

Two-voice Counterpoint

Orlando di Lasso, two-voice compositions

Counterpoint

- › The word “counterpoint” comes from the Latin *punctus contra punctus*—or “point against point”—referring to the way in which one note is combined with another note
- › Good counterpoint involves two or more voices moving and interrelating in a fairly independent way
- › Composers of all time periods (from the Renaissance to the current day) were trained in writing effective counterpoint
- › Often they were taught counterpoint by doing exercises in ordered steps called “species”

General principles of counterpoint

- › Homophony (moving together in the same rhythms) is not common in counterpoint—the voices should seem independent
- › The voices should not be allowed to move in parallel motion for too long, as this lessens the independence of the voices
- › There is normally a good mixture of motion types between the two voices (parallel, similar, contrary, and oblique motion)—no one type should be allowed to predominate
- › In two-voice counterpoint, the voices should not move much more than a 10th apart
- › The voices can cross, but should not do so frequently

Consonance and dissonance

- › In late-sixteenth century counterpoint, the focus is on the intervals formed between voices, rather than on the harmonies that they create
- › Much care is gone into the proper use of consonant intervals and the careful treatment of dissonant intervals
- › The *consonant* intervals are thirds and the sixths (both major and minor), and perfect unisons, fifths, and octaves
- › All other intervals between voices are considered *dissonant* (seconds, sevenths, the perfect fourth, and all augmented and diminished intervals)

Proper use of consonant intervals

- › In two-voice counterpoint, the intervals most frequently found on the beat are thirds, sixths, and fifths
- › Octaves and unisons may also occur on the beat, but are primarily found at cadences
- › Too many unisons, octaves and fifths weakens the harmonic tension—thirds and sixths are more common in general
- › The final interval is normally a tonic unison or octave approached by step in contrary motion

The avoidance of parallels

- › Parallel thirds and sixths are allowed (and sound good), but there should be no more than about *five in a row* (since this lessens the independence of the voices)
- › Parallel fifths, octaves, unisons, sevenths and seconds are *never* found (nor are unequal fifths or direct fifths and octaves)
- › Lastly, fifths and octaves are not normally found on successive strong beats, since these tend to sound like parallel fifths and octaves

Treatment of dissonance

- ▶ In this style, dissonant intervals are treated *very carefully*
 - ▶ You must *never* leap to or away from a dissonance
 - ▶ Dissonances cannot be prolonged—they tend to be very short
 - ▶ The only dissonance types allowed are passing tones, neighbor tones, anticipations, and suspensions
 - ▶ The passing tone and the suspension are the most common dissonances in this style
 - ▶ Neighbor tones and anticipations can also be found
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Some details about dissonance

- ▶ Half-note passing tones can only occur on a weak beat
 - ▶ Quarter-note passing tones generally only occur on the weak part of the beat
 - ▶ A passing quarter may be replaced by two passing eighths (again, on the weak part of the beat)
 - ▶ Neighbor notes (which much be quarters or eighths) can only occur on the weak part of the beat
 - ▶ Anticipations may occur in quarter notes only, on the weak part of the beat (they often occur before a suspension preceding a cadence)
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Suspensions

- ▶ Suspensions are extremely common in this style, especially before cadences
 - ▶ Remember that there are three parts to a suspension: the consonant preparation, the suspended dissonance, and the resolution down by step to a consonance
 - ▶ The preparation for the suspension cannot be shorter than the suspended note—it is always a half note or a whole note
 - ▶ The suspended dissonance (on the beat) is typically a half note, but it may be ornamented before it resolves
 - ▶ In two-voice counterpoint, the only common suspensions are the 7-6, the 2-3, and (more rarely) the 4-3
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