THOMAS BENJAMIN, *COUNTERPOINT IN THE STYLE OF J. S. BACH*
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In dealing with textbooks on eighteenth-century contrapuntal style, authors traditionally must face two broad decisions, one of which concerns how much emphasis—if any—to place on the species approach popularized by J. J. Fux in 1725, and the other, how much to place on music by J. S. Bach in relationship to that of other Baroque and Classic-period composers. Good textbooks based on species or modified species have been contributed by various authors, including Neale B. Mason (*Essentials of Eighteenth-Century Counterpoint*, Wm. C. Brown, 1968), who confines himself to the music of J. S. Bach, and Kent Kennan (*Counterpoint*, Prentice-Hall, 1987), who does not. Thomas Benjamin, in *Counterpoint in the Style of J. S. Bach* (which credits both of these authors in a brief bibliography), has selected the so-called direct approach, although intermittent references to note-value ratios, such as 2:1, 3:1, and 4:1, pay slight homage to species, which is referred to as "unnecessarily abstract, unmusical, and inefficient" (p. xii, under "Notes to the Teacher"), and he has, as the title suggests, restricted musical examples, other than those that are evidently author-composed, to the music of J. S. Bach.

The wisdom of his choices—which will receive no argument from this quarter—is perhaps best underlined by an observation that variety of approach can be welcome, particularly since Bach himself is reported to have "avoided using 'species' in teaching counterpoint,"[1] and a reminder that Bach's contrapuntal music makes an ideal model for students to emulate, because it is unsurpassed in quality and rich in available literature, including the otherwise rather sparse literature for just two voice parts. The author does, however, periodically acknowledge the Schenker-oriented generation by providing a certain amount of reductive analysis, which some will find instructive.

Counterpoint in the Style of J. S. Bach is replete with examples taken mostly, but not entirely, from Bach's keyboard works, and is packed with information and insights that reveal its author to be an observer having real concern for the welfare of the student. An outstanding job has been done of anticipating certain pitfalls, pointing

out solutions, and prodding the student (through numerous creative, analytical, error-detection, listening, and performing activities) to overcome inertia in and out of the classroom by thinking carefully, remaining contrapuntally alert, and keeping in mind that the ultimate activity in question involves composing music, not writing out exercises. "Primacy of line" is repeatedly emphasized—but not at the expense of harmonic foundation; and an appropriate balance has been struck to maintain student awareness and to avoid the sacrifice of one in favor of the other. Many details of this intricate style (including a few probably understood on an intuitive basis by all but the most naive contrapuntist) have been examined, and some might be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of material or the author's expectations (as, for example, on page 244, where he talks about "the first few fugues one composes"), but if students can absorb and apply even a portion of what is covered, they will have acquired the intellectual equipment necessary for producing respectable counterpoint.

The book opens with preliminary material encompassing the aforementioned "Notes to the Teacher," as well as "Notes to the Student" commenting upon the benefits of contrapuntal studies. There is also an introduction explaining the author's method of graphic analysis and citing well-known quotations about Bach by noted composers of the past. Overall organization is characterized by a standard graduated approach, starting with a long account of pitch and rhythmic features of the single melodic line (including the compound line), and progressing into various aspects of two-voice, three-voice, and four-voice writing. Musical examples are situated at the beginning of certain chapters, where they can spark interest and allow typical practices to be extracted through deduction.

Individual chapters dealing with two voices are given over to free (non-imitative) association of voice parts, chromaticism, binary dance forms (optional), invertible counterpoint, imitation (mostly canonical), and the two-part invention. Similar coverage is given to three-voice counterpoint, but with *two* separate chapters devoted to that most sophisticated of all contrapuntal forms, the fugue. A single chapter is dedicated to four-voice counterpoint, which can be more easily treated by the instructor (if not necessarily applied by the student) as an expansion upon three-voice counterpoint, than can three-voice counterpoint as an expansion upon two (a point addressed within the book).

