

2-Voice Chorale Species Counterpoint

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Preamble

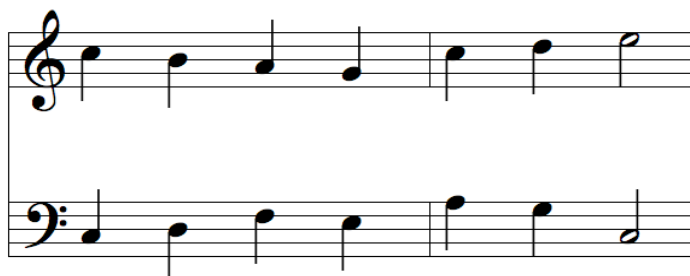
In order to make the leap from composing in a 4-part chorale style to composing in a free-texture style, we will first re-think the process of composing chorales in a more contrapuntal manner. To this end, we will compose exercises in 2-voice (soprano and bass) Chorale Species Counterpoint. Species counterpoint is a way of studying counterpoint formulated by J.J. Fux (1660-1741) after the music of Palestrina and the Renaissance masters. Exercises in species were undertaken by many of the great composers--including Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schubert, and so forth. The basic idea is that one starts with simple, consonant, note-against-note counterpoint, and gradually attempts more and more elaborate exercises, involving more rhythmic complexity and dissonance, in constrained compositional situations. We will be learning a modified (simpler and freer) version of this, to fit in with the study of 4-part voice-leading and chorales, and tonal music in general.

For each exercise, we will assume, at first, that one is given either a bass line, or a soprano line. Given either line, our first task is to compose the other line as a smooth counterpoint against the given line. With the possible exception of the cadence, *we will not think about harmony and harmonic progression at all* during this part of the process. We will think about line, and the intervals formed by the 2 voices. After the lines are composed in this way, only *then* do we go back and consider questions of harmony, and add the 2 inner voices to create a 4-voice chorale texture.

In all cases . . . it will help you to *sing* the lines you compose (most of the rules of counterpoint and part-writing originate in solving problems of singability), and/or to *listen* to their combination, played on the piano. I, and former students, have found that Finale/Sibelius playback is the *least* reliable method of testing your exercises; everything sorta sounds good, bad, (or is it just dull grey medium?) on Finale/Sibelius.

1ST SPECIES — Note Against Note

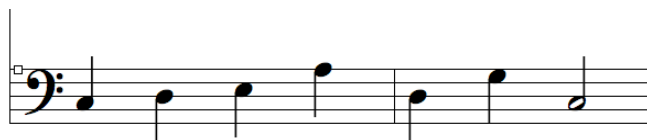
1st Species counterpoint means note-against-note counterpoint; thus, in the context of 4-part chorales, that means quarter-note-against-quarter-note. So for these first exercises, you will create lines out of only quarter-notes.



There are 2 sorts of rules we'll care about for this: melodic rules, governing the line itself, and 'vertical' or harmonic rules, governing the intervals produced by the combination of the two lines.

1. **Linear guidelines**

- a) A line should move mostly by step.
- b) Leaps:
 - i) A line may leap by any interval of an octave or less, except for a 7th.
 - ii) Leaps of a 3rd are most common, 4th and 5th, somewhat less so, 6ths and octaves, rare.
 - iii) Augmented and diminished interval leaps are forbidden.
 - iii) Leaps are more common in the bass. Larger leaps are very rare in the soprano.
 - iv) A leap is most often followed by a reversal of direction of the melodic line. This nearly always happens with any leap larger than a 3rd. (and often occurs after a 3rd as well).
 - v) The reversal of direction following a leap can be part of "gap-fill", that is, the line reverses direction and the interval that is formed by the leap is filled in by steps.
 - vi) Sometimes, in the bass part, a 4th may be followed by a 5th in the opposite direction, or vice versa, a chain of such events forming a small part of the circle of 5ths:



- c) A line should have a shape to it--sing it to yourself: does it meander randomly, or does it have goals that it seeks and arrives at eventually? It should have energy and purpose, shape and grace. Try to avoid dull repetition of tones or small groups of tones.



