

Interlude: Two-to-One Counterpoint

Introduction

In the last counterpoint interlude, we looked at one-to-one (*first species*) counterpoint, in which the cantus firmus and contrapuntal voice move at the same speeds. In combination with certain harmonic norms (like cadences and root motion by fourth or fifth), most tonal music can be analyzed as an elaboration of this simple two-voice texture. In particular, the emphasis on harmonic consonances, effective melodic shaping, and maintaining independent voices will serve us well even when we are working with more complex elaborations.

What do we mean, though, when we say that one-to-one counterpoint is the foundation of tonal music, that tonal music is an elaboration of this foundation? One of the things we mean is that music is, in many respects, *hierarchical*. That is, certain notes and certain points in time are more important than other notes or other points in time. We've already seen this in one-to-one counterpoint: the tonic pitch is more important than the other pitches, as indicated by the fact that it is treated as the melodic goal of each voice. If we loosen our restrictions a bit by allowing, say, the contrapuntal voice to move at twice the speed as the cantus firmus, other hierarchical musical features come to the fore. This kind of counterpoint, called *two-to-one counterpoint*—or *second species counterpoint*—is the subject of the following interlude. Example B-1 illustrates many of the techniques found in two-voice counterpoint.

Example B-1: Two-to-One Counterpoint

contrapuntal voice

8 5 6 6 (7) 3 6 8 (2) 5 6 6 5 3 8 6 5 6 8

cantus firmus

The first hierarchical principle to observe is *meter*. In the above example, not all the pitches in the contrapuntal voice are equally important. Every other pitch begins at the same time as one of the pitches of the cantus firmus; the intervening pitches do not. This alternation of coincident and non-coincident pitches sets up a recurring strong-weak pattern of attacks that both creates and reinforces the notated metric pattern of strong and weak beats. With respect to meter, then, the pitches on the strong beats are more important than those on the weak beats.

Notice also that every strong-beat harmonic interval (those on beats 1 and 3) is consonant, while some of the weak-beat intervals are dissonant. Notice also that each dissonance is prepared and resolved by step in the same direction. This strict treatment of the dissonant pitches causes us to hear them in relation to the surrounding consonances.

Indeed, they are hierarchically less important than the surrounding consonance, merely serving to connect them more smoothly. What emerges here is a second hierarchical principle: the relationship between *consonance and dissonance*.

By learning how to write two-to-one counterpoint examples, we become aware of how music is influenced by the two “gravitational” forces of meter and dissonance. Let us explore the details of this type of counterpoint.

The Melodic Line

Even though our contrapuntal voice is now moving at twice the speed of the *cantus firmus*, that contrapuntal voice still conforms to the stylistic guidelines for writing good melodies that was discussed in the first interlude. So, when writing contrapuntal voices, continue to *avoid* the following (see Interlude 1, “The Melodic Line”):

Overly disjunct or repetitive lines, repeated notes across a barline, melodies that pull too much in one direction, multiple focal points, an overly small range, non-resolving leading tones (except for stepwise descending lines), dissonant melodic intervals, same-direction motion before and after large leaps (or after fourths), more than two consecutive leaps in the same direction, and consecutive same-direction leaps that don’t span a fifth, sixth, or octave.

Finally, *do not use successive repeated notes in the contrapuntal voice*.

Harmonic Intervals on the Strong Beat

Contrapuntal-voice pitches that appear on the strong beats (beats 1 and 3 in our examples) in two-to-one counterpoint are likewise treated in the same manner as one-to-one counterpoint. In other words, avoid dissonant harmonic intervals and internal unisons. Remember that although the perfect fourth is consonant when used within a melodic line, it is a *harmonic dissonance* when measured against the *lowest voice*. Since we are only dealing with two voices in this interlude, you should form no perfect fourths between those two voices on strong beats (beats 1 and 3).

