never see a “4.”

### 2.4.1 The Cadence in Three Voices

Cadences in three-voice textures require special attention. While it’s obvious that we need a CV, it’s not entirely obvious what to do with the ACC voice. In a cadence, the ACC really does support the other two voices. Below are the guidelines for three-voice cadences. Pay careful attention to these rules because they are relevant for all species in three voices, not just first species. You will notice that below I have written $\hat{3}$. This is because, regardless of the mode (major or minor), if there is a third formed with the bass’s $\hat{1}$ in the final sonority, then it will always be a major third. This is called a Picardy third and its usage dates back to the 16th century and continues (with great irregularity) even today. We will use Picardy thirds as a kind of “tip of the hat” to an old tradition. Conditions for cadences in three voices are:

1. Must contain a CV between the CF and CTP.
2. If $\hat{7} - \hat{1}$, then lower voices moves $\hat{5} - \hat{1}$.
3. If $\hat{7} - \hat{1}$ is in the lowest voice, then ACC moves $\hat{5} - \hat{3}$ or $\hat{5} - \hat{5}$.
4. If $\hat{2} - \hat{1}$ is in the lowest voice, then ACC moves $\hat{4} - \hat{3}$.

### 2.4.2 Special Considerations for Three-Voice CTP

Like first species in two voices, we always want to strive for line independence. There must be a climax in each voice and they must be in different places or of different types. As I mentioned above, the inner voice serves a kind of supporting role to the outer voices. While we still want three strong independent voices, it is acceptable to occasionally repeat a note in an inner voice line. Between the upper two voices it is
acceptable to have a perfect fifth move to a diminished fifth in parallel motion. This is called *unequal fifths*. However, it is not good practice to move from a diminished to a perfect fifth, however. Diminished fifths ought to “resolve” in contrary stepwise motion into a third. Augmented fourths ought to resolve in contrary stepwise motion out to a sixth.

Figure 2.8: Permissible cadences in first species in three voices.
Chapter 3

Second Species in Two and Three Voices

3.1 Two Voices

In second species, we introduce two intrinsically connected ideas: **meter** and **dissonance**. In this species, the CTP has two notes for every note of CF. Meter is \( \frac{2}{2} \)—so the first note of CTP is stressed (i.e. strong beat) and the second is unstressed (i.e. weak beat). In our exercises, we will always write the CF in whole notes and the CTP in half notes.

Second species is the first to allow harmonic dissonance—that is, dissonance formed between two voices. Recall that harmonic dissonances are all seconds, all sevenths, perfect fourths, and all augmented and diminished intervals. These dissonances may occur only on unstressed beats (the second half note of the measure). Melodically, the dissonance must: (1) be approached by step and left by a step in the same direction, (2) melodically fill in the span of a third, and (3) they must pass between two harmonic consonances. This type of dissonance is called a **passing tone**. Passing tones do not have to be dissonant, however—they can be consonant too. Figures 3.1, 3.2, and 3.3 describe the passing tone in great detail.

Learning to properly treat, control, and understand dissonance is one of the most important aspects of species counterpoint. If you are very conscientious in this species, then the others will come much more easily. The basic rules for second species counterpoint in two voices are as follows:
Dissonant Passing Tone

C  W  S  C  D  C  C

Consonant Passing Tone

C  W  S  C  C  C  C

Figure 3.1: Dissonant and consonant passing tones. The passing tones are written with filled note heads for visual emphasis.

![Fig. 3.1](image)

Figure 3.2: Passing tones must resolve by a step in same direction. Leaping away from a dissonance is incorrect. The passing tones are written with filled note heads for visual emphasis.

![Fig. 3.2](image)

1. Notation is in $\frac{3}{2}$ with bar lines.
2. Counterpoint written in half notes, two for every note of CF.
3. No repeated notes in CTP.
4. Stressed half note must be consonant.
5. Unstressed half note can be consonant or dissonant.
6. Dissonance can only be a passing tone filling in the interval of a third.
7. No dissonant neighbor tones.
8. No parallel perfect fifths or perfect octaves on successive strong beats.
9. Unison on weak beat is OK, but not on strong beat.
10. You may begin CTP with a half-note rest, but the first interval still must be a unison, fifth, or octave.
11. Last two notes (the cadence) may be written in whole notes.
3.1.1 Guidelines

Remember, each measure has two parts: a strong beat and a weak beat, corresponding to the first and second half notes of the CTP. The strong beat must always be consonant. The weak beat can be consonant or dissonant. If it’s dissonant, then it must be a passing tone.

