

Review-Article

ROBERT GAULDIN, *A PRACTICAL APPROACH
TO SIXTEENTH-CENTURY COUNTERPOINT*

(Prentice-Hall, 1985)

THOMAS CHRISTENSEN

Sixteenth-century (or "modal") counterpoint has long occupied a venerable if dusty corner in most music theory curriculums. Curiously, though, there has been a sharp disagreement concerning its pedagogic function. A traditional view holds that one studies sixteenth-century counterpoint less for intrinsic historical value than for extrinsic compositional value. The sacred polyphony of Palestrina and his contemporaries is canonized as "ideal" music which embodies in the purest form absolute and eternal principles of music. In the words of one of the most committed advocates of this view, it is music which "does not subordinate itself to the expressive will of an artistic personality, or of a historic epoch but follows only its own purely musical laws and urges."¹ These "purely musical laws," Jeppesen continues, are "fruitful and eternally valid." They govern the most fundamental aesthetic norms of musical structure: the graceful shaping of a melodic phrase; the poised balancing of lines within a unified whole; the strictest rules on the placement and resolution of dissonance. The catholicity of these principles is usually learned and applied, then, through the abstracted context of species counterpoint. In many theory curriculums, these same principles are then carried over—with slight modifications—to the following semester for the study of tonal counterpoint. Emphasis is thus placed upon the continuity of contrapuntal principles within the evolution of musical style.

In opposition to the view of these "idealists," a small, but growing, minority of theorists have argued for a more critically historic approach towards sixteenth-century counterpoint. By extracting from Palestrina's music an abstracted list of counterpoint rules and melodic prescriptions, they argue, one necessarily reduces compositional practice to the lowest common denominator, thereby providing an oversimplified picture of Palestrina's music, to say

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

nothing of sixteenth-century contrapuntal practice in general. The concern of these theorists is, instead, to get as close as possible to the actual repertoire and to answer questions of style, genre, and historical development, even if this is at the expense of a unified codification of practice. Not only does the historicist methodology provide a richer and more accurate view of sixteenth-century practice, they believe, it avoids the pernicious suggestion that tonal counterpoint is some kind of teleological culmination to which modal counterpoint serves as a preliminary and pedagogically elementary foundation.

Unfortunately, the historicist epistemology offers little aid to the theory student. Loath to reduce sixteenth-century music to any set of abstract rules or compositional prescriptions, the historicist offers, instead, endless numbers of empirical descriptions and illustrations. Yet the student wanting to understand the principles of this music in any systematic way—let alone to imitate it—is left floundering without any didactic guides.

While the above characterizations are obviously generalizations about a wide and diverse literature on sixteenth-century counterpoint, they do accurately capture, I think, the two basic polarities of counterpoint pedagogy to which belong the vast majority of textbooks. Of the two approaches, the "idealists" are by far the oldest and most common, the classic texts being by Fux, Cherubini, and Bellerman. The "historicist" school is a more recent and largely English-speaking phenomenon. The principal texts here are by R. O. Morris, A. Tillman Merrit, and Gustave Soderlund. Jeppesen's work falls somewhere between the two approaches. Although he was clearly sympathetic to the "idealist" school, he was also a thorough and informed historian, sensitive to the stylistic and historical problems associated with the music of Palestrina. I will have more to say on the pedagogical implications of these respective epistemologies below.

It is with this problem in mind, then, that Robert Gauldin has written his textbook, *A Practical Approach to Sixteenth-Century Counterpoint*. Gauldin's sympathies, it is clear, lie with the historicist school. He rejects, from the outset, the species approach in favor of a direct empirical description of sixteenth-century contrapuntal practice. But wishing to avoid the pedagogical difficulties of previous "direct approaches," he has attempted to introduce real systematization and order in his text. And he succeeds in this task remarkably well. By combining rigorous analysis with imaginatively designed composition exercises in increasing degrees of complexity, the student learns to master systematically a wide and diverse representation of sixteenth-century music.

