How to Write a Canon

The process for writing a canon is straightforward. The following order is recommended, and shown in the example below.

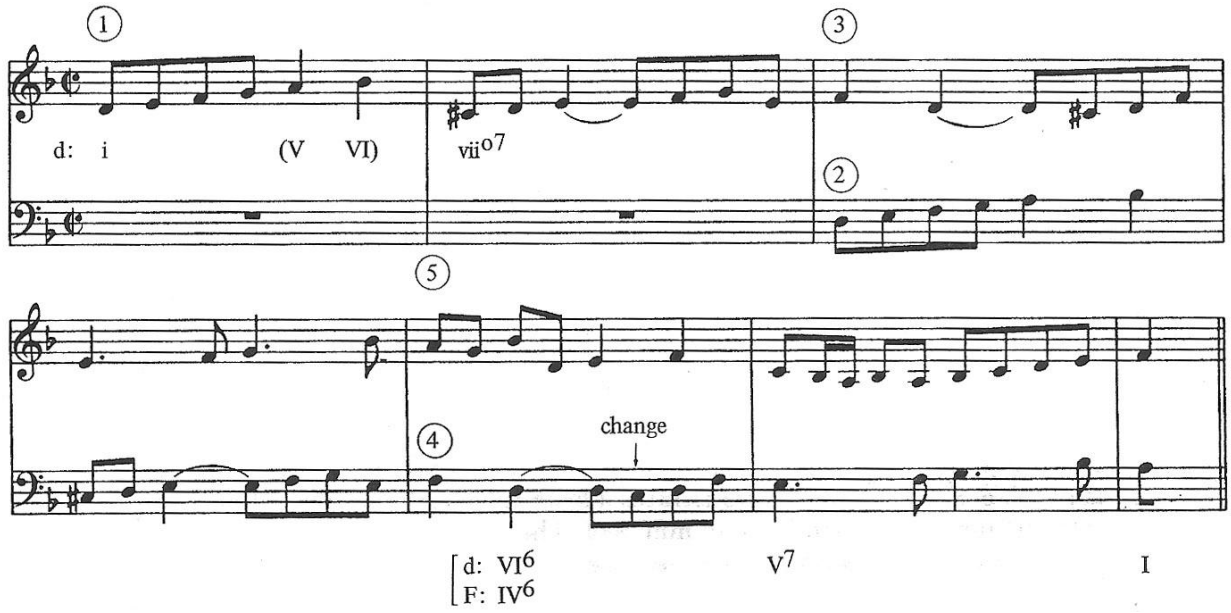
1. Compose the leader up to the point at which the follower enters, keeping in mind harmonic clarity and simplicity, shape, motivic unity, and rhythmic drive.

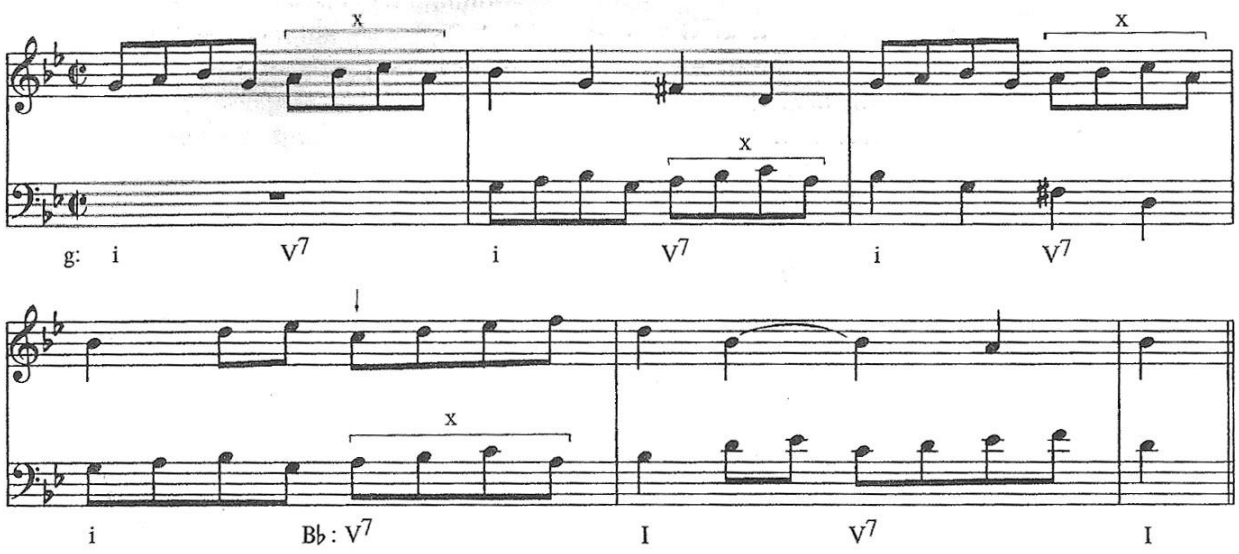
2. Bring in the follower in an appropriate place in terms of time and pitch interval.