Additional chapters take up the variation form and cantus-firmus technique, and following a brief (one-paragraph) conclusion, three appendices appear, reviewing harmony and conveying information about rounds and organ-composition. A ten-item bibliography precedes

a long (100-page) anthology, which focuses heavily on fugues from both volumes of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* but also contains many items from the French and English Suites, Inventions, and Goldberg Variations, as well as other celebrated keyboard and non-keyboard pieces. An index concludes the book.

Occasional questions concerning organization arise. For example, the few comments made about augmented-sixth chords, as such, appear under "Chromaticism in Two Voices" (page 97) and nowhere else in the book, except in the review of harmony in Appendix I, despite the fact that not even the Italian-sixth chord, much less the German- or French-sixth chords, can be realized within a two-voice texture unless implied by the *interval* of an augmented sixth (a rare-enough occurrence) or simulated through some means such as arpeggiation, and the one example cited, from the *Art of the Fugue*, in fact, exploits a *four*-voice texture. (Other, seemingly out-of-stride, circumstances—resulting in the employment of four-voice illustrations during a discussion of two-voice counterpoint—carry more logic.) Augmented-sixth chords are used "sparingly" by Bach, as the discussion points out, and one will search in vain for them in both the Three-Part Sinfonias and Two-Part Inventions; but, as might be expected, more of the four-voice works feature them, including some fugues from the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (Number 8 from Volume II has *several*).

Multiple inclusion of certain musical examples seems unnecessary—such as the Menuet from Bach's French Suite III, shown in part on page 3, in larger part on page 49, and in complete form (minus its accompanying Trio) on page 103; or the D-minor Invention (Number 4), the same portions of which show up on pages 143, 146, and 160. Another instance of less-than-effective space utilization results on pages 63-64, where an earlier musical example and its verbatim graphic reduction from page 4 are reprinted.

The importance of sequence is vividly recognized in chapter 1 ("Line and Other Elements of Style"), where it is discussed as "the most frequently used device for development in the music of Bach and his contemporaries" (page 35), but its definition has been relegated to a footnote, where it could give the impression that understanding sequence is peripheral to its use. In the definition itself, which like many authors' definitions is incomplete, there is nothing to prevent some careless student from, say, viewing a one-bar melodic idea, in measure 30 of a given piece, as supplying the second stage of a sequence, the first stage of which lies back in measure 2, or from talking about an oboe line as sequencing a clarinet line, because one essential condition has not been reinforced (immediacy of restatement, to distinguish it from return after intervening material), and another has been omitted

(reappearance in the same voice part, to distinguish it from imitation). One could even construe octave repetition as sequence and not strain the boundaries of the definition.

In later chapters, this extremely important device (of both homophonic and contrapuntal music) is taken up but in a somewhat perfunctory manner involving mostly analysis, without many helpful hints about how it can be constructed *out*side the framework of the individual line, and although it is, of course, a single-line affair, most problems students encounter in dealing with sequence relate to its construction within a two-voice or multi-voice texture, a formidable contrapuntal challenge made no easier by the apparent ease with which composers of every stripe have managed to make it sound natural and inevitable.

The Neapolitan chord is identified (page 96) as "a highly charged sonority for this style," but since this sonority—a simple major triad—is not particularly unusual or distinctive in itself (as opposed to a sonority such as the French-sixth chord, which occupies 2/3 of the whole-tone scale), perhaps some mention that the Neapolitan chord receives its charge purely from context would have been appropriate. A later statement, "Neapolitan chords may alternatively be heard as iv, with chromatic neighbors" (page 199, note 2), may be true with regard to the example under discussion on the previous page, but not, as it implies, with Neapolitan chords in all other circumstances.

