

From The Classroom

A Different Species of Counterpoint

By Justin London

A few years ago my colleague here at Carleton College, Stephen Kelly, wrote an article for the College Music Society newsletter about effective teaching in the music history classroom. In that article Steve makes a convincing case that the best way to teach music history is to have students “do music history and be music historians, rather than just accumulate facts and observe scholarly controversy about the music of the past” (*CMS Newsletter* (March 1992), 1). In a similar fashion I believe that the best way to teach music theory is to have our students *do* music theory and *be* music theorists, rather than just learn about music theory, and be told how various pieces of music purportedly work. Of course, the special challenge for the theory teacher is that we are not only engaged in the teaching of music theory, but also the teaching of the prerequisite skills necessary for any analysis or theoretical work—score reading, score hearing (i.e., solfège and ear training), the fundamentals of tonal syntax, and so forth. And by the time we have finished with these fundamentals there is no time left to have any fun with them, to use them to do some real theory (or so one would think). One can, of course, ask whether or not all of these fundamentals are truly necessary. But one may also try and combine the acquisition of various skills and basic concepts with the activities of making and critiquing music theory. What follows is intended to be an example of such a synergistic lesson.

In the usual teaching of modal or tonal counterpoint, students proceed from simpler to more complex rhythmic textures, along the way adding to and refining the “rules” which govern their exercises. In so doing they (hopefully) gain a knowledge of how added complexity and added compositional choice are balanced by new

and different constraints on melodic construction and harmonic dissonance. All too often, however, the student is caught in a myopic net of simply trying to finish the darned exercise, and when choler and frustration run high, the student probably isn't gaining any high-level understanding of either musical syntax or a particular contrapuntal style. Simply not having any parallel fifths is good enough.

In an attempt to prevent my students from having such experiences, especially early on in their careers as contrapuntists, I now approach second species (over a modal cantus firmus) in the following way. The basic idea—the passing dissonance between two consonant intervals—is introduced in class lecture. Students are reminded of the various species of contrapuntal motion (contrary, oblique, similar, and parallel), as well as the prohibition against parallel perfect consonances. They are then given the following assignment: through trial and error, simply list ALL of the possible second species passing motions—both ascending and descending, and both above and below—for any given pair of cantus notes. They are given the list of “two note cantuses” shown in figure 1 just to avoid any confusion. This is the entire assignment. In class we go over all of the possibilities of oblique motion, and produce the list shown in figure 2. This establishes the protocols used in the assignment (i.e., labeling intervals, keeping track of ascending vs. descending melodic motion and the relative positions of the voices). The students are told that they may include examples which involve voice crossing, but I do not specify how to categorize crossings (e.g., if a passing motion starts below the cantus, but ends up above it, as the cantus skips down, should we then regard this snippet as being above or below the cantus?). In the subsequent class discussion we fine-tune the ways in which we categorize the motions (another topic is how to count—or not count—octave doublings), and in so doing the students must deal with small but significant problems in the organization of their data.

Why have the students bother with such a “mindless” exercise? As readers may be quick to point out, listing all of the passing motions is trivial; the real challenge comes in putting together entire melodies with a coherent, well-formed shape that complements the given cantus. True enough, but this listing isn't entirely mindless.