Once you’ve written your CF in 2/2 meter, label the two parts of the measure “S” and “W” for strong and weak metric positions. This will help you remember where you can put dissonance (weak beats) and where you can’t (strong beats). Don’t center your CF whole note in the middle of the measure—write it to the left side. You’ll want your first half note of the CTP to line up with the whole note of the CF. Try to visually represent the fact that they will be attacked at the same moment.

You can begin your CTP with a half-rest, but the first note you write must still be a perfect unison, octave, or fifth if above the CF, or a perfect unison or octave if below. In the last two measures of the counterpoint (the CV), you may write the CTP in whole notes—just like in first species.

Label all harmonic intervals and circle those intervals that are dissonant. The passing tone should (1) be preceded and followed by harmonic consonances, (2) occur only on beats marked “W,” and (3) be approached by step and left by step in the same direction (filling in the melodic interval of a third).

Try to use as many dissonant passing tones as possible. Please go back and read Section 2.3.
3.2 Three Voices

Second species in three voices follows the general principles of first species in three voices, with the addition of the two-to-one relationship of the CTP to the other two parts. You may start the CTP with a half rest, and any dissonances must occur on the weak beat as a passing tones. Here are some basic guidelines:

1. The CTP is written in half notes and can use dissonant passing tones.
2. The ACC voice is written in whole notes and stays in a one-to-one ratio to the CF.
3. Cadences must include a CV and the last two measures may be in first species. Review Section 2.4.1.
4. Each voice must have a unique climax.
5. The second CTP note of each measure, in either the ACC or CF, or both, can be dissonant.
Chapter 4

Third Species in Two Voices

4.1 Two Voices

In third species, the CTP has four notes for every one note of the CF (a four-to-one ratio). Meter is still $\frac{2}{2}$, so the CTP comprises four quarter notes against each CF whole note. The first and third notes of the CTP are stressed, and the second and fourth are not. However, the pattern of metric emphasis looks something like this: S-W-S-W—where beats one and three are strong, but one is stronger than three, and beats two and four are weak, but four is weaker than two. Although we will spend most of our time writing counterpoint in a 4:1 ratio, a 3:1 ratio is also possible. Simple-triple meters work the same way. They look like S-W-W. Here, the first beat is strong, the second beat is weak, and the third beat is weakest.

The multiple strong-weak beats in third species provide space for different kinds of dissonances. We continue to use the dissonant passing tone and introduce the dissonant neighbor note. Dissonant neighbor notes move away from a harmonic consonance by step to form a harmonic dissonance with the CF. The dissonant tone resolves back to a consonance by step in the opposite direction. Like passing tones, there are also consonant neighbors. Figure 4.1 describes in great detail how dissonant neighbors and passing tones work in this species. You will find that there are three or four patterns that recur again and again. Try to spot them and use them in your own counterpoints.

Dissonances can occur on beats two, three, or four, but never beat one. In one special case, it is possible to have two dissonances in a row. Here are the basic rules of two-voice third species:
Figure 4.1: Detailed examples of dissonant passing tones and neighbor notes in third species.
1. The first note in the measure must be consonant.

2. The remaining three notes can employ:
   - (a) Passing tones, but do not approach a unison from a second.
   - (b) Neighbor notes (NNs), but no NN from a unison and avoid the interval pattern 7-Unison-7.

3. You may begin with a quarter rest. First interval must still be a perfect fifth, perfect unison, or perfect octave when CTP is above CF, and perfect unison or perfect octave when CTP is below CF.

4. As in second species, no unison on beat one in the phrase, and no perfect fifths or perfect octaves on consecutive first beats.

5. Parallel perfect fifths or perfect octaves on strong beats (one or three) must be more than 4 quarter notes apart.

Both dissonant passing tones and neighbors can occur on the fourth beat of a measure. This means that they will “resolve” on the downbeat of the next measure. Since beat one is always a consonance anyway, this makes sense. Be sure to approach and leave the dissonance correctly. Neighbors have a special melodic function that differentiates them from passing tones. In the examples below, you can easily see that moving away from and returning to the same melodic note has an embellishing function. The neighbor decorates its “parent” tone. Whereas passing tones propel you smoothly from one harmonic consonance to another, neighbor notes have a static effect that draws your attention to a particular tone.
Both dissonant upper and lower neighbors are permissible. As a rule, it is gratifying to use neighbors that are a half step from their parent (e.g. E-F or B-C).

