

## 3 - Second Species Counterpoint

Second species counterpoint consists of two notes in the counterpoint voice against one in the cantus firmus. Example 3-1 below is from a Two-part invention by J.S. Bach and is a fine example of this species.

Ex. 3-1 Bach: Two-part Invention No. 4, bars 5 – 8

This is the most important contrapuntal species to master as it is the most common rhythmic relationship found in 18<sup>th</sup> century music. In this passage the lower voice arpeggiates chords in D minor in eighth notes while the treble performs a much more conjunct (i.e., stepwise) melodic line in sixteenths above it. Technically the big news in second species is the presence of non-chord tones.

Ex. 3-2 Two-part Invention No. 4, analyzed

This example is fairly typical of second species counterpoint in that the majority of the non-chord tones are passing tones, both unaccented and accented (abbreviated ‘apt’). In bar 1 there is also an escape tone and in bar 4 there is an appoggiatura. It is also typical in that with only one exception the NCT’s alternate with chord tones. It is worth pointing out that every downbeat is a chord tone in the counterpoint.

The point is that the dissonant intervals of perfect 4ths, 2nds, 7ths, and so forth can be used in second species counterpoint as long as they are clearly perceptible as non-chord tones. The most prevalent non-chord tones are passing tones and neighboring tones, these are the only two NCT’s that don’t involve leaps. *Passing tones* are approached by step and resolved by step in the same direction. *Neighboring tones* are approached by step and resolved by step in the opposite direction. Less frequently one can employ appoggiaturas and escape tones. Appoggiaturas are approached by leap (usually ascending) and resolved by step in the opposite direction (down). Escape tones are approached by step (usually ascending) and resolved by leap in the opposite direction (typically a 3<sup>rd</sup> lower).

Ex. 3-3 “Legal” non-chord tones

passing tones      neighboring tones      appoggiatura      escape tone

6 7 6 5      6 5 8 2      6 4 6      3 4 6

The next example demonstrates some common “illegal” non-chord tones that frequently show up in student work. The common thread in these mistakes is the leap either to or from a non-chord tone without the correct resolution. There is no useful NCT involving a leap which doesn’t change direction. Also, there is no useful NCT which has two leaps, even in the same direction.

Ex. 3-4 “Illegal” Non-chord tones

a)      b)      c)      d)

6 7 3      6 4 8      6 2 6      8 7 3

Ex. 3-4a starts off like a passing tone, but then the leap following the NCT (a dissonance of a 7<sup>th</sup>) is in the same direction as the approach, which keeps it from being a passing tone, or any other “legal” NCT. Ex. 3-4b is wrong because the dissonant 4<sup>th</sup> is both leapt to and from, which is not the case with any “legal” NCT. Ex. 3-4c is like an appoggiatura, but the resolution is by leap instead of step. And 3-4d is a sort of “upside down” escape tone, which is poor. In summary: when composing a leap between two notes be certain that both the note that is leapt from and the note that is leapt to are both chord tones, or if not, that the second note is an appoggiatura or escape tone.

Another problem that often appears in initial efforts at second species are passages with too many leaps, especially leaps of thirds. Since it is fine to leap from one chord tone to another it is tempting to overuse this pattern. It is a good idea to strive for as much stepwise motion as possible when composing 2:1 counterpoint, and to use leaps only occasionally. Ex. 3-5a and 3-5b are two versions of a counterpoint to the same c.f., the first with too many leaps. The second uses more conjunct (i.e., stepwise) motion to offset the initial leaps. The use of the III<sup>+</sup> chord in Ex. 3-5a is also questionable.

Ex. 3-5a Too many leaps

3-5b A better solution

8 8 5 5

III+

## Parallel Fifths and Octaves

Example 3-5a is not only a problem with regard to leaps, but it also contains two cases of illegal parallel fifths and octaves. The last two notes of 3-5a create parallel perfect fifths relative to the Bb-A in the lower voice. This is a serious flaw and is easily revealed by writing all of the interval numbers between the staves. Across the barline of 3-5a is a more subtle form of illegal parallels that is harder to detect. The parallel octaves that sound on successive beats in 3-5a are often referred to as “beat-to-beat” parallel octaves. On the other hand the 5ths that occur on the second half of beats 1 and 2 in 3-5a are not a problem since neither occurs on a beat. A guideline that will help you avoid illegal parallel octaves and fifths is: *avoid parallel fifths or octaves between either part of one beat and the start of the next beat.*

One strategy for composing 2:1 counterpoint is to first compose a 1:1 counterpoint to the c.f. and then convert it to 2:1. This is not necessarily the best approach, but it works – especially if the student is having trouble getting started. When using this strategy you will need to connect the various notes in the 1:1 version by adding passing tones and so forth to them. The following examples will show some ways in which this can be done successfully. It should be pointed out that when writing 1:1 with the aim of converting it to 2:1 repeating notes is perfectly acceptable, as neighboring tones can then easily separate them. The following examples show various alternatives that can be used when converting 1:1 to 2:1 with different intervals.

