A Practical Approach To
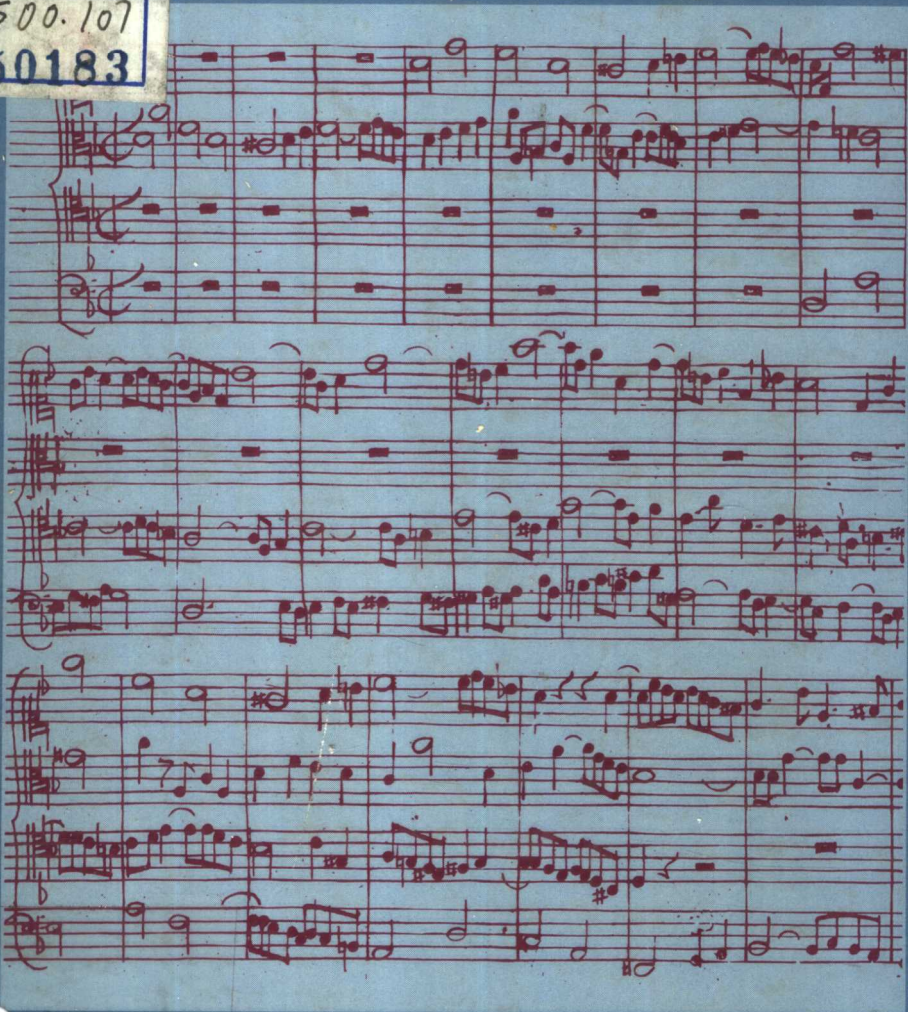# Eighteenth-Century Counterpoint

Robert Gauldin

A practical approach to eighteenth-century counterpoint

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Preface

The purpose of this text is to equip the student with analytical and writing skills in the contrapuntal technique of the eighteenth century. Its orientation is strongly stylistic, dealing basically with the polyphony of the late Baroque period, although the two final chapters explore counterpoint in the Classical era. Three aspects of counterpoint are stressed: history, to establish the origins of different forms[1]; analysis of music literature, often in voice-leading reductions; and practical work in writing counterpoint utilizing various textures, devices, and genre of the period.

The opening chapter reviews some general features of the late Baroque. After a brief survey of melodic characteristics, the study of counterpoint ensues with procedures associated with two, three, and four voices. Each texture is studied in three ways, which become more complex. We will start with note-against-note settings employing *cantus firmus* (usually chorale tunes), then go on to diminution techniques, and finally the chorale prelude. The fixed cantus is dropped in favor of free counterpoint, which is reinforced by the use of dance movements and their two-reprise structure. Finally the topics of imitation and invertible counterpoint are introduced, culminating in the study of canon, invention, and fugue. Chapters

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[1]For examples, see Chapters 3 and 22.

on chromaticism, contrapuntal devices, variation, and choral writing are also included.

