

SPECIES COUNTERPOINT

CANTI FIRMI

Species counterpoint involves the addition of a melody above or below a given melody. The added melody (the *counterpoint*) becomes increasingly complex and interesting in each of the five species.

The given melody is called *cantus firmus*, which means "firm" or "unalterable melody". We shall use the following *canti firmi* throughout the species unit.

The image displays five musical staves, each containing a different *cantus firmus* melody. The first four staves are in G major, and the fifth is in G minor. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature. The notes are as follows:

- Staff 1: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 2: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 3: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 4: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 5: G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.

GUIDELINES FOR FIRST SPECIES COUNTERPOINT

In first species, the counterpoint moves in the same rhythm as the cantus firmus, resulting in “note-against-note” counterpoint. The following guidelines apply specifically to first species, but will also be relevant to later species. The capitalized headings in particular constitute basic elements of all counterpoint.

I. AIM FOR INDEPENDENCE BETWEEN VOICES

Rhythmic independence is not available in first species. The following types of independence, however, are available:

1. Independence of direction. Use a lot of **contrary** motion (voices move in opposite directions). Some **similar** motion can be used (voices move in the same direction). Even some **parallel** motion is fine (voices remain the same interval apart), as long as the voices are a third, sixth or tenth apart, and as long as no more than three statements of the same interval appear in a row. More than three thirds, sixths or tenths in a row results in too great a loss of independence.

Contrary motion

Parallel motion

Parallel perfect consonances (1, 5, 8, 12) are strictly forbidden.

Illegal parallelism

In all species work, label all vertical intervals. Look for a mix of vertical intervals; if such a mix is present, you can be sure that the voices are independent in direction.

2. Independence in the use of steps and leaps; when the cantus firmus leaps, try to use a step in the counterpoint, and vice versa.
3. Independence of melodic curve; the high point of the counterpoint should not coincide with that of the c.f.

4. Independence of range; the voices must not invade each other's space. Actual crossing of voices (a lower counterpoint being above the c.f., or an upper counterpoint being below the c.f.) is forbidden in first species. It is also forbidden for a lower counterpoint to rise above the immediately preceding c.f. note, or an upper counterpoint to fall below the immediately preceding c.f. note; this type of invasion of the c.f.'s space is called "overlapping".

The first example, labeled "Voice crossing", shows two staves. The upper staff has notes with interval numbers 5, 3, 3, 3. The lower staff has notes that cross above the upper staff's notes.

The second example shows two staves. The upper staff has notes with interval numbers 8, 6, 3, 1. The lower staff has notes that cross below the upper staff's notes. Arrows point to these crossings with labels: "overlap (lower than the immediately preceding note of the lower voice)" and "overlap (higher than the immediately preceding note of the upper voice)".

II. WHILE THE TWO VOICES SHOULD BE INDEPENDENT, THEY MUST NEVERTHELESS AUDIBLY BELONG TOGETHER

1. The counterpoint must be written in the same style as the c.f.
2. The two voices must not move too far apart; rarely exceed the distance of a tenth between voices. (Labelling all vertical intervals will help you check on this point.)

III. THE COUNTERPOINT SHOULD BE AS PLEASING AS POSSIBLE IN ITSELF

For the purposes of beginning counterpoint, we shall define "pleasing" as "singable and interesting". To make a counterpoint **singable**:

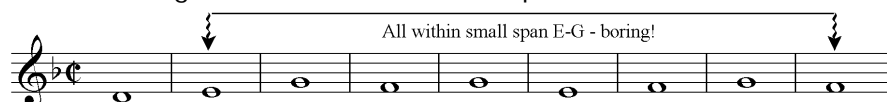
1. Use no dissonant leaps (dissonances are hard to sing). Be especially careful of the tritone F/B, and of augmented seconds in minor melodies (B[?]/C[?]; the B[?] will be in the signature, and is easily forgotten!). Note that the P4 is not considered dissonant when used as a melodic leap; most good melodies use the P4 somewhere!

A single staff of music with the instruction "Find the dissonant leaps." and a circled 5 above the fifth measure. The notes are: C4, E4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4. The interval between B4 and C5 is marked with a circled 5.

2. Use more steps than leaps; too many leaps result in an instrumental rather than a vocal style.
3. Use mainly small leaps. The permissible large leaps (5, 6, 8) should be reserved for "special effects." Immediately after a large leap, move by step in the opposite direction.
4. Stay within appropriate vocal ranges (see Aldwell and Schachter, p. 64).

To make a counterpoint **interesting**:

1. Use a blend of steps and leaps.
2. Change direction frequently.
3. Build up to a high point and come back down, i.e. give the melody a sense of purposefulness—don't let it meander aimlessly.
4. Avoid hovering within a small intervallic span.