The student begins by analyzing—and then writing—a single vocal

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY COUNTERPOINT

line conforming to the basic melodic and rhythmic characteristics of Palestrina's music. The student then proceeds to combine these lines in an appropriate and idiomatic manner. Gradually, he works his way from short two-voiced compositions to longer works of greater complexity. Gauldin correctly notes in his introduction that modal counterpoint textbooks rarely ever treat music in more than three voices, while the norm for the period was 4 and 5 voices (p. vii). Thus, polyphonic writing in 4 and 5 voices is fully covered, as indeed is music in 6 and 8 voices. In the course of the text, diverse topics are introduced such as sixteenth-century notation, mode, imitation, the canon and double counterpoint. Advanced compositional techniques from the sixteenth century not normally dealt with in practical textbooks are also covered: paraphrase and parody techniques; the use of a cantus firmus in a tenor mass; familiar style; and polychoral writing. Gauldin even offers two chapters at the end of his book on extended *musica ficta* and chromaticism as used by the late sixteenth-century madrigalists and keyboard composers.

Undoubtedly the greatest strength of Gauldin's book is its abundant use of musical examples. On virtually every page of the text there is at least one musical example illustrating some relevant musical problem under discussion. A number of these examples are ingeniously composed by Gauldin himself in order to illustrate a particular contrapuntal device or compositional procedure. In one example the melody of the well-known Thanksgiving hymn *We Gather Together* is exploited motivically in imitative texture, as well as in a cantus firmus in the tenor of a four-part composition (pp. 155-56). Elsewhere, an original five-note motive is incorporated in different contrapuntal manners into a number of lengthy illustrations. By these means, the student is given graphic illustrations of the many idiomatic polyphonic contexts and contrapuntal manipulations to which a melody or short motive may be subjected.

Even more valuable than Gauldin's original illustrations, though, are the generous citations from sixteenth-century polyphonic literature. Every important contrapuntal technique, compositional style, and genre is illustrated with appropriate excerpts from the works of Renaissance composers. These are not short citations, either. At the end of each major subdivision in the book, there is a chapter containing the music of up to a half-dozen complete compositions. These chapters serve as both illustrations of the subject matter covered, as well as literature for analysis. While Gauldin's book does not offer the quantity of music found in Soderlund's well known anthology², it does provide more scholarly transcriptions and an overall richer sampling of Renaissance literature. Of course, this is not unexpected in a textbook of sixteenth-

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

century counterpoint; what is remarkable, though, is the diversity of sources cited. Not surprisingly, it is the sacred vocal polyphony of the Counter-Reformation composers led by Palestrina who receive the largest number of quotations (the runners-up being, respectively, Lassus and Victoria). But Gauldin makes a point to include the music of a number of composers not normally discussed in traditional modal counterpoint textbooks. Thus the English school is amply represented with works by Gibbons, Byrd, Tye, Weelkes, and Morley. So too are composers from the earlier generation of the sixteenth century represented (Josquin and Isaac), as well as "modernists" such as Rore, Gesualdo, and Galelei. A number of surprising pieces are to be found, constituting a rich tableau of Italian, German, French, and English styles: masses and motets, canzonets and biciniums, chansons, madrigals, and instrumental music. The wide spectrum covered by all this music, illustrating a wealth of compositional styles, genres, and idioms, provides the student with a rich exposure to sixteenth-century music.

Yet it is just these strengths in Gauldin's book that offer perils in the classroom. By presenting such a wide range of music to the student, Gauldin is faced with a real pedagogical dilemma. The fact is, the species pedagogues have a valid point: much of sixteenth-century contrapuntal practice can be described by a small number of rules, and hence formulated into prescriptive formulas for compositional imitation—this with a precision unthinkable with any other musical style.

Can one imagine a comparable situation with tonal music, wherein we compile a list of prescriptive rules for a one-semester course in, say, the "high-classical" style, with the aim being for the student to produce a respectable, if not inspired, imitation of a Mozart minuet and trio? While there exist those students (and teachers) for whom such a goal might be attainable, I do not believe there are many. And I would be most interested in seeing such a set of rules; those who have sought an algorithm by which to generate tonal compositions with the voice-leading rules of Schenkerian theory have been notably unsuccessful.

