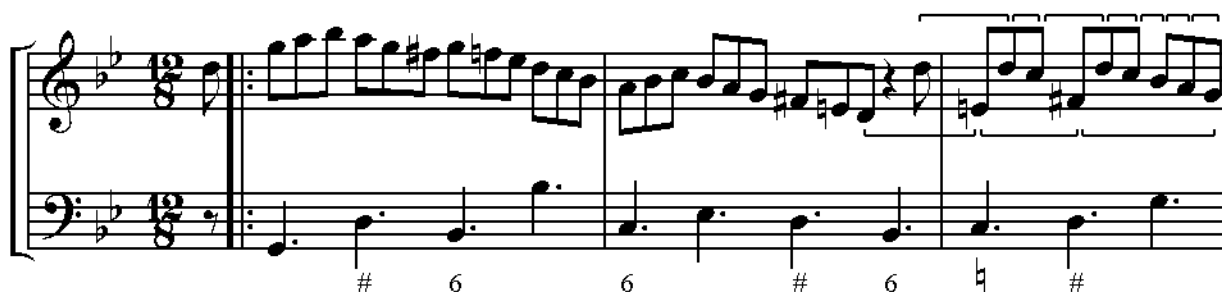


5 - Third Species Counterpoint

Third species counterpoint is actually two rhythmic relationships, 3:1 and 4:1. In this chapter each one will be discussed in turn. Three notes against one does not present any particularly new concepts beyond those found in second species.

Ex. 5-1 was referred to earlier as an example of the usage of the melodic minor scale but it is also a fine example of 3:1 counterpoint. Below the bass part you will see figured bass symbols which the keyboardist in a Baroque ensemble would interpret to know what chords to play while also playing the bass line. The first seven beats of this theme also show how a simple melodic figure can be developed. The first full beat is a simple pattern of a passing tone through the interval of a third. The second beat is the same pattern but in descending, or contrary, motion. The next two beats are the same pattern still in the descending form. Bar two returns to the ascending passing tone shape, followed by two more of the descending patterns. This sort of motivic economy is a common characteristic of Baroque music and creates a strong sense of unity within the movement.

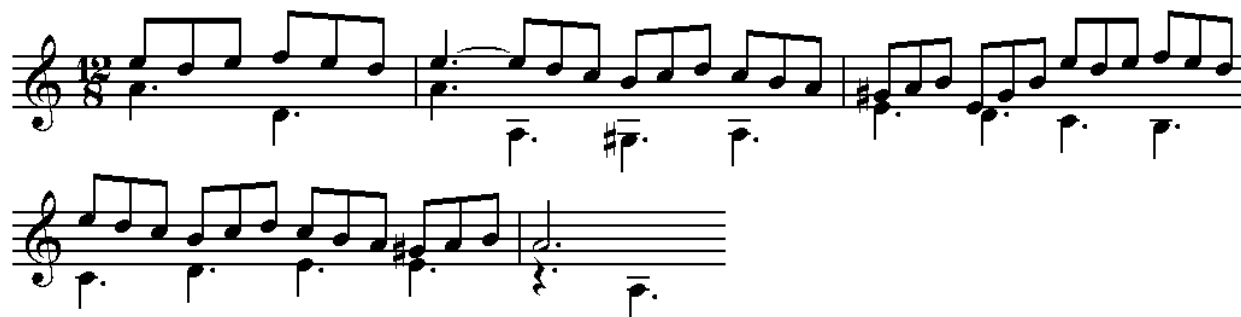
Ex. 5-1 G.F. Handel: Sonata op 1, No. 6



The third measure of ex. 5-1 is a nice bit of compound melody. The lower melodic strand is D, E, F#, while the upper strand moves down in contrary motion from the higher D down to the tonic G. The striking appoggiatura from E up to D links these two strands and returns in the course of the movement many times.

Example 5-2 also uses only a few melodic patterns, the primary one of which is the same passing tone through a third as in ex. 5-1. In both of these examples in almost every case the third note of each beat connects by step to the first note of the next. The only exception to this is found in the first half of bar 3, where the V chord lasts through both beats. Once again it can be seen that leaps are most frequent during a chord rather than between chords.

Ex 5-2 Bach: Lute Suite No. 3, Gavotte en Rondeau



As with second species one strategy for writing third species is to convert a note against note version. Example 5-3 shows various ways that a 1:1 connection can be expanded to 3:1. Again, in a single exercise it is best to limit the number of different types of connections as a way of writing a motivically unified phrase.