The Weak Beat

Most of the differences between first and second species counterpoint have to do with the treatment—both melodic and harmonic—of *weak-beat* pitches in the contrapuntal voice (beats 2 and 4 in our examples). As we mentioned above, the weak beats are the only places where harmonic dissonances can appear in two-to-one counterpoint examples. This is not to say, however, that all weak-beat pitches *have* to be dissonant with the *cantus firmus*. There are actually *three* different types of weak-beat pitches, each with their own characteristics: *consonant leaps*, *passing tones*, and *5-6 or 6-5 motions*. Let us examine each of these types in turn.

Type 1: Consonant Leaps. This type involves a melodic leap between a strong-beat pitch and the following weak-beat pitch—between beats 1-2 or 3-4—in the contrapuntal voice. A consonant leap is consonant in two different senses: 1) *The melodic leap itself must be consonant*, and 2) *Both the strong-beat and the weak-beat pitch must be consonant with the cantus firmus*. Of course, all strong-beat pitches must be consonant with the cantus firmus, but the same is true of weak-beat notes that are approached by leap.

Example B-1 (repeated from first page):

contrapuntal voice

8 5 6 6 (7) 3 6 8 (2) 5 6 6 5 3 8 6 5 6 8

cantus firmus

In Example B-1, which is reprinted above, there are consonant leaps on the last beats of measures 2 and 4. In measure 2, the C on beat 4 is consonant with both the preceding melodic pitch G (a perfect fourth) and the cantus firmus pitch Eb (a sixth). In measure 4, the D on beat 4 is consonant with both the preceding melodic pitch F (a sixth) and the cantus firmus pitch D (an octave).

There are two other points to remember about this type of weak-beat pitch. First, since we are following the melodic guidelines from Interlude A, remember *to prepare and resolve any fifths, sixths, and octaves in the direction opposite to the leap*. (For fourths, only the *resolution* needs to move opposite to the leap.)

Second, this principle does not apply to motion between the weak beat and the following strong beat (beats 2-3 or 4-1). In general, such locations should employ stepwise motion, although a leap is possible as long as it does not cause any other problems (like creating two consecutive leaps that don't span a fifth, sixth, or octave).

Type 2: Passing Tones. A passing tone is a dissonance that is both approached and resolved *by step* in the *same direction*. For this to happen, the two surrounding strong-beat pitches need to be separated by a third; the passing tone fills in that third with stepwise motion. The passing tone is the *only harmonic dissonance* that can appear in two-to-one counterpoint—you should *not* use dissonant neighbor tones (notes that are approached by step and then resolve back to the same pitch by step) in these exercises. The weak-beat passing tone is the least prominent dissonance that we can use, so it represents a good first step in our contrapuntal treatment of dissonances.

In example B-1 above, there are two dissonant passing tones; they are indicated by the interval numbers in parentheses between the staves. Notice the same-direction, stepwise motion of the contrapuntal voice leading into and away from both tones.

Type 3: 5-6 or 6-5 motion. There is one type of stepwise motion that does not create a dissonance, and that is the motion from a strong-beat fifth to a weak-beat sixth (or a strong-beat sixth to a weak-beat fifth), which we call 5-6 motion (or 6-5 motion). All other adjacent intervals (unison-second, third-second, third-fourth, fifth-fourth, sixth-seventh, octave-seventh, octave-ninth, and so on) involve one consonance and one dissonance.

Because this stepwise motion does not involve a dissonance, it can be used more freely. So, 5-6 or 6-5 motion can be followed by

- 1.) Stepwise motion in the same direction, making the weak beat a *consonant passing tone*,
- 2.) Stepwise motion in the opposite direction (back to the previous pitch), making the weak beat a *consonant neighbor tone*, or
- 3.) A leap. Remember to approach and resolve large leaps in the opposite direction.

In Example B-1 above, there are two examples of 5-6 motion (beats 3-4 of measures 1 and 3) and two examples of 6-5 motion (beats 1-2 of measure 4 and 5). The 5-6 motion in measure 1 is followed by a leap of a fifth in the opposite direction. The 5-6 motion in measure 3 is followed by stepwise motion in the opposite direction; the weak-beat note is therefore a consonant neighbor tone. Both 6-5 motions (measures 4 and 5) are followed by stepwise motion in the same direction; the weak-beat notes in these passages are consonant passing tones.