This addresses at least in part, I think, David Lewin's challenge to the "historicist" school to defend why it would choose to have the student learn to write in the style of the sixteenth century as opposed to, say, "the organ works of Bach" or "Notre Dame polyphony."³ Granting the desirability of having the student learn to write in some historical musical language (which is itself another subject for debate, but unrelated to the present argument), it is precisely the consistency and (superficially) the simplicity of sixteenth-century polyphony that

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY COUNTERPOINT

allows it, above all other repertoires, to be systematized and imitated. This, of course, in no way denies the idealist claims of a deeper compositional value to the music. Indeed, at this level, the historicist and idealist theorist may be in total accord.

The use of prescriptive formulas for compositional imitation, then, has meant focusing on an admittedly selective repertoire, one heavily represented by a single composer: Palestrina. But by introducing the earlier practice of Josquin or Zarlino, as well as the idiosyncracies of the English or Madrigalist schools, let alone the exigencies of parody or instrumental writing, Gauldin presents music, which, he himself acknowledges, does not always conform to the normative contrapuntal principles followed by Palestrina. Their presentation in the text can only compound the already great difficulties facing the student.

To be fair to Gauldin, the majority of his musical illustrations are stylistically homogeneous. And when an example from some earlier (or later) practice is introduced (usually to illustrate a specific compositional technique or genre), Gauldin is always careful to alert the reader to the fact. There is, nonetheless, a discontinuity in ranging in the same chapter from "pieces that incorporate the abstruse canonic technique found near the end of the fifteenth century to those which incorporate procedures of the Venetian school" (p. 158).

The root of the problem, I think, is Gauldin's bifurcated pedagogical aim. He tells us in the very first sentence of his preface that his goal is dual, being "the acquisition of writing skills in the contrapuntal discipline," as well as "the simulation of sixteenth-century sacred polyphonic idioms" (p. vii). But these are really two different goals; learning the principles governing the contrapuntal manipulation of vocal lines is a quite different task than learning the historical genres and idioms in which these lines occur. The fact is, when talking of the "abstruse canonic technique found near the end of the fifteenth century" or "procedures of the Venetian school," one is dealing with problems beyond—and in many cases different from—those posed by the suspension, passing tone, and the *cambiata*. To be sure, one cannot properly speak of Renaissance counterpoint independently of any genre or style. But the advanced compositional genres and styles introduced by Gauldin presuppose a normative contrapuntal style. And this normative style can—and for pedagogical purposes should—be considered independently of genre and style. As any theory teacher well knows, just assimilating the basic rules of two- and three-part counterpoint is a challenge for most undergraduates. How then can the same students be expected to master with any competence all the advanced topics presented? To draw an analogy from tonal harmony, we would not have the student write a sonata or

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

concerto, let alone use advanced chromatic harmony, before he has mastered the principles of elementary four-part harmony. And even then, we certainly would not expect to do all this in one course. Why should it be so different with Renaissance music?

As Gauldin's text is structured, there is a formidable amount of material to cover. Each of the 22 chapters in the book contains ambitious assignments consisting of analyses, transcriptions, and compositions. Any one of the composition assignments would itself seem to be a major project for the student, one not so easily tossed off for the following class. Just consider a sampling of these: an original three-part "puzzle canon" (ch. 11); a four-voiced *Sanctus* using paraphrase and cantus-firmus technique (ch. 13); a five-voiced *Kyrie* parodying a Victoria motet (ch. 17); a polyphonic composition in eight parts and triple meter (ch. 19); and an imitative piece for organ based on a chromatic subject (ch. 22)—and all this to which the teacher "will doubtless wish to supplement . . . with projects of his or her own" (p. viii)! Now, given that most modal counterpoint courses are one semester long, it is beyond me how all but the most precocious students can begin to cover this material in any depth. Presumably, Gauldin takes a full year in his own modal counterpoint course at Eastman. But few other teachers have the luxury of this amount of time. This is not to argue against including the material in the book—it is nice to have all these styles and idioms covered pedagogically. Rather, it is to argue that Gauldin has not been able to resolve the practical time constraints faced by most teachers which, necessarily, limits the amount and extent of material covered.

Implicitly admitting the problem, Gauldin has advised that "it is the author's experience that each new device does not have to be mastered completely before moving on to the next. After all, the same problems and situations will continue to arise in subsequent assignments, and this allows additional opportunities for correction" (p. viii). I wonder, though, if this is really true. Of course certain technical problems will continue to arise in subsequent assignments. But these occur in evermore complex situations where the student is forced to focus on a more immediate and unrelated problem. If he hasn't mastered, say, the suspension in two parts, I have little optimism to think that he will begin to understand it better when trying to write a canon in three parts, or a parody in six parts, let alone trying to incorporate it within a highly chromatic texture.