IV. AIM FOR A SENSE OF CONTINUITY AND FLOW, i.e., AVOID ANYTHING STATIC OR JARRING

1. No single vertical interval should stick out.
 - i. Don't overuse fifths and octaves; these very stable intervals tend to interrupt the flow. Use more thirds and sixths than fifths and octaves.
 - ii. Don't approach fifths or octaves in similar motion. Such **direct fifths and octaves** stick out unpleasantly.

Find the direct fifths and octaves. ⑤ ⑨

↑
This is NOT a direct fifth (both voices must be moving for a direct fifth or octave to occur).

- iii. Use the unison only at the beginning and end. When used anywhere else, it produces the very jarring effect of a gap in a note-against-note counterpoint.
- iv. Use no dissonant intervals (2, 4, tritone, 7, 9, etc.).

Find the dissonant intervals. ⑤ ⑨

Labeling all vertical intervals will help you keep track of these points.

2. No single note of the counterpoint should stick out.
 - i. Don't immediately repeat a note. (You may, however, use **one** tie within a first species counterpoint.)
 - ii. Don't circle around a particular note for bars and bars.

GUIDELINES FOR SECOND SPECIES COUNTERPOINT

Most of the guidelines for first species counterpoint still apply; the following material, organized under the same headings as the first species handout, spells out the new freedoms (and pitfalls) of second species.

I. AIM FOR INDEPENDENCE BETWEEN VOICES

In addition to the other kinds of independence, rhythmic independence is now available. The counterpoint moves in a steady half-note pulse against the whole notes of the cantus firmus.

You may begin with a half rest (this is the **ONLY** rest you should ever use!), or you may begin with a half note on the downbeat.

Ways to begin

You may end with two whole notes (scale degrees 7-8) or with two half notes (penultimate bar) followed by a whole note (last bar).

Ways to end

Aside from the above exceptions, no rhythms other than steady half notes may be used within the exercise; keep the flow going until the end. Ties are not permitted in second species.

Additional care must be taken with parallel octaves and fifths. Not only must immediately adjacent parallels be avoided, but parallels on adjacent strong beats as well; these are quite audible because there is just one unaccented note between them. Parallels on adjacent *weak* beats, on the other hand, are fine; they are not audible because of their weak accentuation.

Adjacent parallels - definitely unacceptable

Strong-beat parallels - also incorrect

II. WHILE THE TWO VOICES SHOULD BE INDEPENDENT, THEY MUST NEVERTHELESS AUDIBLY BELONG TOGETHER (no changes here – refer to first species handout)

III. THE COUNTERPOINT SHOULD BE AS PLEASING AS POSSIBLE IN ITSELF

Large leaps (sixths and octaves) may now be used slightly more frequently. Use them only within a bar; a large leap from weak to strong beats gives undue emphasis to the strong-beat note. Be sure to change direction after a large leap.

The image shows two musical examples in treble clef with a common time signature. The first example, labeled 'Good use of large leap', consists of three measures. The first measure has notes on beats 3 and 6 (labeled '3 6'). The second measure has notes on beats 3 and 8 (labeled '3 8'). The third measure has notes on beats 6 and 5 (labeled '6 5'). The second example, labeled 'Inferior use of large leap', consists of three measures. The first measure has notes on beats 8 and 6 (labeled '8 6'). The second measure has notes on beats 10 and 8 (labeled '10 8'). The third measure has notes on beats 10 and 6 (labeled '10 6').

IV. AIM FOR A SENSE OF CONTINUITY AND FLOW, I.E. AVOID ANYTHING STATIC OR JARRING

A unison on the *weak* half note is acceptable in second species; again, rhythmic independence compensates for the momentary merging of voices. Unisons on the strong beat are still forbidden (too jarring).

Dissonant intervals are now permitted, but in order to prevent them from becoming unpleasantly conspicuous, the following restrictions are necessary:

- ❖ **Dissonant intervals may occur only on the weak beat.**
- ❖ **Dissonant intervals may only be approached and left by STEP.**

A dissonance must either fill in the space between two strong-beat notes that are a melodic third apart (PASSING TONE), or it must lie between two statements of the same note and be joined to that note by step (NEIGHBOUR NOTE).

The image shows two musical examples in treble clef with a common time signature. The first example, labeled 'Passing tones', consists of three measures. The first measure has notes on beats 8 and 7 (labeled '8 7'). The second measure has notes on beats 5 and 4 (labeled '5 4'). The third measure has notes on beats 6 and 8 (labeled '6 8'). The second example, labeled 'Neighbour notes', consists of three measures. The first measure has notes on beats 8 and 7 (labeled '8 7'). The second measure has notes on beats 10 and 8 (labeled '10 8'). The third measure has notes on beats 5 and 4 (labeled '5 4').

“Horizontal dissonance” (melodic outlining of dissonance) is less of a problem in second species; it is less audible because there are twice as many notes. Do avoid melodic dissonance between adjacent downbeats.

