

With regard to the harmonic interval combinations you will notice that intervals of 3^{rds} and 6^{ths} are by far the most prevalent. But even so *at no point do more than three thirds or three sixths occur in a row*. If too many parallel 3^{rds} or 6^{ths} occur in succession it undermines the sense of two independent voices and sounds like one melody with another in parallel harmony. You will also notice that octaves occur most often at the first and last notes. *When an octave occurs in the interior of a phrase it should be approached and left in contrary motion by step* as it is in both solutions in example 2-1.

It will be no surprise to any music theory student that parallel fifths and parallel octaves (as well as parallel unisons) are considered illegal. This may seem odd since most music you perform in an ensemble has parallel octaves at some point, if only in doubling a viola part in a bassoon for instance. The reason this sort of doubling is fine is that clearly the intention in these cases is not to produce two independent melodic lines, but rather a single line with a richer tone color. Since in counterpoint the primary objective is to create two independent lines, parallel octaves and fifths are considered a serious error.

Exercise 2-1b is less successful than 1a, although 1b is not a disaster. The final cadence on a third instead of an octave is acceptable, but not as final sounding as an octave. Perhaps more problematic is the use of the perfect 5th on the second beat. It is permissible at this point because the 5th is approached in contrary motion, and what may be more important is the fact that the preceding beat presented the 3rd of this tonic harmony. Had the 3rd of the tonic chord not just sounded the fifth would have been rather coarse sounding.

Example 2-1b also uses the rather rare interval of a diminished 5th near the end. This interval can be very effective but it must resolve inwards by step to a 3rd as it does here. Furthermore tritones must be clearly heard as the 3rd and 7th of a V⁷ chord and resolve to a tonic harmony. Although not found in either example above, the preceding comments about using tritones as harmonic intervals apply to harmonic intervals of Major 2^{nds} and minor 7^{ths} as well. These two intervals can be effective when they are clearly representing a dominant 7th chord and then only when the note which would be the 7th of the chord resolves down by step on the following beat. This would be the upper note of a minor 7th or the lower note of a major 2nd. Example 2-3 below demonstrates these two intervals used properly.

Harmonic Considerations

18th century counterpoint differs from 16th century counterpoint in that not only are the intervallic combinations considered, but also the harmonic progressions implied by the various intervallic combinations. The music must have logic and a sense of direction both as independent melodic lines and as a harmonic progression. As a student of counterpoint this means that certain chord successions are avoided, in particular *retrogressions*. The most common retrogressions are V – IV and V – ii in either major or minor keys. Put another way, dominant chords should lead to tonic chords, or on occasion a submediant (vi) chord for a deceptive progression effect. This also applies to secondary dominant chords, they too should resolve to their secondary tonic (e.g., V/vi – vi) or occasionally the root of a secondary dominant might also resolve deceptively up a step (e.g., V/vi – IV).

When working towards a solution to a counterpoint exercise it is a good idea to first scan the *cantus firmus* before writing any notes and develop a rather basic harmonization of the *cantus*

firmus. To facilitate this you can often simply associate the seven scale degrees with chords that most often harmonize each scale degree.

Scale degrees:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Common chords associated with each scale tone:	I	V	I	IV	I	IV	V	I
	IV	ii ⁶		V ⁷	V			IV
				ii ⁶				

(these chord possibilities apply equally to minor keys as major keys)

For those scale degrees which have two or more chords to choose from the next note will often provide a clue as to which to choose. For example:

- Only use V7 for 4 if the next note is 3.
- Don't use V for 5 if the next chord is either IV or ii.
- Only use ii if the next chord is V.

Chord Palette:

Don't think it's a mistake to repeat a chord. It isn't. Also, you don't need to use every chord you've ever learned in each harmonization. Certain chords are used far more often than others. It is better to have a rather simple harmonization that works than an ambitious one that simply sounds confused. Err in the direction of simplicity.

Most Frequent

I, V, IV, ii⁶

Sometimes

vi, vii⁰⁶, ii

Very Rarely

iii

Using chromatic chords (i.e., secondary dominants, borrowed chords, augmented sixths, etc.) can be very effective if used correctly. It is best to begin with a simple diatonic harmonization and then try to inject a chromatic chord or two where they fit. If a melody has chromatic notes in it: a raised note is usually a 3rd of a secondary dominant; and a lowered tone is usually the 7th of a secondary dominant.

Seventh chords were used in 18th century music, but not on all scale degrees. The V⁷, vii⁰⁷ and ii⁷ chords in both major and minor modes are often found and in all inversions. However, seventh chords on other scale degrees, especially I⁷ and IV⁷, were quite rare and should be avoided in student counterpoint exercises.