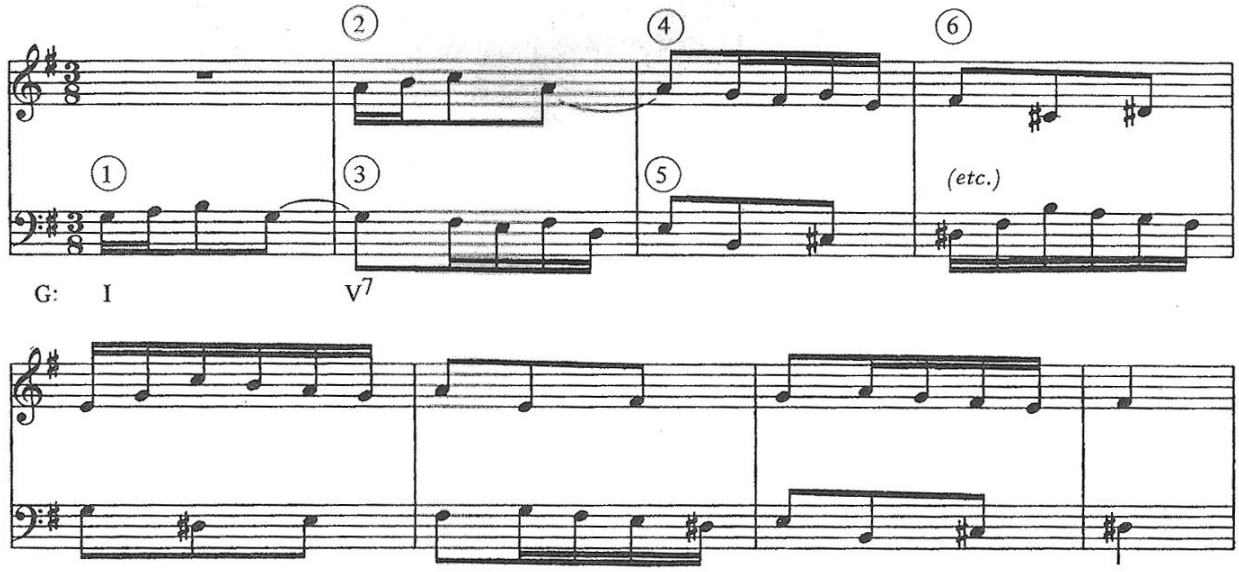
3. Continue the leader against the follower, keeping in mind the precepts of good two-voice counterpoint regarding vertical intervals, clear harmony, idiomatic nonharmonic tones, and rhythmic interplay. This line must represent a smooth, logical continuation of the opening.

4. Continue the follower exactly as you did the leader in number 3 above. Here, though, you may sometimes make subtle adjustments by adding or removing accidentals in order to create a modulation or to avoid tonal monotony. Modulation can be accomplished by reinterpreting certain diatonic notes of the theme in a new harmonic/tonal context, as in measure 5 of the example below, where the F-D in the lower part, originally in d minor, is reinterpreted in terms of Bb major. (Also notice how the motive marked "x" in the first example on the back is interpreted in different harmonic contexts).

5. Meanwhile the leader will continue with its counterpoint, reinforcing any new tonal direction taken by the follower. The canon may be continued in this way for as long as the materials suggest. Be sure to return to the tonic key before the end.




x
x
x
g: i V7 i V7 i V7
x
i B♭: V7 I V7 I


1
2
3
4
5
6
(etc.)
G: I V7