

Reviews

Harold Owen, *Modal and Tonal Counterpoint: From Josquin to Stravinsky*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1992. x, 389 pp.

Reviewed by David L. Mancini

Harold Owen's *Modal and Tonal Counterpoint: From Josquin to Stravinsky* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992) is in many ways a unique contribution to current texts in the field. As the only available text that covers the entire historical span of contrapuntal writing, it should be of interest to those teachers in search of a text whose primary focus is the stylistic and technical development of contrapuntal genres throughout music history.¹ The book also has the potential to shift the traditional balance of counterpoint coursework somewhat away from compositional activities and more toward analysis and discussion.

The book is divided into six parts. Part one, "Introductory Concepts," explores the nature of polyphonic music in general and guides the student through a comparison of musical examples, both vocal and instrumental, from the fourteenth to the twentieth centuries. Part two covers counterpoint in the late Renaissance (1500-1600); parts three and four treat counterpoint in the early and late Baroque (1600-1750); part five is devoted to musical examples from the Classical and Romantic eras, while part six covers polyphony in the first half of the twentieth century. The book contains three appendixes: the first identifies the musical examples used in chapter 1; the second gives a brief outline of the ecclesiastical modes and hexachord system; and the third reviews the figured bass system.

¹Although no longer available, Harold AtKisson's *Basic Counterpoint* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956) predates Owen's text in covering both sixteenth- and eighteenth-century contrapuntal styles. More a manual than a full-fledged textbook, AtKisson takes a nonspecies approach to counterpoint. With an almost polemical tone in his preface, AtKisson labels the third and fifth species of counterpoint "completely erroneous" and rejects the use of whole-note *cantus firmi* in the composition of exercises.

In addition, the book contains a glossary, discography, and a briefly annotated bibliography of selected sources.

The author's intent is that the book be used in a year-long course after the student has completed basic studies in harmony and musicianship. Since many institutions offer two counterpoint courses, the book could function as the principal text for both. Indeed, the largest portion of Owen's text, slightly over 72%, is devoted to the traditional core of university counterpoint studies: the music of the late Renaissance through the late Baroque. The sections on Classical/Romantic and twentieth-century polyphony each occupy roughly 9% of the text.

One of the most salient features of Owen's text is what the author calls "the discovery approach." Each chapter begins with one or more complete compositions followed by questions intended to stimulate class discussion. Following the questions are the author's "observations," which are essentially complete answers to the preceding questions. The author's belief, of course, is that students, either individually or as a group, will attempt to answer the discussion questions as they study the music. Once they have developed their own responses, they compare them to the author's observations. Admittedly, students in search of the "quick answer" may be tempted simply to read the author's response to a given question. Instructors pressed for class time might find themselves just assigning students something to read about a particular piece. While we all recognize the ultimate superiority of the discovery approach, we must also admit that it can be very time consuming. I do not believe we can fault Professor Owen if classes sometimes take shortcuts.

One way to reinforce the discovery process would be for a text to allow students to replicate the activity with a variety of compositions. For instance, Owen could have provided as exercises additional questions for other pieces without providing answers, although reproducing the scores probably would have too greatly increased the length of the text. Each chapter includes suggestions of other works for further study. I find these suggestions uniformly appropriate and readily available (although Owen usually does not suggest specific editions). The author could have given at least one set of questions for a particular suggested work without providing

a score. Such an approach would have provided more flexibility for the instructor without greatly expanding the text. In addition, many of the discussion questions already included are general enough to apply to other compositions, and both instructor and student should be able to formulate many of their own questions.

The questions for discussion that the author does provide are usually quite pertinent to the given musical example. For a violin sonata movement by Corelli, the author poses questions on melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic elements (pp. 175-76). Students are asked about the kinds of melodic motion found in solo part and bass, how motives are developed, the various cadence types in the piece, and how the composer achieves rhythmic variety.