Nonharmonic tones are initially taken up in chapter 1, dealing with the *un*harmonized melodic line; and, although this does not pose much of a problem, Exercise 3 on page 33 directs the student to "locate and identify the nonharmonic tones in the examples beginning this chapter," something not always possible without a supporting line (Example 1-5's tied notes, for instance, are treatable as suspensions or chord members). Nonharmonic-tone identification is often somewhat touchy because of the lack of standardization in terminology. What some call changing tones, Benjamin calls double neighbor tone, and his incomplete neighbor tone is illustrated (page 32) along with the appoggiatura, which it resembles, almost as if to belie its own label. The suspension, accented passing tone, and appoggiatura are cited (page 69) as "the only accented nonharmonic tones," but some might want to add the neighboring tone, which sometimes appears accented, to this list.

Statements regarding the suspension (pages 69-71) inform us that the suspension dissonance can be situated only on the strong beat of a measure; however, placement exclusively—or almost so—on the strong beat is a Renaissance, not a Baroque, phenomenon; and, although a majority of suspension dissonances in Bach's music may well fall upon

strong beats, one does not have to search far at all to discover numerous weak-beat occurrences, resolved with*in* the beat, of course.

Discussion of the 6-5 upper-voice configuration as not involving a true suspension in two-voice counterpoint seems reasonable, except perhaps when it is placed in a syncopated passage along with other obvious suspensions (as in measures 33, 35, and 37 of Invention Number 6 in E major), but the given reason why, "as the sixth is not a dissonance, and therefore little used (page 70), tends to contradict the reasoning behind a correct earlier statement (page 69), "Not all nonharmonic tones are dissonant." Also, after a cautionary remark about "using a suspension to attempt to avoid an incorrect parallelism" (page 71), the accompanying example (page 72) exhibits a 6-5.

Exclusion of the 6/5-4 suspension later, during a discussion of nonharmonic tones in three voices (and, by extension, four voices, since not much separate material to speak of is included on nonharmonic tones in four voices within chapter 12 on four-voice counterpoint) is more serious than exclusion of the 6-5 figure under two-voice suspensions, for this cumbersome-to-label device—which is something of a cliché in sixteenth-century music—shows up with some regularity in the contrapuntal music of various later composers, including Bach (for example, in Sinfonias 1, 7, 12, and 13; Fugues 14 and 24 from the first volume of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*; and Fugues 5, 8, 9, 22, and 23, as well as Prelude 16, from the second volume).

Like other authors on the subject, Benjamin discusses two-voice invertible counterpoint in terms of the single octave, tenth, twelfth, and double octave (fifteenth) without going any further, a procedure that makes sense only up to the twelfth if one considers—as many do—the octave to include multiples of the octave as well as the single octave, but if the double octave is to be included for more precision why stop there? The *triple* octave (twenty-second) is by far the most common interval of inversion in the Two-Part Inventions, and there are some passages (in Inventions 4, 6, and 11) exploiting the quadruple octave (twenty-ninth!). Some confusion reigns (page 110) when double counterpoint, a specific term, is equated with invertible counterpoint, properly a generic term that includes double and triple counterpoint, in order to avert confusion with melodic inversion, and later (page 206) where a redundant-sounding title is employed, "Triple (Triple Invertible) Counterpoint," as opposed to "Double (Invertible) Counterpoint" before.

The discussion of three-part invertible counterpoint states, "Thus, three contrapuntal lines, A, B, and C, should sound equally good in all six possible positions." It comments next, however, on the unlikelihood of all six being used, and later (page 207) refers to what is called semi-

invertible counterpoint, in which only four of the six are used, as a means of avoiding unidiomatic forms of second inversion, suggesting that the unlikelihood of all six appearing could have something to do with the possibility that they may not always sound equally good. Occasionally all six manifestations do appear, as in Sinfonia Number Three in D major, a prize specimen, which might have been useful by way of example here, for none of chapter nine's passages illustrates the full potential of triple counterpoint. Minimally, the reader could have been directed to pages 375-376 in the Anthology, where the D-major Sinfonia appears in its entirety. (Generally, the Sinfonias have been somewhat slighted in favor of the three-voice fugues.)

