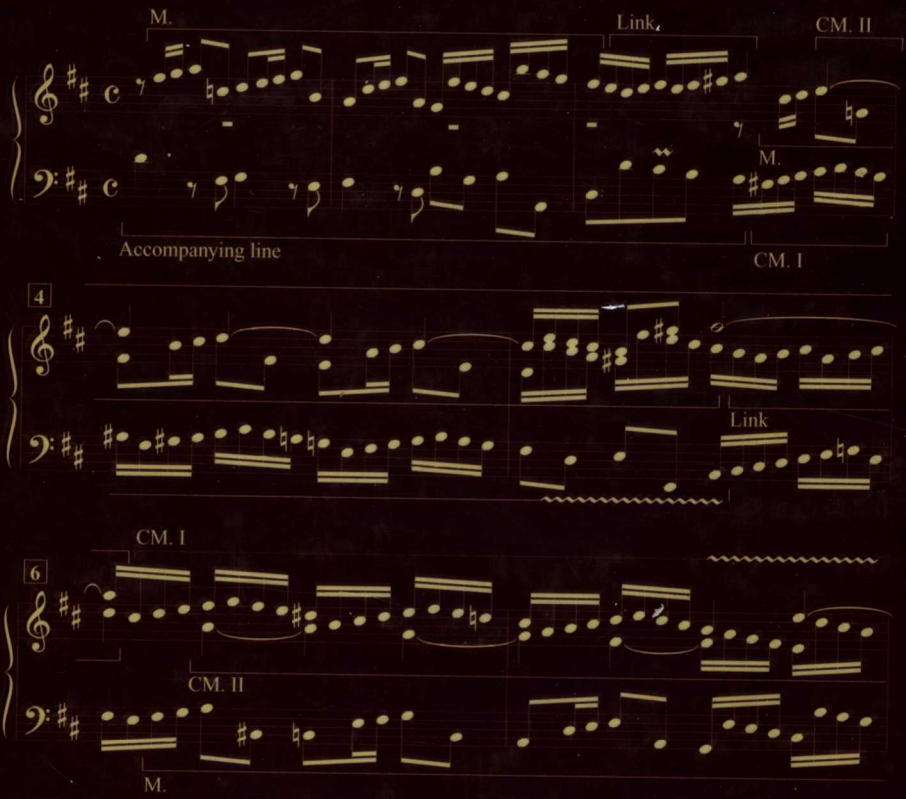
COUNTERPOINT

FOURTH EDITION



KENT KENNAN

COUNTERPOINT

Based on Eighteenth-Century Practice

FOURTH EDITION

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Preface

This fourth edition of *Counterpoint* retains the overall organization of the third, which appeared some twelve years ago. The print has been enlarged slightly for greater ease in reading; a number of "Self-Tests" formerly in the *Counterpoint Workbook* have been transferred to the text and reorganized so as to apply to specific chapters; the bibliography has been updated; and some of the Suggested Assignments have been revised.

The activities connected with this book fall into two broad categories: analysis based on aural and visual acquaintance with contrapuntal music of the Baroque period (roughly 1600 to 1750); and writing, first of exercises and then of music involving forms or techniques characteristic of the period, such as canons, dance-suite movements, inventions, fugues, chorale preludes, and passacaglias. It is assumed that students will already have had courses in basic theory, harmony, ear training, and sight singing.

In the exercises mentioned above, a modified species approach is employed—"species" in the sense that basic rhythmic rations are specified at first, "modified" in that whole-note *cantus firmi* have been replaced by melodies that are metrically organized and that often carry strong harmonic implications. Also, some of the more stringent restrictions of strict counterpoint (especially those derived from sixteenth-century practice) are waived. Fifth (florid) species is not undertaken as such because it resembles the free counterpoint that students will write in later assignments. The C clefs, traditionally employed in earlier counterpoint texts (and even some recent ones) have not been used here, since most students do not have a real working command of them and since it seems doubtful that the problem of learning to use them should be coupled with the process of learning counterpoint.

Given the wide influence of Schenker theory on musical analysis today, the question arose as to whether there should be an attempt to incorporate that approach in this book. After considerable discussion with Schenker specialists and other teachers, it was decided that that was inadvisable, for several reasons: (1) a wholesale revamping of the book to include a proper explanation of Schenker theory and the application of

it to the musical examples was obviously unfeasible, and it was felt that the sporadic inclusion of Schenker concepts might amount to a superficial treatment of the subject and perhaps prove more confusing than helpful; (2) counterpoint books with a strong Schenkerian orientation are already available (see the bibliography); (3) unless students have had a Schenkerian background in their first two years of theory, it seems doubtful that they would be ready to absorb Schenker principles in their junior year—the time when most students take counterpoint. Schools with Schenker courses generally offer them at the graduate level.

