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FIRST-SPECIES COUNTERPOINT

Counterpoint refers to music that combines two or more relatively independent lines (or "voices" — a term used even when no singers are involved). The voices sound distinct, but they are coordinated so that they work well together. Species counterpoint is a traditional approach in which a set of rules is strictly followed throughout an exercise. Each individual species has some unique features, but there are general rules that all species share.

Species counterpoint begins with a simple melody known as the *cantus firmus*. A second voice is added to make good counterpoint with the *cantus firmus*. The trick to writing good counterpoint is to make the musical lines sound independent and yet make sure they sound good together. As you will see, most of the rules in species counterpoint concern this relationship between the two voices.

In first-species counterpoint:

1. Both voices employ exactly the same rhythm. Traditionally, they are written in whole notes, one note per measure per voice. In principle, though, different meters and note values are possible as long as the two voices match.

2. The *cantus firmus* typically begins on $\hat{1}$. The added voice also usually begins on $\hat{1}$, but it may begin on $\hat{3}$ or $\hat{5}$ if the added voice is *above* the *cantus firmus*.

3. The harmonic interval between the two voices must always be consonant. Consonant intervals include major and minor thirds, major and minor sixths, and perfect fifths and octaves. All other harmonic intervals (seconds, fourths, sevenths, and diminished or augmented intervals) are dissonant and should not be used.

4. Beware of perfect harmonic intervals! They stand out and therefore require special care.
   A. Parallel motion between perfect intervals is always illegal.
   B. Do not approach a perfect interval by similar motion (this is referred to as "direct" or "hidden" fifths/octaves) unless the upper voice moves by step. Contrary motion to perfect intervals is acceptable provided that the higher voice moves by step.
   C. Except for the beginning and ending, generally minimize your use of perfect consonances (especially octaves). They tend to stick out and undermine the sense of forward motion. Especially avoid using two perfect consonances in a row in the middle of an exercise.

5. Contrary motion is always good. Parallel motion is acceptable, assuming that the interval between the two voices is imperfect and that it doesn't continue for more than three notes in a row.

6. Avoid simultaneous leaps in both voices. Simultaneous leaps involving notes that are extremely easy to sing (e.g., $\hat{1}$, $\hat{3}$, and $\hat{5}$) are usually not a problem, though.

7. Never allow the voices to cross. Also avoid overlap (for example, the bottom voice should not go higher than the previous note in the top voice).

8. Traditionally, no voice may use the same note twice in immediate succession (i.e., oblique motion is never used). However, you will be allowed *one* repeated note (i.e., one instance of oblique motion) during an exercise.

9. Each voice should have a conservative range, generally about a sixth. The lowest and highest notes of a single voice should be no more than an octave apart.

10. Stepwise motion is most desirable. If a voice leaps, it is likely to "balance" the leap with stepwise motion in the opposite direction. The larger the leap, the more important it is to move by step in the opposite direction immediately afterwards.

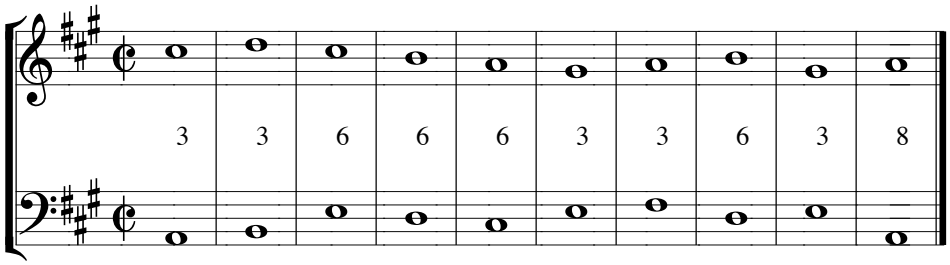
11. Dissonant leaps are illegal, and leaps larger than a perfect fifth are discouraged. (Remember that the P4 is a harmonic dissonance but a melodic consonance; a perfect fourth is therefore *not* considered a dissonant leap.) In a minor key, the d4 leap from $\hat{3}$ down to $\uparrow\hat{7}$ is fine; otherwise, diminished melodic intervals are avoided. Augmented melodic intervals are *always* avoided.

12. Try not to leap twice in a row, particularly in the same direction. However, this is not considered a problem if the leaps involve notes that are extremely easy to sing (e.g., $\hat{1}$, $\hat{3}$, and $\hat{5}$).

13. When you write in a minor key, be sure to raise $\hat{6}$ and $\hat{7}$ when appropriate. Raised notes should lead upward, and lowered notes should lead downward.

14. Traditionally, both voices end on $\hat{1}$. More recently, it is considered acceptable for the upper voice to end on $\hat{3}$. The upper voice must approach its final note by step. The lower voice may either approach the final $\hat{1}$ by step or may leap from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{1}$. (A resulting direct octave under the latter circumstances will be acceptable because the upper voice must move by step.)

An example of good first-species counterpoint:



In order to write a coherent melody, try to think about several notes in a row (ideally more) rather than just approaching the task one note at a time. Once you compose your counterpoint, test it by singing both parts separately; then play the parts together. (Playing your sight-singing exercises on the piano is a terrible idea, but playing your written work on the piano is strongly encouraged.)

Don't be afraid to scrap a failing solution and try again. Sometimes you write yourself into a corner and there is simply no way out of it. However, always assume that a good solution is possible!