A few words should be said about Gauldin's "practical approach" in teaching counterpoint. As with all the historicists, Gauldin is keen that the student be exposed, right at the start of the course, to real music literature. The traditional Fuxian species are rejected as too

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY COUNTERPOINT

abstract, historically unrelated to the music at hand, and as overly time-consuming. Gauldin's judgement—shared by many theory teachers—bears some scrutiny.

To be sure, species exercises are, by necessity, abstract, and let's admit it, musically stilted. Even the best shaped fifth-species line will rarely resemble Palestrina when it is tied down by a *cantus firmus* plodding along in whole notes. Yet, the point of species counterpoint, as Gauldin well knows, has never been to resemble a musical model in any overt—or should one say foreground?—sense. Its advantage, as musicians since the time of Mozart have recognized, is that it effectively isolates well-defined musical problems in a precise and economical manner which the student can master in orderly succession.

Thus, I do not understand Gauldin's objection that "idiomatic devices, such as the portemento, cambiata, accented passing tones, etc., are somewhat difficult to present within the context of third (quarter note) species alone, and must wait until fifth species (or better still, entirely free two-voiced counterpoint) is introduced." Or, that in species counterpoint, "the rhythmic vitality (or microrhythm) of the Renaissance melody with its reliance upon the text is often neglected" (p. 279). This is precisely the virtue of species counterpoint. Idiomatic contrapuntal devices and rhythmic complexities are deferred until more basic problems of line and dissonance control have been solved by the student.

It is true that the actual rules taught by Fux and elaborated by nineteenth-century pedagogues such as Cherubini and Bellerman seemed to have little to do with the historical style of the sixteenth century. One need only play through Fux's own examples of a third-species bass line to realize how his musical conception was rooted in the basso-continuo tradition of his time rather than the vocal polyphony of Palestrina. Nonetheless, the Fuxian approach was shown, in Knud Jeppesen's landmark study⁴, to be adaptable to sixteenth-century style. Strictly following the paradigm of Fux's species approach, Jeppesen was able to formulate a virtually definitive codification of the contrapuntal practice of Palestrina. While, as a textbook, Jeppesen's work has severe deficiencies, it nonetheless showed how a species approach could be brought into line with the music of the sixteenth century through a modification of Fux's rules. In fact, it was quite common for sixteenth-century theorists themselves to utilize species-like exercises as illustrations of contrapuntal problems. Gauldin cites examples by Zarlino, Banchieri, and Morley which are, for all practical purposes, exercises in species counterpoint (pp. 281 ff.). The theorists of the time recognized—as Fux did later—that contrapuntal

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

writing could be effectively analyzed and imitated through a graded succession of rhythmically abstracted lines.

I would take issue, then, with Gauldin's assertion that the species approach is too time-consuming (p. vii). On the contrary, it seems to me to be one of the most efficient means for the student to learn idiomatic and stylistically correct counterpoint. It is the direct approach, I believe, that could conceivably delay the student. By his "practical approach," Gauldin asks the student to begin writing idiomatic lines from the very start. And while this is certainly a desirable goal, is it realistic to expect the student to write characteristic melodic and rhythmic lines incorporating idiomatic devices such as the *cambiata* and *portamento* before he has mastered the simplest problems of dissonance control—problems that are easily isolated and addressed by the species approach? Lacking the efficiency of species rules, Gauldin offers a long list of empirical descriptions and prohibitions. Yet the result is, in many cases, lengthier than the same material covered under more generalized species rules. Especially in dealing with the devices such as the suspension in 3 and 4 voices or common cadential patterns, Gauldin must provide rule after rule and example after example. I find many of Gauldin's illustrations redundant, though, being only slight variations or revoicings of one another. In simply accounting for his multiple illustrations, the prose occasionally breaks down into a series of one-sentence rules strung together in a paragraph, reading like they were compiled from old mimeographed sheets handed out in class. This has the result of fragmenting the text while frustrating the reader. Of course his rules are, for the most part, empirically valid descriptions of practice, but there are, at times, so many that the student faces real problems in assimilating them all. I kept finding myself compiling Gauldin's rules and descriptions into a more orderly and logically generative list. Even for the historicist, a certain amount of didacticism is necessary in a textbook whose aim is compositional imitation.