The author is indebted to many persons who have made valuable suggestions in connection with this book since its first edition appeared in 1959. Among these are Dr. Donald Grantham, Dr. Patrick McCreless, Mrs. Janet McGaughey, Dr. John Rothgeb, Dr. William Thomson, the late Dr. Richard Hoppin and the late Dr. Paul Pisk.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE USE OF THIS BOOK

Presumably all classes will cover the first six chapters (on basic contrapuntal relationships) and will do some of the exercises suggested in connection with them. From that point on there is likely to be some variation in procedure from school to school, depending on the amount of time allotted to the course, on the emphasis, and on the backgrounds of the students involved. Following are some possible departures from a consecutive and complete coverage of the book.

1. After two-voice exercises in the various species have been done, the instructor may elect to have students use a passacaglia theme from the *Workbook* (page 36) as a C.F., against which another voice is to be added, using, in turn, 2:1, 3:1 and 4:1. In that case, Chapter 19 should be read first. (It is placed relatively late in the book because actual passacaglias normally involve at least four voices.)

2. Chapter 10 (The Two-Part Invention; Motive Development) may be taken up before Chapter 7 (Writing of Short Two-Voice Pieces), Chapter 8 (Canon), and Chapter 9 (Invertible Counterpoint) if desired. However, the author's experience has been that students often find the short freer-form pieces easier vehicles for their first compositional efforts than the invention, with its prescribed features.

3. Chapters 8 and 9 on Canon and on Invertible Counterpoint contain some of the more esoteric material in the book; the instructor may find it sufficient to go over this material in class—or have students read the chapters but not attempt to do writing exercises based on them.

4. The material on the three-part invention (sinfonia) in Chapter 14 may be bypassed and three-voice fugues studied next. The two genres involve essentially the same principles, and since musical literature includes many fugues but few three-part inventions, it would seem more important to move on to a study of fugue if time is limited. In either case, students should read Chapter 13 (Imitation in Three Voices) first; it is organized as a separate chapter precisely so that it can serve as preparation for work on the three-part invention, the trio sonata, or the three-voice fugue.

5. Chapter 18, concerning forms based on the chorale, may be studied earlier (before fugue) if desired. In that case, it is advisable to provide some basic information on fugal procedure in order that chorale-based works involving that element will be understandable.

At the end of each chapter a list of suggested assignments is given. Certain of these involve exercises contained in *Counterpoint Workbook,* 4th ed. (Prentice Hall, 1999). In such cases the appropriate page numbers in the *Workbook* are cited. It is not intended that all the suggested assignments be done by any one student or class. Projects of varying difficulty and scope have been included with a view to meeting the needs of different teaching situations.

It is strongly recommended that students be given the opportunity to *hear* (in class or through recordings on library reserve) as many examples as possible of the forms they are studying. While pianists and organists are likely to have considerable acquaintance with Baroque music (especially J. S. Bach's inventions and fugues), other students often do not. And it is obviously unreasonable to expect a student to imitate a style that is unfamiliar. Furthermore, performance, in class, of music under study can do much to stimulate interest.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction

OBJECTIVES

The chief objective of counterpoint study, in the author's view, is to awaken or sharpen in students a feeling for the contrapuntal element that is present to some degree in virtually all music; to make them sensitive to the forces of opposition and agreement, tension and relaxation, direction, climax, and the like, that operate whenever two or more voices are sounded simultaneously. While a limited understanding of these elements may be gained through analysis alone, experience has shown that they come alive and are grasped in a more intimate way through the actual writing of contrapuntal examples. Furthermore, students (including those who protest that they have no compositional ability) often discover the special satisfaction that can come from creating music.

For student composers, the writing aspect is acknowledged to be a valuable part of their training. Even though the styles of their own compositions will presumably be far removed from much earlier styles, the technical control gained in working with linear relationships has been found to carry over into composition using contemporary idioms. Theory majors, though less likely to be involved in the creative aspect, must know the subject thoroughly, not only because it is important from an analytical standpoint but because they may well be called upon to teach it in their future work. For all students, counterpoint study gives added insight into the workings of the style involved—and perhaps an acquaintance with music they might not get to know otherwise.

A question might arise as to whether students in jazz programs and those planning to work with music for mass media should take counterpoint. Teachers in these areas who were questioned on this point responded strongly in the affirmative. They stress the fact that arrangers, in particular, need this training. The late Robert Russell Bennett, long considered the top arranger for Broadway shows, once commented that counterpoint is *the* indispensable element in arranging; if it is missing, the audience's enjoyment of the music will be lessened, even though they will not identify the missing feature.

