

USING SPECIES COUNTERPOINT IN THE UNDERGRADUATE THEORY CURRICULUM

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Much debate has arisen in recent years regarding the place of species counterpoint in the undergraduate music theory curriculum. To many teachers, especially those of a Schenkerian orientation, no modern pedagogical device can rival the traditional disciplines of figured-bass realization and species counterpoint. No one would argue that these two teaching devices do not possess a long and highly respected history in the teaching of tonal music theory. Today, for instance, we can still study the counterpoint exercises of Beethoven and the teaching notes of Mozart. Nevertheless, no modern pedagogue would claim that historical tradition alone justifies the use of a particular teaching device. In this regard I am reminded of Schoenberg's decidedly negative opinion of figured-bass realization. In his *Theory of Harmony*, he states that teaching figured bass "serves no purpose and is a waste of time, hinders more important work, and fails above all to make the pupil self-reliant."¹ As his own textbook on basic counterpoint suggests, Schoenberg apparently held this discipline in much higher regard than figured-bass realization.² Whether or not he simply considered the practice of counterpoint an inherently more creative activity is not at issue here. Of greater interest to us is Schoenberg's faith in the usefulness of counterpoint for the music student.

If we indeed believe in the value of counterpoint training for undergraduate music students and grant it a place in the undergraduate theory curriculum, then three issues immediately arise: chronology, content, and relevance. We can perhaps clarify and best address these issues in terms of the following questions: 1) when should we introduce the study of counterpoint; 2) what should we include in our discussion of counterpoint for students in the standard two-year course sequence in music theory; and 3) how can we relate counterpoint studies to other aspects of theory instruction, such as training in harmony and analysis, and the development of aural skills. The second of these questions is far too broad to deal with in this paper. I have chosen instead to limit my discussion of curriculum content to the traditional species, almost universally recognized as an appropriate starting place for training in counterpoint. This paper is divided into three

parts. In the first part, through a survey of some recent articles and theory texts, I will present the opposing arguments in the debate surrounding the inclusion of species counterpoint in the undergraduate theory curriculum. In the second part, I will discuss the teaching approaches of Johann Philipp Kirnberger and Mozart, as well as some species exercises of Mozart and Cherubini. Finally, I will show how these older approaches to training in species counterpoint suggest a compromise between opposing modern views of its place in the undergraduate theory program—a compromise I will illustrate with specific suggestions regarding teaching strategies.

A forceful advocate of the strict Schenkerian view of species training is John Rothgeb.³ The theory curriculum that Rothgeb proposes begins with an entire year devoted solely to species counterpoint and figured bass with no reference whatsoever to harmonic theory. Rothgeb cites two reasons for deferring the study of harmony until the second year: the advanced nature of harmonic theory itself and its susceptibility to misunderstanding and misapplication.

Rothgeb's first point can be summarized as follows: harmonic theory is the product of several generations of theorists; we therefore cannot expect beginning students to cope with a set of concepts whose precise formulation has eluded numerous musicians of the past. To this argument one might respond that as contemporary practitioners of tonal harmony, we stand before a fully developed and well documented theory of common-practice harmony. We are not asking our students to resynthesize or recreate the theorizing of several generations; we are simply asking them to grasp our distillation of certain basic facts about harmonic syntax. As an example of the misapplication of harmonic theory, Rothgeb cites the use of Roman numerals to describe chords generated by melodic rather than harmonic processes. Although I will not dispute the existence of this all-too-common error, it seems to me the potential for a misunderstanding should be more an impetus to help the student "get it right" than a rationale for completely avoiding an admittedly difficult task.

Somewhat less controversial than Rothgeb's curriculum is Leo Kraft's pedagogical approach to species counterpoint.⁴ Kraft espouses the Schenkerian view that the species present us with "many of the basic factors that make tonal music work."⁵ In developing his integration of harmony and counterpoint, Kraft introduces the student to the species after a discussion of melody but before any discussion of harmony.⁶ The final stage in his presentation of first-species counterpoint serves as the link between harmony and counterpoint: this stage consists of four-part progressions guided by purely linear, as distinct from harmonic, considerations.