Not So Great



Better

- d) Soprano lines should be as “melodic” and smooth as possible. Move by step and small leaps most of the time, and when the soprano line does leap, reverse direction and gap fill. See the previous 2 examples.
- e) Bass Lines: Bass lines leap more than soprani, most often because they are singing root motion (5ths and 4ths), between implied (or, eventually, actual) of chords. Generally speaking, when adding a bass line to a soprano line, try to keep things moving by step at the beginning of the phrase, and then, towards, or at, the cadence, you may introduce 1 or 2 4th and 5th leaps to close things off. The final 2 notes will most often involve a leap downwards of a 5th, or upwards of a 4th, indicating a V-I cadence. Continuing this generalization, the last 3 notes of a phrase will most typically have a 4-5-1 or 2-5-1 motion in the bass, again, setting up a pre-dominant --> dominant --> tonic harmonic motion.

This general idea—focus on *Counterpoint* at the beginning of a phrase, focus on *Harmonic Progression* at the end—is a cornerstone of common-practice voice-leading and phrase structure:

"Counterpoint" -----> "Harmony"

- f) Minor Mode: in minor mode, when moving by steps, scale degrees 6 and 7 should obey the laws of melodic minor:

a minor

g minor

e minor

If there are leaps involved, natural minor may be in order:

Augmented 4th leaps in bass from ascending melodic minor -- bad.



Natural minor -- better.

Use your voice/mind/ear: trying singing your line without the help of a piano. If you can figure it out fairly easily, you're good. If you're feeling confused, try using a different mode or scale.

2) **Vertical Guidelines:**

- a) Allowable intervals between the lines: (compound) intervals of a 3rd, 5th, 6th, and octave (and see letter [e] below). Focus on 3rds, 6ths, and octave compounds (in that order of priority). They should comprise 90% of your vertical intervals.
- b) Be sure to allow enough space between the soprano and bass to add the 2 middle voices.
- c) Final interval: 90% of all phrases end with an interval of an octave or a 3rd compound between soprano and bass, corresponding (most of the time) to PAC or IAC respectively.
- d) 4ths (and compounds) are Forbidden between soprano and bass. In 1st species, 4ths are a dissonance between soprano and bass.
- e) 7ths, tri-tones: In a tonal context, the intervals of a minor 7th, diminished 7th or augmented 2nd, and diminished 5th or augmented 4th, may occasionally be found between soprano and bass. These are allowed because harmonization by a diminished 7th chord, or a dominant 7th chord will explain the dissonance. However, these dissonances must always be resolved properly: the diminished 5th inwards by step, augmented 4th outwards by step, diminished 7th inwards by step, aug 2nd outwards by step, and the minor 7th, with the upper voice resolving downwards by step.



Harmonized:

tri-tone

- f) Parallels: Parallel 5ths and octaves, and compounds, are Forbidden.
- g) Direct 5ths and 8vas sound quite bare and ugly in 2 voices, but with appropriate harmonization, can be OK, especially if they are employed in the midst of the phrase, during a period of motion—one would not, for example, use direct 5ths/8vas between soprano and bass as part of a cadence.
- ii) The following is OK, when harmonized and continued appropriately:

- iii) This

is problematic, even when harmonized.

- iv) Direct octaves: This could work fine, mid-phrase:



I have found that it's difficult to make hard and fast rules about sequences involving 5ths and/or octaves, (other than the *always inviolable* parallelism rule). When in doubt, avoid direct 5ths and octaves. Use your ear. If something sounds ugly, or like medieval organum, it is not in common-practice style. Avoid it. Keep in mind the dictum that 85% of your vertical intervals should be 3rds and compounds.

It should also be mentioned that, between the inner voices, direct 5ths and 8vas are usually fine, and not something you need to worry about. It is between the outer voices where one should be most concerned. Once again, parallel 5ths and 8vas, between any voices, are always forbidden, of course.

- h) The best way to approach a 5th or octave is by step or small leap in contrary motion:



- i) Simultaneous melodic leaping: When one voice is leaping (again, usually the bass), the other should usually be stepping. Certainly, avoid the situation where both voices are leaping about with abandon.



Bad

- j) The $I^{64} 6^{th}$: Although we are purposefully wiping our minds clear of the distractions of harmony while we write 2-voice counterpoint, still, we are aware that eventually, these 2-voice counterpoints will form the basis of full 4-part harmonic progressions. Every once in a while, we have to take into account the possible harmonic ramifications of what we're writing. An example of this problem is the " I^{64} sixth". Let us say we are in A major, and the following counterpoint is written:

10 6 6 8

At first glance, this seems fine. But how would this eventually be harmonized?

iii^6 ? I^{64} I ?

Ugh! The first solution (involving a iii^6 chord) is weak as a harmonic progression; the second solution involves an improper use of a I^{64} chord. Clearly, an interval of a 6th between the soprano and bass, where the bass is the 5th scale-degree of whatever key you are in, needs to be carefully controlled, introduced and departed from. When studying harmony, you learned of the Passing 64, the Neighboring 64, and the Cadential 64; these become the 3 ways in which the $I^{64} 6^{th}$ can be used in 2-voice counterpoint.