Most musical examples are taken from instrumental works or theoretical treatises of the eighteenth century. A wide sampling of various composers is included, although a majority of the compositions are by J. S. Bach.[2] With the exception of two student pieces, unlabeled music was composed by the author. Almost all of the compositions cited are available in practical editions. It is imperative that the student either purchase or have access to Bach's Two- and Three-Part Inventions and the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (Vol. I and II).[3]

Student assignments consist of analytical problems, error detection, fill-in or completion drills, and original writing projects. In the case of *cantus firmus* exercises, most of the melodies are drawn from the Lutheran chorale literature of the period.[4] Further assignments may be added at the discretion of the instructor. Note, however, that spending too much time polishing the skills of any one chapter may not allow study of later material.

Prerequisite for this manual is a standard two-year course in harmony. It should include some skill in four-voice part-writing with figured bass (triads, seventh chords, and suspensions), chord function with Roman numerals (including secondary dominants, simple mixture chords, and the Neapolitan and augmented-sixth chords), non-harmonic tones, and modulation to closely-related keys. All of these are briefly reviewed in Chapter 1. It would also be helpful if the student has had a survey course dealing with eighteenth century music history, but this is not absolutely necessary.

The ideal time span for covering the material of this text is one year; however, many tonal counterpoint courses last only one semester or quarter. Although it is doubtful that everything can be covered in that time, it was felt that too much information is better than not enough. The teacher should therefore feel free to include or omit material. Indeed, the basic emphasis may be varied — in one situation historical/analytical aspects may be stressed, while in another the acquisition of writing skills may be the basic goal.

Following an appendix on dance movements, there is an extensive bibliography on counterpoint texts, treatises, related books, articles, and analyses, with some annotations in the first two sections. Indices on composers/works and terms are included.

The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance of Alfred Mann, who kindly offered suggestions for many of the historical and bibliographical portions of the text. The staffs of the Sibley Music Library

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[2]For the less well-known Bach compositions, *Bach Werke Verzeichnis* (or BWV) numbers will be included.

[3]Reprints of these from the *Bach Gesellschaft* edition are available from Dover Publications, Inc. The Peters editions are also reliable.

[4]An attempt has been made to include the more important and familiar chorale tunes.

(Rochester, New York) and the Music Faculty and Bodleian Libraries (Oxford University) were particularly helpful in securing scores, theoretical treatises, and reference sources. Finally a special token of appreciation goes to the author's wife, whose hours of proofing and typing provided a special encouragement.

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1

Introduction

This chapter highlights some characteristics of the late Baroque period, approximately 1685–1750 (the dates of its greatest master, Johann Sebastian Bach). We will review general aesthetics, texture, aspects of formal construction, performance practice, thoroughbass, the major-minor tonal system, cadence formulas, and sequence patterns. Much of this material may be familiar to students who have studied harmony. Nevertheless it should be a useful review prior to studying polyphony.

The late Baroque period was one of intense musical activity. Among its more renowned composers were, in Germany, J. S. Bach and his son Karl Philipp Emanuel (1714–1788), Dietrich Buxtehude (1637–1707), Johann Pachelbel (1653–1706), Johann Kuhnau (1660–1722), Johann Gottfried Walther (1684–1748), Georg Phillipp Telemann (1681–1767), and Georg Böhm (1661–1733); in Italy and Spain Arcangelo Corelli (1653–1713), Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741), and Domenico Scarlatti (1685–1757); in France François Couperin (1668–1733), and Jean-Phil-ippe Rameau (1683–1764); and in England George Frederick Handel (1685–1759) during the latter part of his career. Important theorists include Friedrich Erhardt Niedt (1674–1708), Johann Mattheson (1681–1764), Johann Fux (1660–1741), Johann David Heinichen (1683–1729), Friedrich Wilhelm Marpurg (1718–1795), Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683–

1764), and somewhat later Johann Kirnberger (1721–1783) and K. P. E. Bach (1714–1788).[1]

DOCTRINE OF THE AFFECTIONS

This term, *Affektenlehre,* coined by musicologists of the last century, refers to how the Baroque composer was expected to move the affections of his audience. Discussions of this principle in treatises of the period involved many analogies between rhetoric and music. In vocal works the text should be given an appropriate musical setting to effectively reinforce specific emotions it might convey: joy, love, hate, or sadness.[2] From this marriage of words and tone (or *text painting*) evolved a number of stereotyped musical figures (such as the "half-step sigh"), which often surfaced in purely instrumental compositions—hence the expression *Doctrine of Musical Figures.* Individual movements, both vocal and instrumental, tended to express one affection. This "affective unity" controlled the musical material and its subsequent development to such an extent that contrasts of mood or ideas were minimalized.