In discussing the infinite or circular canon (page 128), the remark, "one of the canons in *The Musical Offering* is of this type," is somewhat misleading, because two—not one—of the canons from this work are actually identified by the term "Canon perpetuus," and for all intents and purposes, several of its other canons are also perpetual. One wonders, in fact, why the extremely sophisticated canons of *The Musical Offering* have been given such lean consideration given the amount of emphasis placed upon canon during both the sixth and ninth chapters.

Benjamin consistently applies the term *theme* to generating ideas of the Two-Part Inventions, a term some might dislike, especially to designate a very brief thought consisting of only a half measure's melodic material (as in Inventions 1, 7, and 13). Like others who make a distinction in terminology between the raw material of an invention (or sinfonia) and that of a fugue, he fails to support the distinction with any concrete reason; later, in fact, several remarks call attention to similarities between inventions and fugues (without underscoring any obvious differences, such as the one relating to the presence or absence of an accompanying line along with the very opening entry): "The main theme of a fugue is called the subject. It is analogous to the theme of an invention" (page 219). The point is reinforced later (page 221):

> Fugue subjects, like invention themes, come in a variety of lengths and types, but all possess some of the same characteristics . . . . There is, in fact, no clear distinction to be made between an invention theme and a subject (which we will call S) other than to say that most subjects are longer; are more complex in rhythmic, melodic, and harmonic structure; may modulate; may be sequential; and may be in two distinct sections.

The problem of grammatical clarity (most subjects . . . may modulate) is compounded by one of content, since a pretty good case has been made for doing other than what has been done in terms of labeling. Resistance to the term *subject* for long ideas that generate inventions (such as Numbers 5, 9, and 14), but not short ideas that generate fugues (such as Numbers 17 and 22 from WTC I, or Numbers 2 and 9 from WTC II), does not always make sense, and it would seem best to apply this traditional term whenever the musical conditions are appropriate—be the piece a fugue, sinfonia, or invention—and do the same with the term *motive*, a term with which *all* the inventions' opening ideas frequently get stuck. Note 2 on page 145 (which explains why the term motive is not applied even to the briefest of generating ideas in the Two-Part Inventions) causes one to speculate about just how short an idea must be in order to qualify.

It is not true (page 146) that in the Two-Part Inventions, "the imitation is at the octave (except for No. 10, which imitates at the eleventh below, on the dominant)." Five of the fifteen inventions (Numbers 5, 10, 12, 14, and 15)—not just Number 10—employ initial imitation at the dominant, in every case manifested by the lower eleventh, except when tonal adjustments are made (as in Number 10) to create partial imitation at the lower twelfth, usually (but not in Number 10) with an accompanying modulation into the dominant key; therefore, a later statement (page 149), "it [the episode] serves the function of a modulatory passage, leading away from the tonic key which unified the exposition tonally," is not entirely accurate. In fact, one of the inventions using opening imitation at the lower octave (Number 11, in G minor), has an exposition characterized by tonal ambiguity rather than stability, by virtue of its employment of the augmented, as well as the perfect, octave.

Another potentially misleading statement, at least insofar as certain bodies of literature are concerned, is found on page 89, with regard to the simultaneous cross relation (double inflection), "isolated instances [of which] may occur in slow, highly chromatic movements." This somewhat extreme chromatic device shows up only five times throughout the Inventions and Sinfonias, in Inventions 6 and 12, and Sinfonias 1, 2, and 12, none of which could accurately be construed as truly slow, and only one of which comes close to being highly chromatic.