Ex 3-6a, repeated notes

1) 2) 3)

Ex. 3-6b, notes a step apart

1) 2) 3)

Ex. 3-6c, notes a third apart

1) 2) 3)

Ex. 3-6d; notes a fourth apart

1) 2) 3)

It can be seen that if one begins with a 1:1 basis then the easiest intervals to convert are notes a third apart - by simply using a passing tone. Repeated notes are also easily converted to 2:1 by a using neighboring tone. However, other possibilities work no less well. In each line one of the solutions involves leaping to a chord tone and then moving to the second note, e.g. 3-6a-2; 3-6b-2, 3-6d-1. Another good solution is to delay the “goal” note to the second half of the beat preceding it with a non-chord tone; e.g., 3-6a-3, 3-6b-3, 3-6c-3 and 3-6d-2. In these cases two NCT’s occur in succession, which some students assume is wrong, but it is not always true.

While it is often perfectly good to place a non-chord tone on the beat and delay the chord tone, care should be taken to not do this too many times in a row. A good rule of thumb is to have no more than two beats in a row in which a NCT is heard on the beat. Most of the time chord tones should occur on the beat.

Another point that concerns 2:1 counterpoint is that students should resist the tendency to treat each beat as an isolated problem. Instead the goal should be to connect the pair of notes occurring in one beat to the first note of the next beat in a smooth and musical manner. When looking at good counterpoint notice how often there is a stepwise connection between the end of one beat and the first part of the following beat. This is especially true when connecting to a strong beat from a weak beat.

### Usage of the melodic minor scale

When composing music in minor keys confusion will frequently develop about which form of the melodic minor scale to use and when. It is oversimplistic to say that if the line is moving upwards one uses the ascending form of the melodic minor, and that if the line is descending one uses the descending form of the melodic minor. There are many examples in the music of Bach and Handel that contradict this basic notion. The primary factor to consider about when to use the raised 6<sup>th</sup> or 7<sup>th</sup> scale degrees is the underlying harmony. If the harmony is a dominant chord (with the required raised leading tone) then the melodic line above it should use the ascending form of the melodic minor even if it is descending.

Ex. 3-7 Handel: Sonata op.1, No. 6

g mi:    i    V    i<sup>6</sup>            ii<sup>o6</sup>    VI    V

In example 3-7 the last 3 notes of the treble voice use the raised 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> tones in G minor even though the line is descending. This is required since this phrase cadences on a V chord in which the 3<sup>rd</sup>, F#, is raised. On the other hand on beat three of bar 1 the line is descending and in this instance Handel uses the lowered 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> of the descending melodic minor. This is preferable in this spot because the underlying harmony is a tonic chord, and has no notes which conflict with the descending melodic form of the scale. The F# at the end of beat 2 in bar 1 is also appropriate as it projects the sound of the dominant chord at this point. Furthermore, regardless of the underlying harmony on beat 2, since the F resolves up to G it

would still be best to use the F# in this spot. Even when the harmony is not a dominant chord if the seventh scale degree is followed by the tonic it is best to use the raised form of the seventh.

Example 3-8 is a summary example riddled with flaws which are listed below.

Ex. 3-8

The musical score for Example 3-8 consists of two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The time signature is 2/4, and the key signature has one flat (Bb). The melody in the treble staff is: G4 (beat 1), A4 (beat 2), Bb4 (beat 3), C5 (beat 4), D5 (beat 5), E5 (beat 6), F5 (beat 7), G5 (beat 8), and G5 (beat 9). The bass line in the bass staff is: G3 (beat 1), A3 (beat 2), Bb3 (beat 3), C4 (beat 4), D4 (beat 5), Eb4 (beat 6), F4 (beat 7), G4 (beat 8), and G4 (beat 9). The score is annotated with numbers 1 through 9 above the staff.

- a) from beat 1 – 2 the ‘a’ is an illegal non-chord tone
- b) beat 3 – 4 is parallel octaves from G – F#
- c) beat 4, the leading tone should not be doubled
- d) beats 4-7 the repeated oscillation of D-Eb is tedious
- e) beat 6, the Bb is an illegal NCT of a P4th
- f) beats 6 – 7; illegal parallel octaves of the beat-to-beat variety
- g) beat 7 – 8 the Eb to F# in the lower voice is an augmented second
- h) the d5<sup>th</sup> harmonic interval on beat 8 should resolve to a 3<sup>rd</sup> with G in the bass
- i) at beats 8 - 9 the two leaps in the same direction don’t outline a chord, the last note should be an octave higher to solve this problem.