TEXTURE

The texture of this music is contrapuntal. The concept of "melody and chordal accompaniment", with the possible exception of the recitative, is foreign to this style. Even a well defined melodic foreground is supported by voice parts that are linearly rather than harmonically derived. The polyphony of the late Baroque may be relegated to four general categories:

1. A preexistent or original *cantus firmus* (fixed melody) could be set in a contrapuntal environment. Such pieces may incorporate a chorale tune (chorale preludes) or a recurring bass theme, as in some continuous variations. Even chorale "harmonizations" arise from counterpoint.

2. *Continuo* polyphony may occur in solo arias (often with an instrumental obbligato) and solo and trio sonatas. In this case, the *basso continuo* and one or more of the upper voices determine the piece.

3. Many dance movements and keyboard genre (preludes, fantasias) dispense with both the cantus and continuo, thereby permitting an independent interaction between the voices. The term *free counterpoint* seems appropriate, although, as we shall see, polyphony is never completely "free."

4. Finally, *imitative* pieces (such as fugue), which are based on one or

[1]See under Treatises in the Bibliography.
[2]The relation of text to music will be explored further in chapter 21.

more subjects and their contrapuntal associates exhibit greater equality of the separate voices. Their entry and exit is strictly accounted for through the use of rests.

ASPECTS OF FORMAL CONSTRUCTION

Compositional structure is determined more by tonal centers than by thematic contrast. The initial idea forms the material basis for the remainder of the piece. There is a great economy of means; a few motivic figures undergo intensive development through repetition, modulation, sequence, or melodic mirror. With the exception of some smaller dance forms, there is little sense of periodic phrasing.

   Once a new key is reached and confirmed cadentially, the music will frequently veer off immediately toward some new tonal goal. The resultant tonal hierarchy in relation to the original tonic is crucial in defining the formal scheme of a composition.

PERFORMANCE PRACTICE AND MUSICAL EDITIONS

Our knowledge of the performance practice (*Aufführungpraxis*) of the late Baroque has expanded enormously in the last fifty years.[3] Even volunteer church choirs performing the *Messiah* have not been exempt from this progress. Most historians point out the different mannerisms of the Italian versus the French school, and the occasional interaction of both in such composers as J. S. Bach. The responsibilities of the keyboard player in regard to thoroughbass realization and accompaniment are treated in great detail by some contemporary treatises.[4] The question of ornamentation, either notated or improvised, is vast and sometimes confusing.[5] The application of certain rhythmic conventions (such as dotted values and *notes inégales*), with revised notions of tempi and dynamics have often transformed the character of familiar pieces. A concerted attempt to perform works on either restored instruments of the era or accurate reproductions has had repercussions on our perception of Baroque timbre.

   The C clefs (soprano, alto, and tenor) were traditionally used in vocal and keyboard pieces for notating the upper voices. In this text the G or

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   [3]For a good survey of Baroque performance practice see Robert Donington, *A Performer's Guide to Baroque Music* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973).

   [4]In particular Johann Heinichen and K. P. E. Bach; see under Treatises in the Bibliography.

   [5]For a comprehensive treatment of this subject see Frederich Neumann, *Ornamentation in Baroque and Post-Baroque Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978). Less ambitious is Walter Emery, *Bach's Ornaments* (London: Novello, 1953).

treble, along with the familiar bass clef, has been substituted. The acciden-
tals in key signatures were sometimes on different lines or spaces from
those to which we are accustomed (see Ex. 17-7); these have also been
modified. Dynamic markings were used quite sparingly, more usually in
ensemble music. They consist solely of a written out *forte* or *piano* (echo
effects are a typical example); no crescendo/diminuendo markings exist.
Contrasts of loudness levels were achieved through the sudden addition or
subtraction of voice parts (or organ stops), a device termed *terraced
dynamics.*

Scholarly editions of Baroque music attempt to arrive at the most
accurate possible version of the music through a careful comparison of
various autographs, copies, and early printed editions. They contain no
markings other than those authentic with the composer's intents. Complete
works of composers or reprints from these are typical examples.[6] *Practical*
editions are slanted more toward the immediate needs of the performer.
They may include fingerings, pedaling, articulations and phrase markings,
dynamics, and tempo suggestions inserted at the discretion of the editor. A
note of caution is advised, since some older practical editions reflect the
performance practice of the Romantic rather than the Baroque period.
Some editions happily combine both scholarly and practical aspects; any
editorial additions can be distinguished from the composer's original
markings.[7]

THOROUGHBASS

The Baroque has been called the era of the *thoroughbass.* It served as the
textural/harmonic foundation for most choral pieces, ensembles, arias, and
instrumental sonatas of the period. Other equivalent terms are *basso contin-
uo* (Italian), *basse continue* (French), and *Generalbass* (German). It consisted
of a bass instrument (usually cello or bassoon) and a *Klavier* or keyboard
instrument (usually harpsichord or organ). The bass line of the keyboard,
which is doubled by the cello, was *figured* with intervallic numerals, so that
the player *realized* chords above it by filling in the gap between the lowest
voice and the upper parts of the score—hence the expression *figured bass.*[8]
Since this text will make continual use of figured bass notation, it is imper-
ative that you are thoroughly familiar with the symbols and their real-
ization.