The authentic cadence is stressed (page 155) as a section-defining device in contrapuntal music—an obvious but sometimes neglected thought that should be stressed—but recognition of other sectionalizing means is somewhat limited until later (page 243). Invention Number 2 in C minor, for example, is dismissed (page 156) as less obviously

sectional than certain other inventions, including its fraternal twin, Number 8 in F major, because "it lacks strong internal cadences"; however, no specific mention is made—here, or on the two previous pages alluding to the C-minor Invention (138 and 153)—of its structural procedure, which involves not only a long opening passage in which the bass imitates the treble canonically, but an equally long continuing passage in which the two voice parts are exchanged in invertible counterpoint, so that a new canon, having the same key *relationships* (in transposition up a fifth or down a fourth) results, with the treble imitating the bass. This establishment of sections seems to be more than enough to make up for the absence of a conclusive-sounding interior cadence, such as that found at measures 11-12 of the F-major Invention, which does not benefit from such extensive canonical parallelism. Structural similarities among such seemingly disparate works as the C-minor Invention and the ones in C major, E-flat major (to some extent), and A major, tend to corroborate the point, for all have second sections which in large part closely parallel their first sections—the first three with invertible counterpoint, the last without; the C-minor Invention with canonical procedures, the others without; and the C-major and A-major Inventions with brief inserted passages, the other two without. Of this particular group, only one (the C-major Invention) has a perfect-authentic cadence between the two sections in question.

Note 3 at the bottom of page 145, which states, among other things, that "the approach typified by [Invention] Nos. 1, 3, and 4 has been selected as best approximating the conditions found in fugal writing, and thus as the most useful preparation for it," might have offered additional evidence of the author's thinking, for among all fifteen Two-Part Inventions, only one—Number 10—opens with an unaccompanied idea *and* employs opening imitation at the fifth, like the typical fugue.

The term *consonant fourth* is brought in on three occasions (pages 182, 183, and 184), and always refers to an arrangement involving the perfect fourth of a first-inversion triad created by the fifth sounding below the root. Another term might have been more appropriate since this could be confused with something quite different—the consonant fourth expounded by more than one author in fairly standard textbooks on sixteenth-century counterpoint, in which the fourth created by one upper voice with the lowest-sounding voice, usually as part of a 6/4 sonority, is considered to have a consonant status in relationship to its subsequent dissonant status as the fourth of a 4-3 suspension that is part of a 5/4 sonority.

Some who have taught for many years and steered their students through the mazes of counterpoint, might take exception to the

statement, "mastery of three-voice writing leads easily to mastery of four" (page 172), for although it is generally true that "counterpoint in four voices is no different in technique from that in three" (page 285), the addition of that fourth voice doubles (from three to six) the possibilities for unidiomatic successive perfect intervals, a point suggested by the author when he writes that "there will be six pairs (voices 1-2, 1-3, 1-4; 2-3, 2-4; 3-4)," as opposed to three pairs in three-voice counterpoint. The novice at four-voice counterpoint can find this a difficult condition with which to come to grips. The related problem of achieving linear independence results because four voice parts tend to unite into familiar vertical sonorities—what Piston has described as "contrapuntally . . . a defect rather than a virtue."[2]

Counterpoint in the Style of J. S. Bach is not without printing problems and typographical errors. On page 250, for example, the reader is referred to "pp. 000 ff."; at the bottom of page 195, chapter 8's Cumulative Exercise 10 drifts off in mid-sentence; and on page 239, crowding interferes with the clarity of Example 10-20. Editorial revisions are needed on various pages: 3 (the final sentence); 20 (the penultimate sentence); 51 (the last paragraph's second sentence); 162 (the bottom line); 247 (the first sentence); 305 (line 3); 333 (item a); and 444 (the index item on Sinfonia 9) to cite some of the more obvious items.

For the most part, points are communicated in an unintimidating, easy-to-understand manner; however, the writing style frequently exhibits carelessness in such a way as to distract from the subject at hand or to convey a meaning not intended. On page 61, the perfect fourth, itself (as opposed to one of its two ingredients), is said to be "usually heard and treated as a nonharmonic tone" (a thought compounded on page 208). On page 65, reference is made to doubling an accidental (rather than the note affected by an accidental). Certain other passages speak for themselves:

"Even when the same materials are not literally shared, as they would be in imitative works, still both voices will share the same general thematic content, especially when both are of equal importance" (page 51).