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On the opposing side of the species debate are a number of beginning theory texts that relegate counterpoint to the stylistic pigeonhole of Renaissance and Baroque compositional practices. These texts, in contrast to traditional "harmony" texts, generally reflect the tenets of "comprehensive musicianship" and exhibit the following characteristics: 1) a more or less chronological approach to the presentation of musical materials up to and including the 20th century; 2) coverage of stylistic traits of the various historical periods; 3) the inclusion of extensive compositional exercises; 4) coverage of stereotypical musical forms; and 5) (an admittedly subjective observation) an impatience with "theory" for its own sake coupled with an emphasis on practical skills. Before briefly surveying three representative texts, I should mention here that Kraft's *Gradus* is unusual among the "comprehensive" texts in its separation of stylistic elements from basic counterpoint instruction.

Bruce Benward's widely used *Music in Theory and Practice* contains no mention of species counterpoint but includes in its second volume separate chapters on stylistic counterpoint of the 16th and 18th centuries as well as extensive analyses of a Lasso motet and a Bach fugue.⁷ In his *Perspectives in Music Theory*, Paul Cooper includes a presentation of the species within a larger discussion of Baroque contrapuntal procedures such as canon and fugue.⁸ Cooper attempts to relate the species to actual musical practice by using as illustrative material short musical examples exhibiting the rhythmic relationships of the species. In contrast to Cooper's approach, a more recent text, Earl Henry's *Music Theory*, locates the species within the realm of 16th-century modal counterpoint.⁹ What the above three "comprehensive" texts have in common is a relatively late introduction to counterpoint, occurring after the student has acquired basic harmony skills. Moreover, the view of counterpoint expressed in these texts is quite narrow: rather than as a force equal to or arguably more significant than purely harmonic relationships in the generation of tonal events, these texts present counterpoint as a set of specific compositional procedures that form one of the many elements in a composer's technical arsenal.

As I mentioned earlier, one crucial factor in the pedagogical use of the species is their chronological position in the course syllabus: more specifically, whether we place them before, during, or after the presentation of harmonic concepts. Of course, student attitudes and reactions play a significant role in a decision of this kind. Put species counterpoint (especially in three or more voices) before harmony and run the risk of drowning students in a sea of abstraction. They may dutifully memorize a set of rules, but, through lack of experience with actual music, they will be unable to see these rules in operation. Moreover, after spending several weeks or more in rudiments training, students are anxious to forge ahead in "real music"

to apply the fundamentals they have just learned. Most students who come to our college-level theory courses with any pre-college theory background at all most likely will have had some introduction to harmony. Ideally students should be called upon to relate course material to what they themselves bring to that course. Delaying harmony training too long will inevitably result in increasing impatience and eventual frustration. Besides, teaching chord progressions from a *totally* linear perspective merely shifts the bias away from harmonic theory. What is needed in the teaching of tonal harmony is the eventual *integration* of the harmonic and contrapuntal principles.

Introducing the species after an extensive coverage of harmony often leaves students wondering about the purpose of such an apparent digression. Why, they might ask, should we retrace voice-leading concepts in two parts, away from actual music, when these principles have already been thoroughly covered? The third option, teaching harmony and the species concurrently, presents the formidable challenge of relating the two disciplines and thereby avoiding unnecessary instructional fragmentation. This task is made even more difficult by students' often limited experience with harmony at the time the species are first introduced.