THE STYLISTIC APPROACH

A further question that counterpoint students might well ask (and *should* ask) is this: Why do we go back to the eighteenth century for models to emulate? The most compelling answer would be that the principles of eighteenth-century counterpoint apply in a broad sense to contrapuntal music—and even much homophonic music—clear through Brahms's day. That is, in spite of the many changes and stylistic innovations in music during the past three hundred years or so, the fundamental approach to polyphony remained more or less constant until the late nineteenth century. At that time impressionism, dodecaphony, and other trends brought about major changes in musical techniques. Thus, in studying "Bach-style" or "Baroque" counterpoint we are not limiting our interest to music of the eighteenth century; rather, we are concentrating on models from that period because they afford the clearest examples of a contrapuntal approach that underlies the music of nearly three centuries. In line with this view, a few musical examples by composers of later periods (Mozart, Haydn, Beethoven, Schumann, Brahms, Franck) are included in the book.

The choice of the eighteenth-century style as the basis for this text does not imply any lack of regard for the beauties of sixteenth-century counterpoint or any suggestion that one style is more worthwhile than the other as an object of study. An intimate acquaintance with both is part of the background of every well-trained musician. The author does feel, however, that the eighteenth-century style is best taught first, simply because it underlies the great body of music that is most familiar to students. Because the styles of these two periods differ in spirit, technical construction, and (generally) the use of a text, they call for different courses, or at least separate parts of the same course. An attempt to fuse them into one composite style will only produce a synthetic result that has no counterpart in actual music. The case for the stylistic approach is nicely stated by Professor Glen Haydon in his introduction to Jeppeson's *Counterpoint, The Polyphonic Vocal-Style of the Sixteenth Century:* "More and more, thoughtful musicians have come to realize that one cannot teach counterpoint 'in general' without inviting endless controversy as to what is permissible and what is not." Also, Jeppeson's book (despite its title) includes an "Outline History of Contrapuntal Theory" that comments at length on "Bach-style" counterpoint and gives an excellent explanation of the relationship between that and "Palestrina-style" counterpoint, in terms of musical structure, historical perspective, and pedagogical approach.

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

Ever since music has utilized independent lines or voices, composers and theorists have concerned themselves with the principles involved in setting one voice against another effectively. One of the earliest treatises on the subject—and probably the best known—is contained in *Gradus ad Parnassum (Steps to Parnassus)* by Johann Joseph Fux (1660–1741), which was published in 1725. Actually, the book was thought of by its author as a *composition* text, and it included material on intervals,

scales, fugue, and various stylistic trends of Fux's day. But the greatest portion was devoted to basic lessons in counterpoint, and that section is, fortunately, available in a translation by Alfred Mann entitled *The Study of Counterpoint.* (Mann has also written illuminating articles on Haydn's and Beethoven's counterpoint study.) About the *Gradus* Ernest Newman says, "Directly or indirectly, it is the foundation of practically all the methods of teaching counterpoint during the last two hundred years." Written originally in Latin and since translated into many languages, it is in the form of a dialogue between the teacher, Aloysius (intended by Fux to represent Palestrina), and Josephus, the pupil who wishes to learn composition. We know that Mozart used it as both student and teacher; that Haydn and Albrechtsberger absorbed its contents, as did their counterpoint pupil, Beethoven; and that most of the outstanding composers of the nineteenth century studied counterpoint according to Fux's principles, as passed on by Albrechtsberger and Cherubini, among others.

Unfortunately, the monumental contribution of J. S. Bach and other Baroque masters was largely ignored by teachers of that era. Thus there existed a curious situation in which a system of counterpoint instruction widely accepted as the only authentic one persisted even though it failed to take into account the important contrapuntal music of a full century earlier.

THE NATURE OF COUNTERPOINT

In the process of explaining the meaning of the term counterpoint to his student Josephus, Fux's Aloysius says, "It is necessary for you to know that in earlier times, instead of our modern notes, dots or points were used. Thus, one used to call a composition in which point was set against or counter to point, 'counterpoint'." As a technique, this might be defined as the art of combining two or more melodic lines in a musically satisfying way. Included in this definition is the assumption that each line is good in itself; and the phrase "a musically satisfying way" implies among other things that the lines will be independent yet coordinate in feeling.

While eighteenth-century counterpoint puts considerable emphasis on the linear or horizontal aspect of music, it is also very much concerned with the vertical combination of tones; that is, the lines heard together must outline clear-cut and strong harmonic progressions. As Oldroyd puts it in his book *The Technique and Spirit of Fugue,* "Counterpoint is the flight of melodic tracery between one harmony and another." And R. O. Morris, in his *Foundations of Practical Harmony and Counterpoint,* sums up the vertical-horizontal relationship neatly: "Harmony and counterpoint are not two different things but merely two different ways of regarding the same thing."