GUIDELINES FOR FOURTH SPECIES COUNTERPOINT

The pulse of fourth species counterpoint is in half notes, as is that of second species, but here the half notes are tied over the bar. This syncopated half-note rhythm must be maintained throughout, with the following exceptions:

1. The penultimate bar must end with an untied half note, and the last bar must consist of a whole note (the tonic).
2. If, as sometimes happens, you “paint yourself into a corner” and simply cannot come up with a good tied-half-note pair, you may use a pair of untied (different) half notes. You may do this TWICE within an exercise—but do not use more than two untied half notes in a row (to avoid the impression that you have reverted to second species!). Note: the untied half note that is always present in the penultimate bar is not included in the permissible two pairs of untied half notes.

Ties may be used in association with consonant intervals.



Much more interesting is the possibility of tying into a strong-beat dissonant interval; such a dissonance is called a **SUSPENSION**. You should use numerous suspensions in your fourth species work.

It may surprise you that dissonance appears on strong beats in fourth species—but these dissonances will not stick out unpleasantly as long as they are always prepared by a tie, and as long as they are resolved properly (see below).

Do not use weak-beat dissonances in fourth species; keep fourth species distinct from second species. NEVER tie FROM a weak-beat dissonance; that would be exactly the opposite of what you should be doing!

To create a suspension, do the following:

1. Prepare the suspension: tie a metrically weak half note (which MUST FORM A CONSONANCE with the cantus firmus) over the bar line.



2. The second note of the tied pair, on the downbeat of the next bar, must be DISSONANT against the c.f. for a true suspension effect.



3. Resolve the suspension: follow the dissonant downbeat half note with the note A STEP LOWER. The note of resolution must be CONSONANT against the c.f.



Suspensions are labeled with two numbers, designating the vertical intervals involved in the suspension and the resolution. The following are the numbers for the acceptable suspensions:

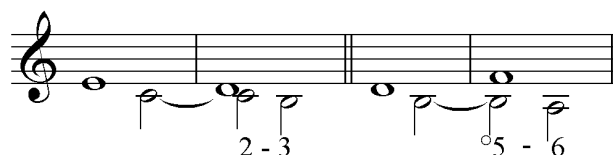
Above the c.f.:

- ❖ by far the most common types are 7-6 and 4-3
- ❖ also possible, but less common: 9-8 and 2-1 (note that unisons on WEAK beats are fine, as in second species)



Below the c.f.:

- ❖ 2-3, 9-10, d5-6.



Theoretically possible, but **forbidden** lower-voice suspensions are 4-5 (two perfect intervals in a row give a “bare” effect) and 7-8 (these just don’t sound good in two-voice texture). Note that this means that **FOURTHS AND SEVENTHS CANNOT BE USED IN THE LOWER VOICE**.

7-6, 4-3 and 2-3 suspensions may be used in “chains”—but do not use more than three of one suspension type in a row; this would result in a loss of independence (as does the use of more than three thirds or sixths in first species).

9-8 and 2-1 suspensions may not be used in chains; such chains would sound like embellished parallel octaves and unisons.



One more point about parallels: you may place octaves or fifths on successive strong beats, or on successive weak beats, as long as there is a CONSONANT interval between them. Recall that strong-beat parallels were not allowed in second species; they are less audible and

therefore permissible in fourth species because the first-beat interval is not actually sounded as a simultaneity.

Find the incorrect parallels.

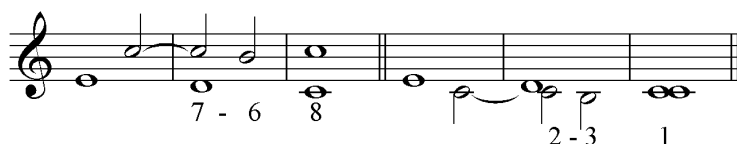


Always begin a fourth species counterpoint with a half rest followed by one of the usual starting intervals (8 or 5 above, 1 or 8 below).

Which beginning is correct?

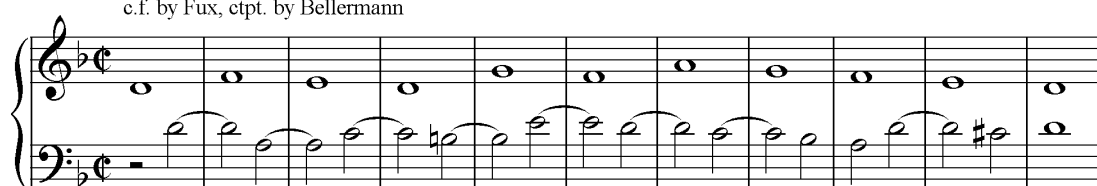


Always end an upper-voice fourth species counterpoint with a 7-6 suspension (penultimate bar) going to a whole-note octave (last bar). Always end a lower-voice fourth species counterpoint with a 2-3 suspension (penultimate bar) going to a whole-note unison (last bar). These endings sound good because they provide a leading-tone to tonic motion to clarify the key.



EXAMPLES

c.f. by Fux, ctpt. by Bellermann



c.f. by Haydn, ctpt. by Beethoven