### 4.2 The Double Neighbor

If you examine the cadences in Figures 4.2 and 4.3, you will notice that the CTP is playing the same figure in both—the melodic progression \( \#7 - \hat{1} - \#6 - \#7 \). If you examine these figures more closely, you will see that this figure creates two unresolved dissonances in Figure 4.2 and one in Figure 4.3. This is called a double neighbor, and we will use it in all of our third species CVs.\(^1\) In both cadential figures, the \( \#7 \) is decorated by the notes above and below it. The introduction of \( \hat{1} \) on the second quarter anticipates the \( \hat{1} \) in the final measure. In actuality, the \( \#7 \) is in control over the whole measure. Just as the neighbor note decorates and prolongs a single tone, so does the double neighbor. The double neighbor figure should be used sparingly. We must use it at the cadence and we will restrict ourselves to only one additional time in a given counterpoint.

\(^1\)There are numerous ways to cadence in third species. I have decided to use just one formula for simplicity’s sake.
Chapter 5

Fourth Species in Two and Three Voices

Fourth species is special because it introduces accented dissonance. We’ve learned that passing tones and neighbor notes must occur on weak beats. The suspension, however, is a dissonance that occurs on the strong beat. In fourth species, the CTP is written in half notes tied over the bar line. The attack of the CTP occurs on the weak part of the measure and its duration continues through the strong part of the following measure. We can think of fourth species as a kind of first species, where the CTP is shifted forward (or displaced) by one half note—forming what we call a syncopation. Because the CTP note is not attacked on the strong beat, it can be dissonant. This dissonant note must be prepared by suspending it from a consonance. Below are the rules for suspensions and fourth species:

1. Syncopations are consonant or dissonant.
2. Dissonant syncopations are called suspensions.
3. Suspensions have three parts, always following the same formula:
   (a) preparation (consonant, weak beat).
   (b) suspension (dissonant, strong beat).
   (c) resolution down by step (consonant, weak beat).
4. Allowable suspensions are:
   (a) 9-8, 7-6, 4-3 when CTP is above CF.
(b) 2-3 (the only bass suspension) when CTP is below CF.
(c) 6-5 is the only consonant suspension (above only).

5. Suspensions are a retardation of first species counterpoint, for example 3, 3, 3 becomes 4-3, 4-3, 4-3. Thus, 9-8, 9-8 is equivalent to parallel octaves. However, 6-5, 6-5 is OK (because both are consonant).

6. No limit to the number of consecutive 4-3 or 7-6 suspensions.

7. Parallel perfect fifths and perfect octaves on strong beats separated by consonances are OK, but no more than two.

8. Best suspensions are:
   (a) 7-6, 4-3, 2-3.
   (b) 9-8 OK.
   (c) 2-1 tolerable (unison may be used within the phrase in fourth species).

9. Cadences must use either 7-6 or 2-3 to lead into the clausula vera.

10. It is possible to break the chain of syncopes occasionally, if no better solution is available. Limit yourself to only once.

   Figure 5.1 shows all of the permissible suspensions: the 4-3, 7-6, 9-8, and 2-1 above the CF; and the 2-3 below the CF. The consonant suspension 6-5 is included as well.
5.1 Two Voices

You may begin the fourth species just like second species—with a half rest. The goal of fourth species is to use as many syncopations and suspensions as possible. It is possible to break the chain of syncopations, if no better solution is available. Limit yourself to no more than one break in any exercise. There is nothing quite like a cascading chain of dissonant suspensions. Try to find places where you can write two, three, or four in a row. Look for step-wise descending lines in the CF. When writing your intervals, connect the suspension interval to its resolution interval with a “—”. This tells us that the two intervals are working together in a single gesture.

It’s important to plan out your cadence. In this species more than any other it is beneficial to work backward from the cadence to the beginning. If your CTP is above, you must use a 7-6 suspension as part of the CV. If your CTP is below, you must use a 2-3 suspension as part of the CV. Since you know where you need to be at the end, start there and then figure out the best way to get there.

Play through the examples given in Figures 5.2 and 5.3. Analyze the suspensions. Please remember that the CTP line, while it is syncopated, still needs to follow good melody rules.

5.2 Three Voices

In fourth species in three voices, we add an accompanying voice. Suspensions of the CTP voice are still measured against the CF. The ACC voice must be consonant
Figure 5.3: Fourth species with CTP below CF.

Figure 5.4: Fourth species in three voices with CTP in the top voice, CF in the middle, and ACC in the bass.

with the CF on the strong beat. All three voices must form a consonant sonority on the weak beat. The ACC should never double the tone of a suspension’s resolution. Except for the 9-8, the suspension and its resolution should never sound together.

Cadences are the same as first species in three voices, with the addition of the 7-6 suspension in the CTP voice. Figure 5.4 shows an example of fourth species in three voices.
Appendix: *cantus firmi*