The compositions at the beginning of each chapter constitute an anthology of sorts. Whether there is enough music for an entire course depends on many factors; I would guess that most instructors would avail themselves of the sources for further study as supplementary material. Even so, Owen is to be commended for providing such a wide variety of music in one place, an important factor for instructors considering this text. Three of the most popular counterpoint anthologies, those by Berry and Chudacoff, Hardy and Fish, and Soderlund, are no longer in print.² The only currently available self-contained texts plus anthologies are Thomas Benjamin's *The Craft of Modal Counterpoint* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1979), the same author's *Counterpoint in the Style of J.S. Bach* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1986), and Robert Gauldin's *A Practical Approach to Sixteenth-Century Counterpoint* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988). None of these approaches the scope of Owen's text.

I was very impressed with the quality of the musical examples, all newly typeset. Most of the pieces, for solo instrument and small vocal and instrumental ensembles, can be easily performed in class. In only one case that I could find does the reproduction get in the

²Wallace Berry and Edward Chudacoff, *Eighteenth-Century Imitative Counterpoint* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969); Gordon Hardy and Arnold Fish, *Music Literature: A Workbook for Analysis*, Vol. II: Polyphony (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1966); Gustave Soderlund and Samuel Scott, *Examples of Gregorian Chant and Other Sacred Music of the 16th Century* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1971).

way of classroom performance. The score of the Minuet and Trio from Mozart's Serenade, K. 388 is nontransposing. While student analysts would welcome this, their performer colleagues on clarinets and horns would not!

There are fewer compositional exercises here than in most other counterpoint texts, an understandable decision given the book's premise. Following the text's focus on stylistic development within a historical context, most instructors would probably give other assignments of a more analytical nature. For these, the sources for further study at the end of each chapter should prove especially helpful. Owen indicates which exercises are more appropriate for advanced students; most instructors would also wish to use some exercises of their own creation.

Part two of the text, which treats counterpoint in the late Renaissance, comprises eight chapters. Three chapters present the basic principles of sixteenth-century counterpoint along with Owen's approach to the species. In a deft organizational strategy, the remaining chapters of this section simultaneously cover composition in two, three, four, and more parts along with a presentation of sacred and secular vocal and instrumental genres. Too often, courses in sixteenth-century counterpoint neglect secular vocal and instrumental music. It is not enough to tell students that the secular music of the period is based on the same general structural principles as the sacred music. While this may be true in the broadest sense, there are some technical differences between the two that Owen manages to bring out (see for instance p. 68).

Perhaps the most striking and possibly controversial element of Owen's treatment of sixteenth-century counterpoint is his use of the species. In this area, the text breaks ranks with some other well-known texts that favor the so-called direct (nonspecies) approach to teaching the counterpoint of this period.³ The difficulty with the

³Gustave Soderlund's *Direct Approach to Counterpoint in 16th-Century Style* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947), the model for this approach, is now out of print, although it and the 1946 edition of its companion anthology are available, at high cost, through Reprint Services Corporation of Irvine, CA. Robert Gauldin also follows the direct, nonspecies approach in his *A Practical Approach to Sixteenth-Century Counterpoint*.

species approach in the teaching of sixteenth-century counterpoint is the eventual development of rhythmic flexibility and the achievement of musical results. Before examining Owen's approach to the species, let us see how two other authors grapple with these problems.

In his monumental counterpoint treatise, Knud Jeppesen presents strict species in two and three parts along with some examples of combined species.⁴ In a section on free two-part counterpoint, Jeppesen discusses exceptional cases that lie outside the boundaries of strict species writing. A new text by H. Gilbert Trythall attempts to achieve more musical results with the species by expanding their rhythmic scope.⁵ The first species uses only whole-note values. Second species exercises are presented first in half notes against whole notes. In this familiar context, the half-note passing tone is the only dissonance allowed. Second species exercises are then presented in quarter notes against half notes, a context that allows further dissonance such as the neighbor tone, accented passing tone, and anticipation. Trythall presents the third and fourth species in the usual way but expands the fourth species to accommodate the consonant anticipation of the suspension resolution.

To address the problem of achieving reasonably musical results in species exercises, Owen offers an "expanded species approach" that allows for greater rhythmic flexibility while still maintaining the basic rhythmic ratio of the species. In Examples 1 and 2, one of Owen's exercises in strict species is followed by an example of expanded second species. (The mistakes in interval labeling, which occur in both examples, appear in Owen's text.)