Regardless of where in the curriculum the species appear, to effectively use them as an instructional tool, the instructor must consistently emphasize the links between the species and harmonic theory. In contrast, some writers, adhering to Schenker's distinction between voice leading and harmonic progression, exclude from their discussions of the species any consideration whatsoever of harmonic relationships. Felix Salzer and Carl Schacter, in their *Counterpoint in Composition*, write that "the student must not concern himself with chord relationships of harmonic direction."¹⁰ This point is also emphasized by Allen Forte and Steven E. Gilbert in their *Introduction to Schenkerian Analysis*.¹¹ Students are reminded that

Specifically excluded from all the species is any reference to harmony in the sense of organized harmonic progression, harmonic scale steps . . . , melodic statements of harmonies (arpeggiations), or patterns such as sequence, which might suggest an underlying harmonic scheme. Voice leading is the primary determinant of tonal motion in the species exercise.¹

According to Rothgeb, attempts to incorporate characteristics of free composition into the species would "sacrifice certain features of the theory of counterpoint which lie at the very heart of the study of voice leading. . . ."¹³

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A look at some of the historic treatises of the tonal period suggests their authors did not share the more recent view of a counterpoint devoid of harmonic relationships and implication. In Johann Philipp Kirnberger's treatise, *The Art of Strict Musical Composition* (1771-76), nine chapters on various aspects of harmony and harmonic progression precede any discussion of counterpoint.¹⁴ Kirnberger states that "... the melodic progression of a voice is subject to certain harmonic rules, even when it is considered without reference to other voices."¹⁵ First among Kirnberger's requirement for correct and strict counterpoint is the necessity for chords to progress according to harmonic principles: in his opinion it is impossible to write even good two-part counterpoint without a thorough knowledge of four-part writing.¹⁶ From his musical examples, it is clear that to Kirnberger four-part writing meant chorale-style writing.

Another significant document in the history of theory pedagogy consists of Thomas Attwood's composition studies with Mozart.¹⁷ Attwood began his studies with Mozart in August of 1785. After a complete treatment of harmony using the figured bass model, Mozart began lessons in free composition in the autumn of 1785. Lessons in two- and three-part species counterpoint took place the following winter; Mozart and Attwood may have resumed exercises in free composition at the same time or, at the latest, in the spring of 1786.

A number of the species exercises that Mozart composed as models for Attwood exhibit a strong harmonic orientation. Figure 1 shows a counterpoint in first species below a cantus firmus in C major.¹⁸

Figure 1. Mozart, Attwood Studies, p. 46.



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I have added to the exercise Roman numerals showing the strongly functional harmonic progression suggested by the counterpoint voices. Note also the traditional first species cadence consisting of the third (or sixth) moving by step to the unison (or octave) on the tonic pitch.

Figure 2 shows Mozart's demonstration of consonant suspensions in fourth species.¹⁹

Figure 2. Mozart, *Attwood Studies*, p. 61.



The obvious sequential nature of the exercise is interesting in light of the usual contemporary restrictions against sequential passages in species exercises (see the above quote from Forte and Gilbert). Note especially Mozart's abandonment of the traditional descending stepwise cadence in the cantus firmus; instead he incorporates the descending fifth as a clear reference to the harmonic cadence. Moreover, this authentic cadence is prepared by the implication of dominant preparation harmonies (VI, IV, and ii) in measures 6 and 7.

We shall now turn to species exercises by Luigi Cherubini that, like Mozart's, exhibit a strong harmonic orientation.²⁰ The first, in Figure 3, is a third species exercise in three voices with cantus firmus in the upper voice.²¹ Note the motion toward the mediant chord beginning in measure 5 with the dominant of III. The exercise closes with a perfect authentic cadence, as does the Mozart exercise shown in Figure 2. Although most modern texts forbid the use of the leading tone in the minor mode before the cadence, Cherubini uses it in measure 3 as part of a dominant-tonic progression.

The four-voice exercise in third species shown in Figure 4 provides an example of the harmonic generation of chromaticism.²²

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Figure 3. Cherubini, *A Treatise on Counterpoint and Fugue*, p. 24.

The first system of Figure 3 consists of two staves. The top staff (treble clef) has a measure number 5 in a box above it. The bottom staff (bass clef) has the label v^6/III below it. The second system also consists of two staves, with the bottom staff labeled 111 below it.

Figure 4. Cherubini, *Treatise*, p. 32.