Feel free to use any combination of consonant leaps, passing tones, 5-6 motions, and 6-5 motions in your two-to-one counterpoint examples. Passing tones, with their characteristic dissonances, are the most interesting, so try to use as many of these as you can, while reserving the other types for the remaining weak beats.

Beginnings and Endings

Many of the same principles from one-to-one counterpoint apply to beginnings and endings in two-to-one counterpoint. So, begin and end your *lower-voice* contrapuntal voices on $\hat{1}$. Likewise, begin your *upper-voice* contrapuntal voices on $\hat{1}$, $\hat{3}$, or $\hat{5}$, and end on $\hat{1}$. Finally, conclude your examples with a melodic cadence ($\hat{2}$ - $\hat{1}$ above $\hat{7}$ - $\hat{1}$ or vice-versa). Remember to use the leading tone (and the raised form of $\hat{6}$, if necessary) in minor-mode examples at the melodic cadence; in general, you should try to use the appropriate *melodic-minor variants* of $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$ in all other instances. Review the melodic minor in Chapter 1 to remind yourself of which variants to use in which circumstances.

Because of the introduction of strong beats and weak beats in the contrapuntal voice, we can be more flexible about the metric features of the beginnings and endings of examples:

Beginnings: As with one-to-one counterpoint, we can begin both voices on the strong beat. However, we can also choose to delay the entrance of the contrapuntal voice until the weak beat (beat 2 in our examples), allowing the cantus firmus to sound alone for the

first half of its span. Insert a rest on the first strong beat (beat 1) of the contrapuntal voice in such cases. For an example of a delayed contrapuntal voice, see the first measure of Example B-1.

Endings: In one-to-one counterpoint, the second-to-last harmonic interval contains $\hat{7}$ and $\hat{2}$ and appears on the second-to-last strong beat (beat 3) of the example. In two-to-one counterpoint, we have two choices.

- 1.) We can save this interval for the last weak beat (beat 4) before the final unison or octave. The ending of Example B-2 below shows this choice of endings.

Example B-2
contrapuntal voice

cantus firmus

- 2.) We can stretch this interval out for two beats (beats 3-4) before the final unison or octave to emphasize the melodic cadence even further. For an example of this choice of endings, see the last two measures of Example B-1 earlier in this interlude.

Motion between Voices

Again, many of our principles of motion between voices from one-to-one counterpoint apply equally well to two-to-one counterpoint. So, avoid static motion, voice crossing, overlapping, more than three parallel imperfect consonances on strong beats, and consecutive large leaps in the same direction.

In the first interlude, we also discussed the avoidance of parallel perfect intervals and direct perfect intervals (fifths, octaves, and unisons). This principle applies to two-to-one counterpoint as well. With the contrapuntal voice moving at twice the speed as the cantus firmus and creating a metric hierarchy, there are new issues to consider in relation to parallel and direct intervals.

Parallel Fifths, Octaves, and Unisons: Avoid these interval successions in two different contexts:

- 1.) Between *successive strong beats* (1 and 3, or 3 and 1). Even though there are intervening weak-beat pitches, the strong effect of parallels carry through the weak beats. In the following example (Example B-3), there are parallel octaves between beats 1 and 3 in measure 1, and contrary fifths between

beats 1 and 3 in measure 2. The use of underlines with the strong-beat interval labels should help you to find these parallel intervals.

Example B-3 Errors: Parallel and Direct Perfect Intervals

The image shows a musical score for Example B-3. It consists of two staves: the top staff is labeled 'cantus firmus' and the bottom staff is labeled 'contrapuntal voice'. Both staves are in 4/4 time and have a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The cantus firmus line contains six measures of music with notes on a grand staff. The contrapuntal voice line contains six measures of music with notes on a grand staff. Between the two staves, harmonic interval numbers are written for each pair of notes. The numbers are: Measure 1: 8, (7), 8, (7); Measure 2: 5, 3, 5, 3; Measure 3: 3, 5, 5, 3; Measure 4: 8, 6, 5, 6; Measure 5: 6, 5, 5, 6; Measure 6: 8. The numbers 8, 5, 3, 6, and 6 are underlined, while the numbers 7, 7, 3, 5, 5, and 8 are in parentheses.