The strict exercise is completed according to the traditional rules. The expanded exercise incorporates a wider variety of rhythmic figures but maintains the 2:1 note ratio of second species. Both upper and lower voices are allowed to move in second species against the opposite voice. Moreover, the relationship is sometimes half notes against whole note (m. 3) and sometimes quarter notes against half

⁴Knud Jeppesen, *Counterpoint: The Polyphonic Vocal Style of the Sixteenth Century* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1939).

⁵H. Gilbert Trythall, *Sixteenth-Century Counterpoint* (Madison, WI: Brown & Benchmark, 1994)

EXAMPLE 1. Exercise in strict second species (Owen, p. 38)

cantus firmus

EXAMPLE 2. Exercise in expanded second species (Owen, p. 38)

[sic] [sic]

note (m. 4). This proportional change in the second species relationship is similar to Trythall's approach discussed above, but is not nearly as systematic. The modifications of Owen's expanded species approach seem to me quite a bit for beginning counterpoint students to manage. Perhaps a sympathetic instructor could provide some limits for the numerous possibilities of the expanded species in order to help students gain some initial confidence.⁶

One annoying aspect of this section of the text is the notational inconsistency. Some examples employ continuous bar lines through all staves of an ensemble piece, others use separate bar lines on the individual staves. On a single page (p. 51) we see one example with *mensurstriche*, another with continuous bar lines, and yet another with no bar lines at all! Some species exercises are notated with bar lines (p. 35) and some without (p. 38).

A problem of potentially greater impact in musical examples and exercises is the often unannounced shift in meter between 4/2 and 4/4. The complete examples from the sixteenth-century sacred repertory are presented in the now standard 4/2, while many of the species exercises are in 4/4. Sometimes this metric change can be problematic in the expanded species exercises. Example 3 shows an exercise in expanded fourth species.

Following Owen's procedure of allowing a proportional change in the species notation, the suspension can now be written as two quarters against one half (see m. 2). As Jeppesen points out, the suspended quarter note forming a dissonance should rarely occur after an unaccented half note.⁷ Of course, if the note values of the exercise were doubled, the suspension problem would disappear.

As in its treatment of modal counterpoint, this book differs from some other well-known texts in its approach to tonal counterpoint. In his *A Practical Approach to Eighteenth-Century Counterpoint*,⁸ Robert Gauldin begins with note-against-note exercises and proceeds

⁶One organizational problem appears in Owen's treatment of expanded fourth species: his inclusion of suspension decorations before they are adequately explained in fifth species.

⁷Jeppesen, *Counterpoint*, 143.

⁸Robert Gauldin, *A Practical Approach to Eighteenth-Century Counterpoint*. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988).

EXAMPLE 3. Exercise in expanded fourth species (Owen, p. 45)

The musical score is written on two staves, both in treble clef and key of D major (indicated by two sharps). The notation includes various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals. Above the notes, there are letters 'P', 'S', and 'R' indicating specific musical techniques or patterns. Below the notes, there are circled numbers: 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, and 8. Some of these numbers are grouped together, such as (2) 3, (7) 6, (2) 3, (4) 3, (2) 3, (7) 6, (7) 6, (3) 6, (8) 7, (6) 5, and (7) 6 5 8. The score is divided into measures by vertical bar lines, and there are repeat signs at the beginning and end of the piece.

to diminution techniques in the ratios of 2:1, 3:1, 4:1, and even beyond. These diminutions do not fit strictly within the constraints of the traditional species, since a much wider variety of dissonance types and chordal figuration is employed. Of course, all of the diminutions occur with a harmonic framework. Kent Kennan, in his *Counterpoint*,⁹ takes an approach similar to Gauldin's with the gradual introduction of elaborative techniques within increasing rhythmic ratios of 2:1, 3:1, and 4:1. In contrast, Owen approaches tonal writing through the melodic elaboration of simple harmonic progressions (chapter 15). Unfortunately, this treatment of elaborative principles should probably come earlier in the text. In chapter 12, on continuous variations, students are asked to compose variations of a simple harmonic skeleton by adding "divisions" to the two upper parts of the three-part texture. They are thus required to do something that is explained more fully later in the book.