The first system of Figure 4 consists of two staves. The top staff (treble clef) has a measure number 6 in a box above it. The bottom staff (bass clef) has the label v/v below it. The second system also consists of two staves, with the bottom staff labeled v below it.

In measure 6 of the exercise Cherubini uses F-sharp as part of the dominant of V, which enters in the following measure. This exercise, as do the other

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exercises already discussed, closes with a strong cadential progression incorporating dominant preparation harmonies.

The concept of embellishment is integral to the treatment of suspensions in fifth-species counterpoint. All of us are certainly familiar with the standard suspension decorations found in any counterpoint text. Mozart, in fact, devoted an entire page to decorated suspensions in the Attwood papers.²³ It is less common, however, to think of passages in the more rhythmically active species as embellishments or elaborations of first or second species structures. Yet I believe that, in several examples from the Attwood studies, this is exactly what Mozart had in mind. Figure 5 shows exercises in second and third species above the same cantus firmus.²⁴

Figure 5. Mozart, Attwood Studies, pp. 49 and 53.



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The exercise in third species is clearly an elaboration of the exercise in second species. The alignment of the counterpoint voices in Figure 6 demonstrates this relationship.

Figure 6.



The elaborative process in this case involves the addition to the second species line of neighbor tones, passing tones, and chordal skips.

Also from the Attwood studies, the next two examples demonstrate even more convincingly that Mozart conceived of the more rhythmically active species exercises as elaborations of simpler structures. Figures 7 and 8, in third and fifth species respectively, show that he added numerical figures to highlight the basic contrapuntal framework in these exercises.²⁵ Although in neither case a strict first- or second-species structure, the underlying contrapuntal framework in the above examples exhibits characteristics of several species. In the first two measures of figure 6 for instance, Mozart has indicated dissonant passing figures typical of second species. Notice how in measures 3–6 he has used slurs to indicate the voice exchanges comprising the intervals of a sixth and tenth. Figure 8 incorporates decorated suspensions, although in measures 6, 8, and 10 we might disagree with Mozart as to the exact points of resolution. (The first figure of measure 8 is obviously an error.) Before leaving these examples, we should also note the strong harmonic orientation of Figure 7 and the authentic cadence at its close.²⁶

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Figure 7. Mozart, Attwood Studies, p. 58.

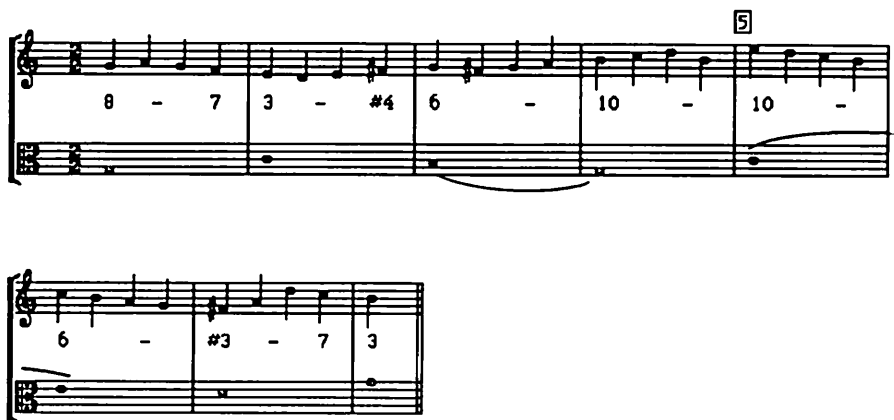
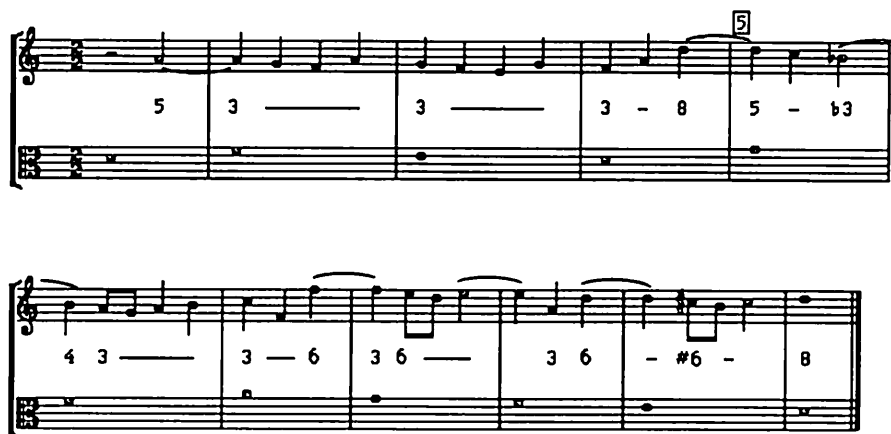