These examples can be easily harmonized, and make good harmonic sense:

passing cadential

2ND SPECIES – 2 notes against 1

2nd Species builds on 1st Species, introducing rules and guidelines for 2-notes against 1-note: in the case of chorale texture, that most often means 8th notes. For the most part, all of the 1st Species rules apply in 2nd Species as well.

1) Vertical Rules

The 8th-note introduces the "passing" dissonance or "passing-tone," which you should be familiar with already from 4-part writing, as well as the "neighbor" dissonance or "neighbor-tone". Generally speaking, the rules for these embellishments, especially in a 2-voice (soprano-bass) context, are as follows:

- a) A passing-tone is a dissonance on a weak 8th note, which is approached and left by step.
- b) Do not leap into or out of the weak-beat dissonance.
- c) The strong 8th-notes on either side of the passing note are consonances.

Cons Diss Cons

d) Neighbor-notes are also possible, but preferred if they are consonant:

neighbor-note

Cons Cons Cons

neighbor-note

Cons Diss Cons

preferred

possibly OK
(depending on harmonization)

e) Another possibility for the 8th-note is the appoggiatura or strong-beat dissonant passing-tone.

6 4 3 8

For our purposes, appoggiaturas are always approached by step from above. Appoggiaturas always resolve downwards. Appoggiaturas always resolve to a consonance. Appoggiaturas should be easily reducible to 1st-species, by removing the dissonance:

6 3 8

- f) Never "hide" parallel 5ths on strong 8th-notes by using the weak 8th-notes to "un-5th-ize" the intervals. The ear will still hear the parallels.

A musical score in two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one flat. The bass line consists of three quarter notes: G2, B1, and D2. The treble line consists of five eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, and G4. Brackets under the bass line group the first two notes (G2, B1) and the last two notes (A4, D2). Below the notes are the fingering numbers 5, 3, 5, 3, 5. A caption below reads "parallel 5ths--still obvious."

- f) On the other hand, it is permissible to have parallel 5ths or 8^{vas} on consecutively *weak* 8th-notes.

A musical score in two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one flat. The bass line consists of three quarter notes: G2, B1, and D2. The treble line consists of six eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, and F4. Below the notes are the fingering numbers 3, 5, 3, 5, 3, 5. A caption below reads "parallel 5ths on off-8ths. OK."

However, a situation with implied parallel 1st-inversion triads is the best for this kind of texture. For your future exercises and compositions, whenever you want to have a soaring, rising parallel sequence of triadic harmonies, aim for something akin to the following:

A musical score in two staves (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of one flat. The bass line consists of three quarter notes: G2, B1, and D2. The treble line consists of six eighth notes: G4, A4, B4, A4, G4, and F4. Below the notes are the fingering numbers 3, 6, 3, 6, 3, 6. A caption below reads "parallel 1st-inversion chords--better".

2) Melodic Rules

The same principles apply as in 1st Species: mostly stepwise motion, occasional leaps, gap-fill is always desirable, etc. Now, with the addition of 8th-note motion, it is even more possible than before to write flowing, goal-oriented melodic shapes richly varied in their rhythm and contour.

- a) Given a stream of 8th-notes, we are much less likely to compose chains of 5ths or other leaps:



as this is more difficult to sing at the faster tempo of the 8th-notes.

- b) A leap followed by step-wise gap-fill is ok:



There are 2 types of exercises we might attempt: pure 2nd Species (all 2-notes against 1-note), and mixed Species (flowing lines of quarter-notes with occasional pairs of 8ths.) Whenever a 2-notes-against-1-note texture appears, even if only for the duration of a single quarter-note, 2nd-species principles apply, otherwise, 1st-species principles apply. In general, I have found little general music-pedagogical use for exercises in “pure” 1st or 2nd species; instead, we will begin composing in “combined” 1st and 2nd species, which makes it possible to compose simple, fluid, and beautiful lines against one another.

Harmonization:

After you have written a 2-voice soprano-bass counterpoint, you can fill in the inner 2 voices to produce a full chorale texture. You will want to recall the rules and guidelines from 4-part writing that you are already familiar with. Your task should be much easier now: fill in the cadence, and work backwards from there. Look for “suggestions” as to harmonization in the 2-voice counterpoint you have already written: for example, when there is 4th/5th motion in the bass, a V-I (or I-V, IV-I, etc.) progression is most likely in order. Another example might be (in C major) where the soprano moves E-D-C while the bass moves C-D-E: this is a voice-exchange, and is most typically harmonized by I-vii⁶-I⁶.