I do not want to leave the impression that Gauldin's text is absolutely incompatible with the species approach. The teacher is free, after all, to introduce species rules and exercises in class. In fact, I found that Gauldin's text complements Jeppesen's species rules perfectly. Gauldin provides just what Jeppesen's text most lacks: diverse musical examples for analysis; creative exercises for the student; and considerations of various sixteenth-century styles and idioms. Yet Jeppesen provides precisely the pedagogical systematization I think Gauldin's text occasionally lacks. Together they work wonderfully. And the structure of Gauldin's text proves well-suited to a modified "species" approach. The first problems addressed

SIXTEENTH-CENTURY COUNTERPOINT

in the book deal with the construction and combining of simple melodic lines with only "white notes" (essentially second and fourth species). Gauldin then covers the same problem using "black notes" (third and fifth species). By chapter 6, the student is ready to move on to questions of imitation, canon, and double counterpoint. Three-part counterpoint is begun in chapter 8, again by first considering white-note relationships, and then black notes. Eventually, we move on to four, five, six, and finally eight voices. In the broadest sense, then, Gauldin follows the species approach, or perhaps more accurately, he follows the obvious and reasonable pedagogical approach—of which Fux's species is a prime example—that any difficult subject is best taught by first analyzing it into composite elements and then reassembling these elements in successive stages. In fact, at points in the text, Gauldin even specifically assigns species exercises for the student (e.g., p. 81).

It would be needlessly picky of me to end this review with a list of disagreements over specific counterpoint rules and prohibitions. As with any theory text, one can always take exception to a rule or example. For the most part, I find Gauldin's descriptions of contrapuntal practice intelligent and correct. I did occasionally come across a dubious rhythmic or melodic prohibition. More often, though, I found examples of melodic construction and dissonance treatment that struck me as clear licenses to the normative practice outlined in the rest of the book, and having minimal empirical justification. But this is an unavoidable consequence, I suppose, of the historicist methodology. All things considered, Gauldin displays a virtuosic mastery of sixteenth-century contrapuntal practice, and he conveys this knowledge clearly and convincingly.

Some teachers may be bothered that in all of Gauldin's musical examples the original C clefs have been transcribed into modern treble and bass clefs. This, of course, makes the music easier for the student (and the instructor!) to read. Yet one might argue that an important function of a modal counterpoint course is precisely to acquaint the student with the various C clefs and allow him to acquire some facility in their use. Again, there is nothing that prevents teachers themselves from introducing C clefs in class.

A minor point concerns Gauldin's use of terminology. The text is chock full of italicized Italian and Latin terms, despite the existence of English cognates that are, in my mind, perfectly reasonable and unambiguous. For instance, names such as *bassus*, *altus*, and *guida* (the guide voice in a canon) are continually used. I am not sure of the reason for this, unless it is to instill some kind of historical consciousness in the student. But why is this any more necessary here than in, say, a tonal counterpoint text? It is doubly disconcerting to read these terms in a text

JOURNAL OF MUSIC THEORY PEDAGOGY

where one also finds contemporary expressions such as "pitch class" (p. 101) or "metric modulation" (p. 192). I can imagine the hearts of not a few Renaissance historians skipping a beat when coming across these.

All in all, I think *A Practical Approach to Sixteenth-Century Counterpoint* is an excellent book, despite the reservations I have voiced over its ambitious scope. Gauldin obviously loves the music he is dealing with, and this enthusiasm is catching. He has given us a soundly researched, creatively written, and most importantly, a *fun* textbook that will be a pleasure to use for both teacher and student.

NOTES

¹Knud Jeppesen, *The Polyphonic Vocal Style of the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Glen Haydon (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1939), p. 285.

²Gustave Soderlund and Samuel Scott, *Examples of Gregorian Chant and Sacred Music of the Sixteenth Century* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1971).

³David Lewin, "An Interesting Global Rule for Species Counterpoint," *In Theory Only* 6/8 (March 1983): 37.

⁴See footnote 1.