Figure 8. Mozart, Attwood Studies, p. 61.



In the remainder of this paper, I will outline a strategy for incorporating species counterpoint within the standard beginning undergraduate theory program. This strategy, the most important element of which is the integration of harmony and the species, has a historical basis in the peda-

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gological approaches of Kirnberger and Mozart that I have described above. I believe, along with Kirnberger, that a study of at least diatonic harmony should precede the undertaking of species study. This means that most classes would begin the species in the second or third semester of theory instruction.

Figure 9 represents a first-species exercise that, as I will demonstrate, could serve as the basis for a set of harmonically conceived species exercises.

Figure 9.



Figure 11.



The added embellishments include chordal skips, passing, and neighbor tones. After these stages in the exercise process, the student could be allowed greater freedom in applying embellishments; one could move into a strict fifth species version or directly into an even freer approach. Figure 12 gives a further elaboration of our exercise with some deviation from the standard rules.

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Figure 12.



Note the unprepared seventh on the second beat of measure 3, which could be considered an incomplete upper neighbor, and the quarter-note suspension at the beginning of measure 4. In addition, the last five measures provide an example of compound melodic structure. This stage of the exercise can serve to bridge the gap between strict counterpoint and free composition. Practically speaking, this approach ensures that the student's compositional attempts always have a harmonic-contrapuntal framework as guide, thereby avoiding the common problem of harmonically incoherent elaborations. Another advantage of these exercises is that they provide a more objective, teachable approach to the composition of tonal melody. Creative compositional activities do have a place in the undergraduate theory curriculum, but at the early stages, when students must assimilate common-practice techniques and not concern themselves with developing a compositional style, carefully structured and guided exercises are more pedagogically efficient.

In classroom analytical discussions we need to take advantage of opportunities to relate species counterpoint and free composition. The short passage from a Handel minuet shown in Figure 13 will serve to demonstrate the kind of contrapuntal relations I think we should try to help our students understand.

Figure 13. Handel, Minuet (*Händelgesellschaft* II/iii, 7).

The first beats of the initial three measures contain the first-species interval progression 8-10-10, which coincides with the harmonic progression I-V-I. Compound melodic structure is explicit in these measures with the descending leaps on the second beat of measures 1 and 2. Chordal skips elaborate the initial bass notes of these measures. The melody note A on the first beat of measure 3 moves to its lower neighbor G, itself elaborated on beats 2 and 3, and returns on the first beat of measure 4. Assuming the bass C on beat 3 of measure 3 results from a chordal skip, the first species progression here comprises parallel 10ths, which continue through measure 4 to the first beat of measure 5; the embellishments in measures 4 and 5 are incomplete neighbors (escape tones). The parallel 10ths serve as a connective between the tonic chord at the beginning of measure 4 and the dominant chord of measure 5. The entire first-species framework of this passage, shown in Figure 14, may not be very interesting from the perspective of intervallic diversity, but it does focus attention on the usefulness of species counterpoint in understanding techniques of compositional elaboration. The student with sufficient background could easily attempt such freer elaborative procedures at a later stage of theory study.

Figure 14. Handel, Minuet: First species contrapuntal structure.