Using Inversions:

After you arrive at a "first draft" harmonization with root position chords, then consider adding inversions to create a more conjunct (step-wise) bass line. However, be cautious. Remember that first inversion chords generally are used to lead by step to the bass of the next chord, not just for variety. Be especially reluctant to use second inversion chords - use them very sparingly, and usually only the passing or cadential types. If you're not sure that you've written a passing or cadential six-four then don't use it.

Harmonic Rhythm:

Harmonic rhythm is a phrase that describes the rate of harmonic change but also has to do with the notion of strong and weak root progressions and their relationship to strong and weak beats in a measure. The "strong" root progressions are: Perfect 5th down, 3rd down, and 2nd up. *A*

strong root progression should be used into a strong beat. On the other hand, a “weak” chord progression (or repetition of a chord) can be used from a strong beat to a weak beat.

Ex. 2-2 - Harmonic possibilities

Scale degrees: 1 3 5 4 3 2 1 5 1

A:	I	I ⁶	V	V ^{4/2}	I ⁶	V ^{6/4}	I	V ⁽⁷⁾	I	Good
B:	I	I ⁶	V	IV	I ⁶	ii	I	V ⁽⁷⁾	I	Poor
C:	I	iii	I ^{6/4}	IV	I ⁶	V ^{6/4}	I	I ^{6/4}	I	Poor

Example 2-2 presents three “rough draft” harmonizations of a cantus firmus in Eb Major, two of which have flaws that are common to many early attempts at counterpoint.

Solution A is the only good solution of the three. Notice that it uses only tonic and dominant chords, which isn’t necessarily desirable in itself, but is also not the problem many students think it to be. Notice that in bar 1 each chord last two beats each, which supports the metrical accents on beats 1 and 3. The chords change at these strong beats, and don’t have to change following the strong beats. *In many cases when the c.f. leaps from a strong beat both beats can be harmonized with the same chord.* The third and fourth beats of bar 1 are a common problem spot – solution B is quite wrong here, because V – IV is an unacceptable retrogression. Solution A is best because again it is not vital to change chords following a strong beat, but also because scale degree 4 on beat 4 can be happily harmonized by V^{4/2} since the next note is scale degree 3. Since the bass note of a V^{4/2} chord must resolve down by step this option works perfectly at this point.

In bar 2 of solution A the use of the V^{6/4} chord is fine because it is treated as a “passing 6/4”. A passing 6/4 connects two different inversions of the same chord as it does in solution A. Solution B is once again poor at this point. Although a root position ii chord is not a mistake in itself, ii chords do not often lead to tonic chords, rather *ii chords nearly always lead to V chords.*

The two main flaws in solution B have already been discussed, but it is worth mentioning that the progression from IV – I⁶ across the first bar line is fine, for all practical purposes any chord can resolve to a tonic chord. The root position ii chord in bar 2 is not necessarily wrong, but ii chords are usually found in first inversion, and in fact most authentic cadences in 18th century music are ii⁶ – V – I.

Solution C is poor because it uses the mediant chord (iii) and it uses too many 6/4 chords. It is a good idea to just avoid the use of mediant chords all together, and second inversion triads should be used judiciously, and nearly always as “passing” 6/4’s or less often, “cadential” 6/4 chords. A more subtle problem is following the iii chord by a tonic 6/4. This is a “weak” chord progression of root movement up a 3rd, and is not a suitable choice to approach a strong beat. More obviously the last three chords in solution C are poor. Actually only the penultimate chord, I^{6/4} is poor – clearly the final cadence should be a strong cadence, and repeating a chord across a barline is to be avoided in almost all circumstances. Most

Example 2-6 is another case of terrible counterpoint. Below it is a list of the flaws in this unfortunate passage.

Ex. 2-6 – Terrible first species counterpoint

- a) beat 2 implies a VII⁶ (subtonic) chord which is quite rare, and should not precede a tonic chord. Put another way, the D should be D# on beat 2 in the treble voice, although this would create the bad melodic interval of an augmented 5th to the first note.
- b) at beat 2 –3 the gap created by the leap from beat 1 to beat 2 is not filled in
- c) beats 3 - 4 are direct 5^{ths} (leaping in similar motion to a P5 of P8)
- d) beats 7 – 8 is a retrogression (V – iv)
- e) in the treble voice beat 7 – 8 is an illegal melodic interval of an augmented 2nd
- f) it is poor to repeat a note immediately as at beats 9-10
- g) beats 10 – 11 are illegal parallel octaves
- h) the treble voice touches the same climactic high note three times

N.B. - At beat 6 the harmonic interval of a minor 7th is fine since the harmony implied by it is iiø7 which often precedes V.