FIGURE 1: “Two note cantuses” used in assignment

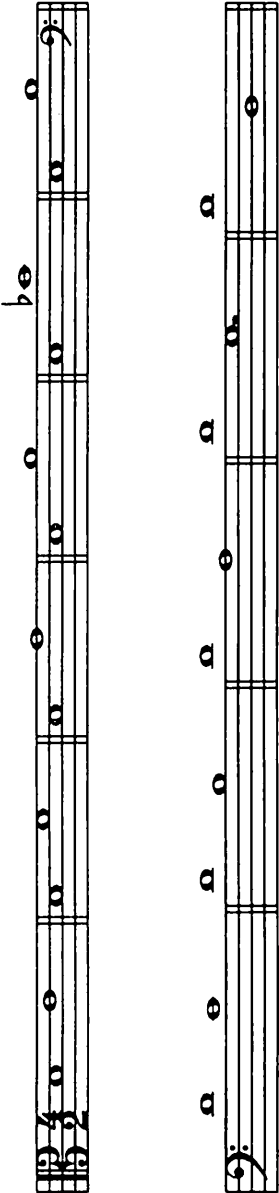
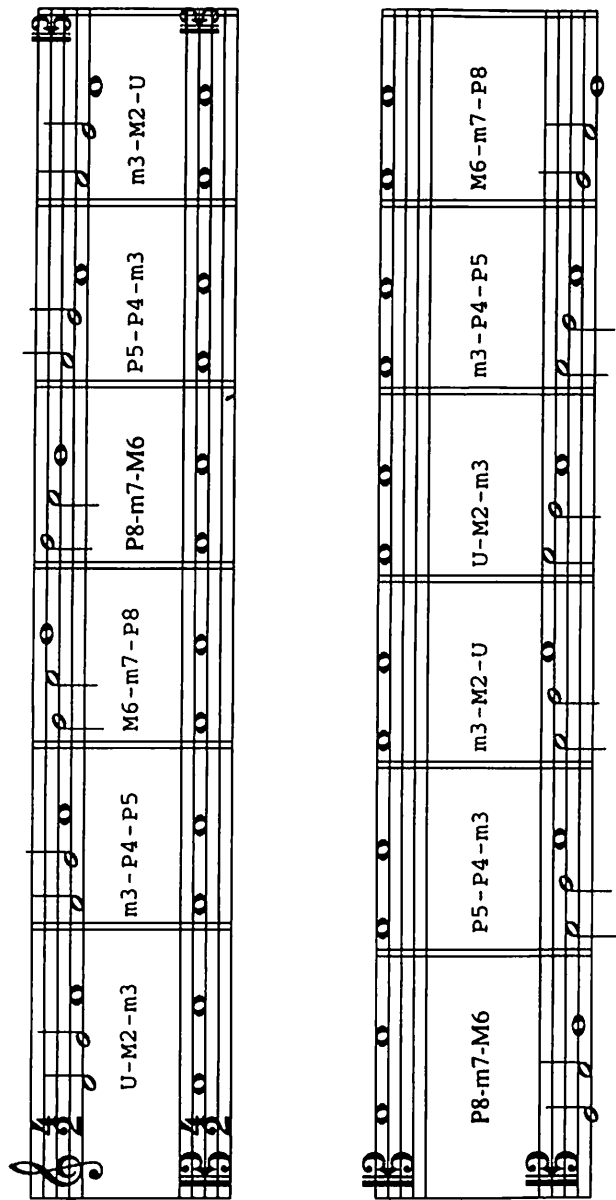


FIGURE 2: List of all possible oblique motions



First of all, there is the practical benefit of practice. Having completed this exercise the student will be quite familiar with the ways that three-note figures fit various portions of the cantus, and it is hoped that they also begin to see patterns of consonance-dissonance-consonance both in their own exercises as well as in the examples from the repertoire that they study. But the principal value is not practical; it is theoretical. For in completing this exercise the students do more than simply follow the rules of counterpoint—they investigate the workings of the very rules themselves. When they are finished they will have discovered the size and shape of the second species universe, at least in terms of the passing dissonance (one could perform a similar exercise with other three-note figures, such as an ascending third followed by an ascending second, an ascending fifth followed by a descending step, etc.). One lesson to be taught here is the value of doing the empirical legwork needed to answer a theoretical question. Even more interesting, however, is what follows as the shape (or what might be termed “structure”) of this universe, since the passing tones are not evenly distributed among the various classes of contrapuntal motion and relative positions (in terms of treble and bass) of the voices.

Type of motion	Oblique	Similar	Contrary	TOTALS
Ascending over CF	3	6	13	22
Descending over CF	3	4	10	17
Ascending under CF	3	5	8	16
Descending under CF	3	5	11	19
TOTALS	12	20	42	74

As one can see from the table in Example three, contrary motion is far more “available” than similar motion, simply given the possibilities of the musical syntax. In short, the musical grammar is biased in a systemic way toward contrary motion. It is not at all intuitively obvious that this bias should be present, and one of the values of having students do such a brute force assignment is to show its value in uncovering such “hidden” aspects of harmonic syntax. The presence of the “contrary bias” gives rise to an interesting chicken-versus-egg kind of question, a question that can be discussed with the students: is the aesthetic preference for contrary motion

simply a reflection of the underlying bias of contrapuntal syntax, or is the syntax itself—the very rules about various successive consonances and dissonances, the placement of dissonance, and so forth—driven by the aesthetic value placed on contrary motion? To put it another way, where do the “rules” of counterpoint come from? And there are other interesting questions that may be discussed here as well: What does this tell us about the way that horizontal versus vertical aspects of musical grammar interact? If you were programming a computer to write your counterpoint, how could you make use of this list? What other lists would you need in order to write such a program? Are there other rules that apply over larger spans of the counterpoint? (and here one may have the students read David Lewin’s excellent essay, “An Interesting Global Rule for Species Counterpoint,” *In Theory Only* 6.8 (1983): 19-44). And doubtless there are other questions for discussion.

Of course, having the students do this assignment means that one must eliminate at least one other species exercise, but I am happy to do so. First, it may well be (one of course cannot really “prove” these assertions) that this preliminary exercise allows the students to do subsequent compositions with greater facility. Just in case some readers were wondering, after this theoretical exercise I do have my students write second species melodies (and worry about their melodic peaks, skip-step constraints, consecutive skip rules, and so forth), as well as fit upper and lower parts to an extended cantus. But in starting their study of second species counterpoint with this particular exercise, students are forced to engage with the larger, “theoretical” issues behind the study of counterpoint, the relationship between music’s vertical and horizontal dimensions, and the notion of musical styles as syntactic systems.