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Shorter versions of the exercises I have proposed could also provide material for dictation practice. Although the typical two-part dictation exercises might begin with strict species, more beneficial to the student, in my opinion, would be a series of exercises based on an unembellished harmonic progression. This harmonic progression would be analogous to the harmonized first species exercise shown in Figure 10. Successive stages of elaboration could then be dictated, beginning with the rhythmic relationships of the species and proceeding to embellishments more characteristic of free composition. This approach unites two traditional dictation exercises—the harmonic and contrapuntal—that in many aural skills classes are often separate and unrelated in purpose.

Although the followers of Schenker have most often been at the forefront in advocating the species approach for the teaching of tonal music theory, recognizing the value of this traditional discipline does not depend on one's particular theoretical or analytical philosophy. At the very least, the species provide a systematic introduction to consonant and dissonant embellishing techniques. With guidance from some of the great teachers of the past, however, I believe we can use the species within a comprehensive program of elementary composition, analysis, and activities directed toward the training of the musical ear. Using harmony as a starting point, I believe it is possible to teach counterpoint so that, in the student's mind, it is not the antithesis of harmony, but its equal partner in the formation of structurally coherent tonal events.

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NOTES

¹Arnold Schoenberg, *Theory of Harmony* (1911), translated by Roy E. Carter (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), p. 14.

²Arnold Schoenberg, *Preliminary Exercises in Counterpoint*, edited by Leonard Stein (London: Farber and Farber, 1963).

³"Schenkerian Theory: Its Implications for the Undergraduate Theory Curriculum," *Music Theory Spectrum* 3 (1981): 142-149.

⁴*Gradus* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976), and "A New Approach to Species Counterpoint," *College Music Symposium* 21/1 (Spring 1981): 60-66.

⁵*Gradus*, p. 117.

⁶Kraft modifies the traditional species ordering by placing the fourth before the third species.

⁷Bruce Benward, *Music in Theory and Practice*, 2nd ed. (Dubuque: Wm. C. Brown, 1982).

⁸Paul Cooper, *Perspectives in Music Theory*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981), pp. 258-261.

⁹Earl Henry, *Music Theory*, p. 22. Henry idiosyncratically presents an introduction to counterpoint (chapter 2 of volume 2) after a chapter on fugue.

¹⁰New York: McGraw-Hill, 1969, p. 26.

¹¹New York: W.W. Norton, 1982.

¹²*Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹³"Strict Counterpoint and Tonal Theory," *Journal of Music Theory* 19/2 (Fall 1975): 260-284.

¹⁴Translated by David Beach and Jurgen Thym (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1982).

¹⁵*Ibid.*, p. 151.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 159, 187.

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¹⁷Erich Hertzmann and Cecil B. Oldman, editors, *Thomas Attwood's Theorie und Kompositionsstudien bei Mozart*, in *Mozart, Neue Ausgabe sämtlicher Werke*, X:30-31 (Basel: Bärenreiter Kassel, 1965). The background information on these studies provided in this paper is based largely on Daniel Hertz, "Thomas Attwood's Lessons in Composition with Mozart," *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 100 (1973-74): 175-183. See also Rosalie Athol Schellhous, "Voice Leading in Mozart's Figured Basses for Attwood," *Journal of Music Theory Pedagogy* (Fall 1988):187-223.

¹⁸Attwood Studies, p. 46. In the following counterpoint exercises, I have changed some of the original clefs to accord with more usual contemporary practice.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, p. 61.

²⁰Luigi Cherubini, *A Treatise on Counterpoint and Fugue* (1835) (London: J.A. Novello, 1854).

²¹*Ibid.*, p. 24. Cherubini wrote all of his counterpoint exercises on separate staves. For ease of reading I have rewritten the exercises on the grand staff.

²²*Ibid.*, p. 32.

²³Attwood Studies, p. 68.

²⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 49 and 53. The cantus firmus is by Fux.

²⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 58 and 61. The cantus firmus of example 7 is the same as that of example 5.

²⁶Since this example is not followed by a double bar and its counterpoint voice does not conclude with the tonic pitch, Mozart may not have intended it as complete exercise.