- 2.) Between a weak beat and the following strong beat (2 and 3, or 4 and 1). The addition of a pitch on the weak beat can introduce parallel intervals with the next strong beat even if no parallels existed between the two successive strong beats. In Example B-3, there are parallel fifths between beats 2 and 3 in measure 3 and in measure 5.

Direct Fifths, Octaves, and Unisons: The addition of a weak-beat pitch in the contrapuntal voice effectively disguises direct intervals between successive strong beats. So, you only need to avoid direct motion to a perfect interval between a weak beat and the following strong beat (beats 2 and 3, or 4 and 1). In Example B-3, there are direct fifths between beats 2 and 3 in measure 4.

Composing the Contrapuntal Voice

Keeping these guidelines in mind, you should practice writing a contrapuntal voice above or below different cantus firmus examples.

- 1.) In addition to writing the contrapuntal voice, you should *write the harmonic interval numbers* between each contrapuntal pitch and the corresponding note in the cantus firmus—there should be two interval numbers for every cantus firmus pitch. *Be sure to watch out for—and avoid—diminished fifths (o5).*
- 2.) *Underline each strong-beat harmonic interval.* This will help you to find and correct objectionable parallel intervals between successive strong beats.
- 3.) *Place parentheses around all dissonant harmonic interval labels.* They should only appear with weak-beat passing tones.

Refer to the guidelines as you work, and don't be afraid to revise. In general, a relatively *conjunct line* moving mostly by *contrary motion* (and *parallel imperfect intervals*) against the cantus firmus will lead to a good solution.

Self-Tests

Self-Test B-1

A. Above the given cantus firmus fragment, compose several contrapuntal voice fragments according to the instructions given above each example. In each case, write two quarter notes above the first cantus firmus pitch and one quarter note above the second cantus firmus pitch. (*Ignore beat 4 in each example.*) Write the interval numbers between the staves. Underline the strong-beat intervals and add parentheses to all dissonant interval labels.

Ex: passing tone 1. Cons. leap 2. Passing tone 3. 5-6 (passing) 4. 5-6 (neighbor)

Self-Test B-2

- A. Between the two staves, indicate the harmonic intervals formed by the voices. Underline each interval that appears on a strong beat. Add parentheses to all dissonant interval labels—watch especially for o5ths and +4ths. Finally, find all of the errors in each example. To avoid cluttering up the score, *place the appropriate numbers from the list below into the score next to the corresponding errors*. All of the errors below appear at least once on this page.

Harmonic Errors:

1. Parallel fifths or octaves on successive beats (2-3 or 4-1)
2. Parallel fifths or octaves on successive strong beats
3. Direct fifths or octaves on successive beats (2-3 or 4-1)
4. Dissonant harmonic interval on strong beat
5. Harmonic unisons in the middle of the excerpt

Melodic Errors:

6. Improper use of the minor mode
7. No change of direction (gap-fill) after large leap
8. Consecutive leaps in the same direction that do not span a fifth, sixth, or octave
9. Voice crossing
10. Weak-beat dissonance that is not a passing tone

1. A minor

contrapuntal voice

cantus firmus

2. Eb major

cantus firmus

contrapuntal voice

Self-Test B-3

A. Write a two-to-one contrapuntal voice (in quarter notes) above or below the following cantus firmus examples using the guidelines in this chapter. Indicate the harmonic intervals formed by the two voices. Underline all strong-beat harmonic intervals and add parentheses to all dissonant harmonic interval labels. Follow the directions related to beginnings and endings provided above each example.

1. D major. Begin the contrapuntal voice on beat 2 and use the given ending.

contrapuntal voice

intervals:

cantus firmus

2. G minor. Begin the contrapuntal voice on beat 1 and use the given ending.

cantus firmus

intervals:

contrapuntal voice

3. A major. The beginning and ending have also been left for you to compose.

cantus firmus

intervals:

contrapuntal voice