"The T is a strongly directed scalar shape, starting on the downbeat on tonic" (page 146).

"As Bach rarely uses canon in three voices as a developmental device as it is difficult to sustain successfully, we will not dwell long on it" (page 215).

"The more voices, the narrower the range of the subject, avoiding crossings and other complications" (page 222).

"Where the A is real, there is no dependable way of distinguishing S from A in such passages" (page 259).

This list of sentences does not single out isolated, inadvertent slips of the kind any writer might occasionally make. It focuses on a pervasive problem that, unfortunately, conveys the impression that the author does not consider presentation as important as content.

The writing is sprinkled with apt, imaginative terms, but the penchant for abbreviations (such as "T" for theme, "CT" for countertheme, "ME" for middle entry, etc.) contributes to inelegance, as does the outline style of sentence construction, which sometimes invades the actual text. Enumerations having an ungraceful follow-through with their introductory material (as on page 183) or constructional inconsistency (pages 40-41) cause other problems. Additionally, parentheses are not always employed as effectively as they could be: "Observe, in Ex. 9-3, a reduction of Ex. 9-1, mm. 1-5, the highly directional structural (passing motion) lines, the descending chromatic lines (I to V), and the simplicity of the overall tonal/linear organization" (page 199). Other disconcerting practices involve such matters as the pluralization of certain nouns that do not really require pluralizing ("relative motions," "imitations," "counterpoints," etc.) and obsession with *note* as an imperative verb (rather than a musical symbol).

Nevertheless, the book has many strong points, not the least of which include exhaustiveness of detail within a wide range of topics, effective employment of musical examples, an underlying current of energy and enthusiasm that could easily be contagious for the student, and explanations that back up rules with reasons for their use. Benjamin's understanding of the compositional process comes across whether he is discussing the need for a delicate balance between the establishment of sections with appropriately strong cadential patterns or the continuity between sections by the subtle weakening of those same patterns (pages 17, 159, etc.); outlining the simple foundations that often lurk behind surface detail (page 201); or emphasizing the multi-faceted function of a musical event, for example, the intervening connecting passage (i.e., codetta) usually found between the second and third entries of a fugue—a passage that may exist not only for obvious modulatory purposes, but also "to avoid excessive predictability and regularity in the entries" (page 239) and to bring about "preliminary confirmation and development of motifs" (page 240). The importance of

rests, "the windows and doors of music, letting in air and light" (page 177), is not lost upon him as it is upon certain other authors, nor is the combined aspect of rhythm, which is illustrated several times in charts showing the composite effect of all voice parts.

The student is kept on course by intermittent reinforcement of salient points, step-by-step models that pave the way for a gradual acquisition of the craft, and error-detection exercises, which (except when errors are overly basic) offer a valuable point of departure for classroom discussion. The anthology is unique, supplying—along with the numerous passages from the text, itself—far more music than can be found in any competing book and therefore alleviating one problem for the teacher, who is still free, of course, to provide supplementary material.

The musicianship of this author, especially in its emphasis on aesthetic and expressive factors that go beyond mere "correctness" of pitch, rhythm, or interval, is evident throughout the book (he frequently stresses, for example, that the structure of music involves long-range considerations having to do with shape, growth, climax, process, and flow); and it is clear he is sensitive to the psychological effect that particular operations have on potential listeners. Such concerns must surely exert a positive influence on the way the typical student thinks about and experiences music in general, not just Bach-style counterpoint.

One could argue endlessly regarding fine points of analysis, which terms are most appropriate, and how best to communicate, but ultimately a book such as this has to be measured on the basis of its overall, intrinsic, pedagogical value. On this basis, *Counterpoint in the Style of J. S. Bach* does constitute a viable alternative to its companion volumes dealing with the same subject.

NOTES

[1]Hans T. David and Arthur Mendel, *The Bach Reader* (Norton, 1966), 39.

[2]Walter Piston, *Counterpoint* (Norton, 1947), 143.