Ex. 5-3a repeated notes

1)

2)

3)



Ex. 5-3b, notes a step apart

1)

2)

3)



Ex. 5-3c, notes a third apart

1)

2)

3)

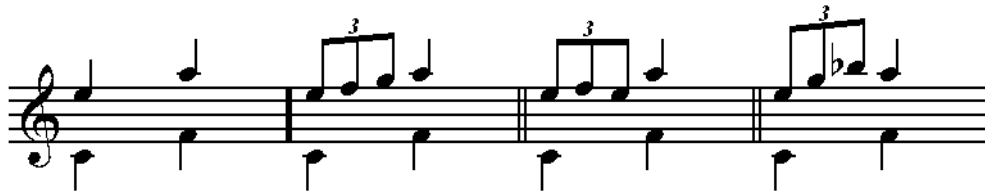


Ex. 5-3d; notes a fourth apart

1)

2)

3)



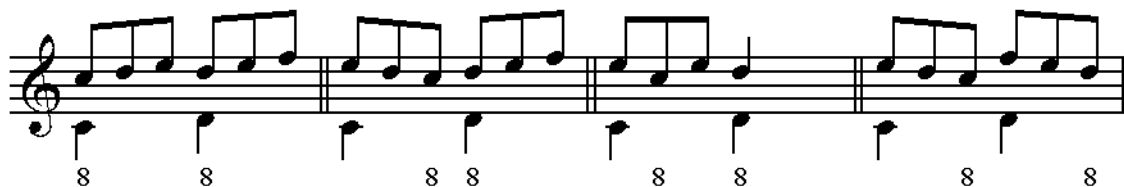
With regard to illegal parallel octaves and parallel fifths in third species the same rule applies, *avoid parallel fifths or octaves between any part of one beat and the start of the next beat*. Example 5-4 a, b and c are all serious errors. Ex. 5-4d is not wrong however because the second octave doesn't sound on the beat.

Ex. 5-4a) bad

b) bad

c) bad

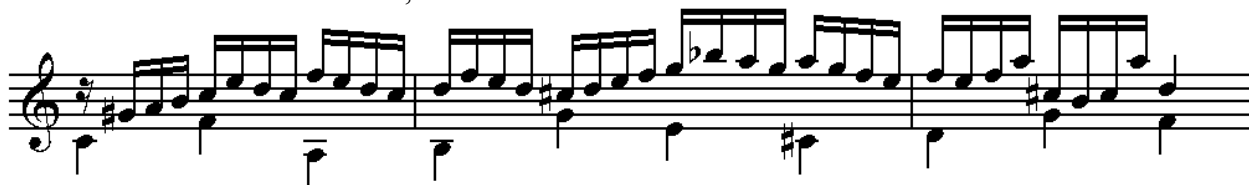
d) acceptable



Four against One counterpoint

Four notes against one is a much more rare rhythmic relationship than either 2:1 or 3:1. While much of Bach's music consists of running sixteenth notes in one of the voices, if you look at the other voice it is usually in eighths, in other words a 2:1 relationship. Example 5-5 is an excerpt from the Prelude to Bach's Second Lute Suite in A minor and is a good example of four notes against one.

Ex. 5-5 Bach: Suite for Lute II, Prelude



Example 5-6 is from J.S. Bach's Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor, a monumental organ composition based on repetitions of the slow moving melodic line found in the treble staff in ex 5-6. This passage is essentially in 4:1 counterpoint despite the presence of a number of half notes in the passacaglia subject. The sixteenth note passage in the lower voice has a very wide range since it is written for the organ but in all other regards it is a fine example of Bach's melodic approach. Once again it can be seen that with rare exceptions the last note of each 4 note group connects by step to the first note of the following beat. Also, notice that on the last beat of each bar how the last three notes flow "downhill" to then next downbeat, following an ascending leap (often a third), a very natural sounding configuration.

Ex. 5-6 Bach: Passacaglia and Fugue in C minor



In both forms of third species an additional concern arises due to the relative speed of the moving line. Often referred to as the “step-leap” principle, this principle suggests that when a line combines both leaps and steps in the same direction that the leaps should precede the steps, rather than the opposite. This principle applies particularly when the leap crosses to a downbeat. Example 5-7 shows examples of this problem, which is concerned with minimizing the rather clumsy effect produced when steps precede leaps. Ex. 5-7b is possible, but not ideal as the initial leap is large enough that it creates a gap-fill issue. It would be better if the line descended after the opening leap of a fifth. Ex. 5-7c is perfectly acceptable as the initial leap is small.

Ex. 5-7 Step-Leap principle

a) Bad b) Acceptable c) Better

The following examples once again show various four note patterns that could be employed when converting a note against note counterpoint into a four against one counterpoint.

Ex. 5-8a, repeated notes

1) 2) 3)

Ex. 5-8b, notes a step apart

1) 2) 3)

Ex. 5-8c, notes a third apart

1) 2) 3)

Ex. 5-8d; notes a fourth apart

1) 2) 3)

Pattern 5-8a, #1 is less successful than the others because it “spoils” the novelty of the note on the second beat by sounding it shortly before beat 2. Also in all of the patterns but one any leap within the pattern is from a chord tone and to a chord tone.

Illegal parallel octaves and parallel fifths in 4:1 counterpoint follow the same rule as before, *avoid parallel fifths or octaves between any part of one beat and the start of the next beat*. However, the rule is relaxed in one case. Example 5-9 a, b and c are all serious errors. However Ex. 5-9d is acceptable as it involves only the second 16th of the first beat and the start of the next beat. While this isn't great it is also not wrong.

Ex. 5-9 a) bad b) bad c) bad d) acceptable

Since parallel problems only extend to the first part of the following beat one way to avoid illegal parallels is to simply avoid using octaves or fifths as the first part of a beat. For this reason it is especially common to encounter illegal parallel fifths and octaves in both 3:1 and 4:1 at the cadence of an exercise. This is because the last interval in an exercise is often an octave. So pay particular attention to the intervals approaching the last note of a counterpoint problem.