"STRICT" VERSUS "FREE" COUNTERPOINT

Although there is not universal agreement as to the exact meaning of these terms, "strict counterpoint" normally refers to an approach essentially like Fux's: there is a

cantus firmus (fixed voice) in whole notes, against which another voice is written, using one of the various "species" (note against note, two notes against the given note, and so on). The basic exercises are not intended to involve a metrical pulse, and harmonic implications do not enter in. The emphasis is rather on vertical intervals and on the motion of the added voice in relation to the cantus firmus; about these aspects there are rather severe restrictions. Some teachers retain the modal approach, à la Fux, while others discard it in favor of the "major-minor" system. There may or may not be an examination of sixteenth-century counterpoint.

As a rule, "free counterpoint" is based on eighteenth-century instrumental models and consequently is not concerned with those restrictions that apply specifically to the sixteenth-century style. It often makes use of exercises in the species—but generally in a modified way that involves a sense of meter and harmonic implications (as in this book).

The beginnings of the free-counterpoint concept can be traced back as far as the writings of Johann Philipp Kirnberger (1721–1783). Although in time that approach gained adherents (such as Jadassohn, Riemann, and Kurth), actual teaching in that fashion did not become widespread until the late nineteenth century.

Strict and free counterpoint have long coexisted and will probably continue to do so—a situation reflecting the divergence of opinion about their respective merits among theorists. Persuasive arguments in favor of each can be advanced.

Chapter 2

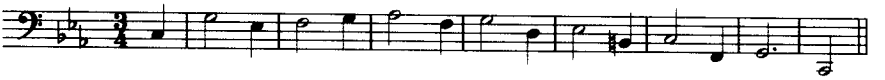
The Single Melodic Line

MELODIC CONTOUR

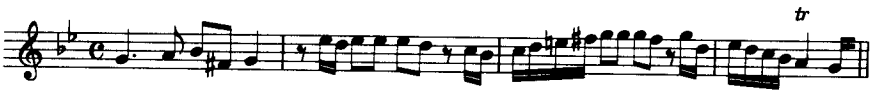
Since counterpoint concerns the character of individual lines as well as the principles involved in combining two or more of them, our first consideration will be the qualities that make for a good melodic line. Among the most important of these are a sense of direction and a climax point, both of which contribute to a clear-cut and interesting melodic contour. (Others concern such matters as a pleasing balance between conjunct and disjunct motion and between ascending and descending motion.) Because of the many different possibilities for melodic contour, it is impractical to attempt a complete cataloguing of them; but certain broad types will be mentioned next.

The most common is the one in which the line ascends to the highest point and then descends. In Example 1*a* the high point is about a third of the way through, in 1*b* slightly beyond the midpoint, and in 1*c* closer to the end. Placement of it somewhere in the second half is the most usual arrangement, since that allows for a sense of buildup to the high point and sustains interest most effectively.

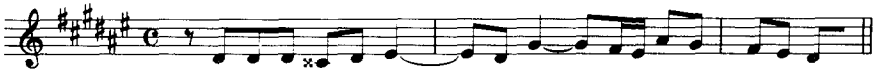
Example 1a **BACH:** **Passacaglia in C Minor**



Example 1b **GOTTLIEB MUFFAT:** **Fugue in G Minor, for Organ**

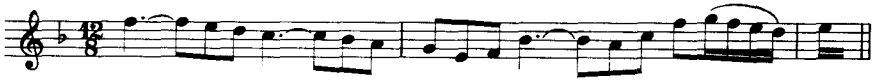


Example 1c BACH: W.T.C.,[1] Book II, Fugue 8



The opposite pattern, one that moves downward and then returns to the original pitch area, is shown in Example 2.

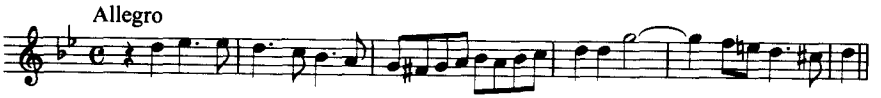
Example 2 BACH: Concerto for Two Violins



This shape (Example 2) is seen only rarely, probably because a sense of pitch climax is difficult to achieve with it. However, the very absence of that element in this passage contributes to its beautifully serene quality.

If a line first descends, then rises to a point *higher* than that of the beginning, a clear sense of pitch climax can result (Example 3).

Example 3 HANDEL: *Judas Maccabeus* ("To Our Great God")



The type of curve that begins with its lowest point and ends with its highest is seen in Example 4*a,* and the reverse of that in 4*b.* Both types are seen relatively infrequently.

Example 4a BACH: Duet in F (from *Clavier-Übung,* Part III)

[1]This abbreviation is used in examples throughout this book to refer to Bach's *The Well-Tempered Clavier.*