[6]The Dover reprints, for instance.

[7]Bischoff's editions of some of Bach's keyboard works published by Kalmus are good
examples of this latter category.

[8]*Unfigured bass* was also prevalent. Here the performer had to rely on his knowledge of
implied harmonies to realize the accompaniment.

Although figured (or unfigured) bass served an eminently practical purpose in the *continuo* of the Baroque, it was later utilized for more theoretical reasons. The figures became a kind of musical "shorthand", inserted to denote specific or implied intervals and chords above the bass, and could even indicate the linear voice leading of the upper parts. In two-and three-voice excerpts in this text where added figured bass symbols are employed, they will be inclosed in parentheses.

Figured bass numbers refer to *intervals above the bass*, not to chord members. In $\frac{6}{3}$, the 3 may be the third of the triad, but in $\frac{6}{4}$ it is the fifth. In modern practice compound intervals are normally reduced within the octave (12 = 5, 10 = 3). Although the notational procedure of that period was to denote the figures *above* the bass, they will be placed in their customary position beneath the bass clef. A review of the bass symbols for triads, nonharmonic tones, suspensions, and chordal dissonance follows. All employ four-voice texture, either in close or open structure.

The thoroughbass treatises in the Baroque speak of "chords of the 5th" and "chords of the 6th". In modern terminology this means root position ($\frac{5}{3}$) and first inversion ($\frac{6}{3}$) respectively. Common abbreviations omitted the $\frac{5}{3}$ altogether and shortened the $\frac{6}{3}$ to simply 6 (see Ex. 1-1A). A change of inversion over a common bass note is denoted by 5–6 (Ex. 1-1B). Unusual chordal doublings are rarely indicated in figured bass practice. It is important to remember that the intervals above the bass are always realized in accordance with the prevailing *key signature* of the composition. Any accidental above the bass (but not the bass itself) must be indicated. In the case of the third (3) a single accidental suffices (Ex. 1-1C). For others consult Ex. 1-1D, noting the use of the slash ($\emptyset$) to raise a note one half step.

EXAMPLE 1-1 Figured bass symbols for triads

Figured bass does *not* normally denote the sometimes intricate nonharmonic activity in the upper voices. This is usually of little concern to the performer in realizing his basically chordal accompaniment. In those instances where they might appear, the resultant intervallic relations above the bass are written out in a linear fashion. Some typical illustrations of unaccented dissonance, shown in Example 1-2A, are the passing tone (P),

neighboring tone (N), anticipation (A), escape tone (E), and leaping tone (L). The last three are sometimes called *incomplete neighbors* (IN). Several *appoggiaturas* (or accented dissonance which resolves by step) are cited in Ex. 1-2B.

EXAMPLE 1-2 Non-harmonic activity above the bass

Suspensions may occur above the bass or in the lowest voice itself. The former category consists of the (⁴₄-³) (see Ex. 1-3A), the (⁹₉-⁸), and the (⁷₇-⁶); the numbers in parenthesis are usually understood. The 4–3 and 9–8 normally resolve to root-position chords. Observe the common cadential formula ⁶₄-³, which is in reality a suspended "dominant" (Ex. 1-3B). The 9–8 sometimes features a *change of bass* upon the resolution of the suspension (Ex. 1-3C). The 2–1 is actually the 9–8 by octave displacement (Ex. 1-3D); it is somewhat rare. While the dissonant or suspended note is usually tied over from the preceding consonance, it can also be reiterated: compare Ex. 1-3A and 3C. In general, 4–3s occur over scale degrees Î, 3̂ and 5̂ in the bass, while the 9–8 favors Î, 6̂, and 4̂. The 7–6 suspension, resolving into a first inversion, can be found on any scale step, quite often in succession (Ex. 1-3E). Bass suspensions are customarily limited to the ⁵₂-⁶ (Ex. 1-3F).

Chordal dissonance or chords of the 7, ⁶₅, ⁴₃, and ⁴₂ are what we call seventh chords today. The dissonance arising from the seventh originates in the voice leading practice of the earlier Renaissance. In the Baroque period they continue to be approached (prepared) and left (resolved) like some non-harmonic tones, in particular the suspension, and passing,

EXAMPLE 1-3 Figured bass symbols for suspensions