Don't concern yourself too much with the “direct 5ths/8vas” issue; but *do* watch carefully for parallel 5ths/8vas. Play through the solution: it should make musical and harmonic sense.

4TH SPECIES -- Suspensions

4th Species introduces the suspension—dissonance on a strong beat, followed by resolution of that dissonance on a weak beat. Suspensions between soprano and bass (the two voices we've been working with) are actually pretty rare in chorale-style writing. However, the principle of the suspension is extremely important in common-practice harmony and voice-leading. Many chord progressions that you are familiar with already, come out of a suspension principle applied in an inner voice.

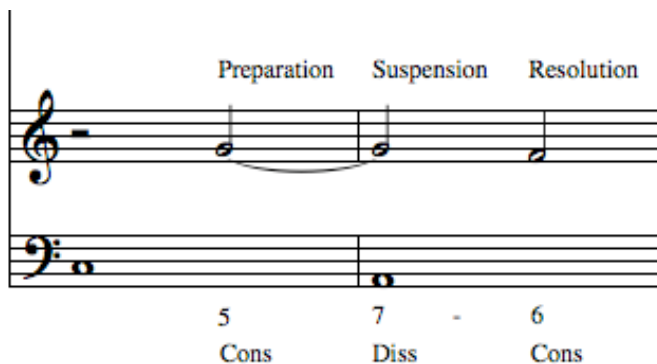
It will be helpful, in talking about 4th, or indeed, any other of the Species of counterpoint, to keep in mind what rhythmic "level" we are talking about. For example, here is 2nd Species at, respectively, the 8th, quarter, and half-note levels:



The image shows three pairs of musical staves, each representing a different rhythmic level for 2nd Species counterpoint. Each pair consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The first pair shows eighth notes, the second pair shows quarter notes, and the third pair shows half notes. In all cases, the upper voice has two notes on a weak beat followed by one note on a strong beat, while the lower voice has one note on a weak beat followed by two notes on a strong beat.

The tempo is different in each case, but the basic idea: 2 notes against 1, remains the same. We will discuss 4th Species at the half-note level to begin with, but we will see that the principles can be applied at any rhythmic level.

4th Species consists of Suspensions. A suspension consists of 3 consecutive half-note events: preparation (P) on a weak beat (beat 2 or 4 in a 4/4 measure), which must be consonant, tying into a strong-beat suspension (S), which is usually dissonant, and a consonant resolution (R) on the following weak beat.



The diagram shows a musical staff with a treble clef and a bass clef. The treble clef staff has three notes: a quarter note on beat 2, a quarter note on beat 3, and a quarter note on beat 4. The bass clef staff has a half note on beat 2 and a half note on beat 3. The notes on beat 2 are G4 (treble) and B3 (bass), which are consonant. The notes on beat 3 are G4 (treble) and D3 (bass), which are dissonant. The notes on beat 4 are F4 (treble) and B3 (bass), which are consonant. The labels "Preparation", "Suspension", and "Resolution" are placed above the treble staff notes. Below the bass staff, the notes are labeled "5 Cons", "7 Diss", and "6 Cons".

That concluding Resolution, may, in turn, become the Preparation for a succeeding suspension figure, thus possibly instigating a Chain of Suspensions:

The Suspension itself is usually a dissonance. When it is, it *always resolves downwards by step*.

If the Suspension itself is Consonant, there are other possibilities: one may leap away from it (but only to a consonance), or, one may move upwards by step--but since this can *only* be to a *consonance*, there is really only one possibility, the 5-6 suspension:

leap from a suspension from/to a consonance

consonant rising suspension

There are basically only a few dissonant suspensions in 2 voices that sound good and are used frequently. These are the following:

- 1) If you are writing a counterpoint in the upper voice:

4-3 suspension

7-6 suspension

- 2) If you are writing a counterpoint in the lower voice:

9-10 suspension

- 3) Finally, often when a suspension is resolved, the underlying bass changes as well, before the resolving voice reaches its goal. This is the (quite common) change-of-bass suspension:



change-of-bass suspension

As mentioned earlier, 4th species can occur at different rhythmic levels.



As mentioned at the beginning of this segment on 4th Species, suspensions usually occur in inner voices in 4-part writing. Occasionally in bass and soprano.