Still, there is much to recommend in Owen's handling of tonal counterpoint, especially its coverage of the important genres of the period. He divides this part of the text into two parts: one devoted to the early Baroque (chapters 11-14), the other devoted to the late Baroque (chapters 15-24). The former is especially good because it treats the harmonic and contrapuntal innovations of the period—a subject usually avoided in most texts. Other topics in this section include continuous variation (ground bass, chaconne, and passacaglia), trio texture, and predecessors of the fugue (canzona, ricercar, fantasia, and choral fugato). The latter topic exhibits a "spiral" organization in relation to later chapters on the mature fugue: Owen presents basic information on fugal exposition to which he returns in more expanded form in later chapters.

The section on counterpoint in the late Baroque is the longest section of the text, occupying about one third of its total length. In this section we find the core of the traditional subjects in tonal counterpoint: the chorale prelude, invention, canon, and fugue. The chapter on the chorale prelude is very effective in its presentation of the various types of this genre. I also like the way Owen builds increasing complexity into the exercises of the fugue chapters. In the first

⁹Kent Kennan, *Counterpoint*, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1987).

chapter (chapter 21), students compose subjects and responses. In the second (chapter 22), they compose complete three- and four-part expositions. Finally (chapter 23), they compose an entire fugue. This section of the text closes with a discussion of genres using fugal technique, such as the gigue, fugal sonata movement, and the fugal chorus. Like the material on the early Baroque, these genres are often omitted from counterpoint texts.

Part five of the text, on polyphony in the Classical and Romantic eras, introduces no new technical material but is nonetheless significant in providing a class the opportunity to study interesting post-Baroque examples of polyphony. The author runs into some trouble when he attempts to generalize about the stylistic characteristics of certain periods. While some observations, like those regarding periodic phrase structure in Classical music, are relevant, others, like the importance of primary triads, hardly qualify as stylistic differences between centuries within the common-practice period.

Owen divides his coverage of early twentieth-century polyphony into chapters dealing with serial/atonal and extended tonal techniques. The first chapter is not intended as an exhaustive discussion of twelve-tone and atonal music; rather, Owen gives the student just enough information to draw some initial conclusions about the pieces studied. Although I would have chosen an example simpler in texture than the fourth piece from Schoenberg's op. 23, Owen's choice of the second movement of Webern's op. 27 piano variations is a good one.¹⁰

In the chapter on extended tonal procedures, Owen presents examples by Hindemith ("Fuga quarta in A" from *Ludus Tonalis*), Bartók ("Theme and Inversion" from *Mikrokosmos*, Book IV), and Stravinsky ("Great Chorale" from *L'Histoire du Soldat*). These choices allow the author to discuss a variety of topics. The Hindemith leads to a discussion of nontertian harmony and the fugue's relationship to traditional contrapuntal technique; the Bartók to a discussion of two-part counterpoint, modal implications, and motivic develop-

¹⁰There is an error in the discussion of the Webern movement. The motivic set of eighths with grace notes first appearing in mm. 3-4 at a dynamic level of *p* appears at other dynamic levels not only in m. 6, as Owen states, but in mm. 17, 18, and 21 as well.

ment; and the Stravinsky to a discussion of implied keys and voice leading procedures.

Harold Owen's *Modal and Tonal Counterpoint: From Josquin to Stravinsky* embodies an approach to counterpoint instruction that stresses the historical and stylistic development of polyphony. The text, with minimal supplementation, could serve as the primary text for either a combined counterpoint course or the traditional separate courses in modal and tonal counterpoint. While the author inevitably must sacrifice the detailed compositional instruction of many competing texts, the reward for the general student is a synthesis of analytical, theoretical, and historical detail. Those instructors who see counterpoint as a significant component of a broad music education should welcome Professor Owen's contribution to the pedagogy of counterpoint.
