



6 - Fourth Species Counterpoint

Fourth species counterpoint is concerned with syncopations and suspensions. This can be a confusing species to master but it opens up some very expressive musical possibilities that were exploited beautifully by 18th century composers. Example 6-1 shows how a 1:1 counterpoint can be converted to fourth species by displacing one of the voices by half a beat.

Ex. 6-1 First species shifted to produce fourth species counterpoint

a) 

b) 

In example 6-1 interval numbers have been added between the staves which show that shifting the treble voice creates additional intervals on the second half of each tied note. It is these “additional” intervals we will focus most of our attention upon. Ex. 6-1b is perhaps not great music, but is more interesting than 6-1a because each of these additional intervals is either a consonant interval (i.e., 3rd, 5th, 6th, or 8^{va}) or a dissonance which resolves down by step to a consonant interval, thereby creating a suspension. In example 6-1b the letters “ct” designate beats where a chord tone is produced by the tied note, and “sus” indicates beats where a suspension is created by the tied note. You will notice in 6-1b that at the two points where chord tones occur on the beat that the upper voice leaps after the tied note. But in the three places where dissonances occur on the beat (marked ‘sus’) the syncopated voice resolves down by step to a chord tone, thereby resolving the “on the beat” dissonance as a suspension.

Unfortunately not every first species counterpoint can be converted to fourth species counterpoint successfully. Example 6-2 presents a less fortunate situation.

Ex. 6-2 Problematic syncopated example

a) 1:1 basis 

b) Poor 

c) Good 

Example 6-2a is a rather questionable 1:1 counterpoint due to the direct 5th on beat 2, but when shifted a half beat later more problems appear. In ex. 6-2b the second half of each pair of tied notes creates a dissonant interval of a seventh relative to the bass voice. If these dissonances resolved down by step (as they do, in 6-2c) instead of leaping from the dissonances, they would

be perfectly good suspensions. In ex. 6-2c the sevenths on beats 2 and 4 are resolved down by step to intervals of sixths relative to the bass. The perfect fifth on the 3rd beat does not need to resolve down however since it isn't dissonant relative to the bass.

Effective Suspensions

The 7-6 suspension is one of a small number of “good” suspension types. When it is the upper voice creating being syncopated the best suspension combinations are: 7 – 6, 4 – 3 and less often 9 - 8. If the lower voice is the syncopated voice there is only one good suspension combination: 2 – 3. The Italian composer Arcangelo Corelli was a master of suspensions and the following example contains two of each of the suspension pairs listed above, except 9-8.

Ex. 6-3 Corelli: Sonata XI, op. 5 Vivace

The image shows a musical score for two staves in 3/8 time, key of D major. The upper staff contains a melodic line with several suspensions. The lower staff contains a bass line. Interval numbers are written below the notes: 7 6, 4 3, 7 6, 2 3, 4 3. The first suspension occurs on the downbeat of bar 3, where the upper voice has a B4 and the lower voice has a G3. The second suspension occurs on the downbeat of bar 4, where the upper voice has a B4 and the lower voice has an F3.

Suspensions have three components: the *preparation*, the *suspension*, and the *resolution*. The preparation can be thought of as the left side of the pair of tied notes, and the preparation must always be a consonant chord tone. In bar two of ex. 6-3 the high ‘B’ at the end of the measure is the preparation to the suspension which follows on the downbeat of bar 3. The preparation is a consonant 6th which becomes dissonant when the bass voice moves down a step in bar 3. The actual resolution of the suspended ‘B’ is the ‘A’ at the end of bar 3, the ‘E’ in between these two notes is a non-essential ornament to the resolution. Suspensions must always *eventually* resolve down by step within the measure in which they occur.

To further complicate matters in bar 3 the first interval is indeed a 7th, but the third beat is not really a 6th – despite the number that appears under the ‘A’. Had the bass voice not moved to another note by the time the upper voice suspension resolves down to ‘A’ it would have been a 6th, nonetheless the correct analysis numbers are as they appear in ex. 6-3. Example 6-4 focuses on these few beats to illustrate the previous comments.

Ex. 6-4: bars 2-3 of example 6-3 analyzed

The image shows a close-up of the musical score for bars 2 and 3, focusing on the suspension. The upper staff is labeled with 'prep' above the B4 note at the end of bar 2, 'susp' above the B4 note on the downbeat of bar 3, 'ornmt' above the E4 note on the second beat of bar 3, and 'res' above the A4 note at the end of bar 3. The lower staff shows the bass line with notes G3, F3, and G3. Interval numbers 6, 7, and 6 are written below the notes in the lower staff, corresponding to the intervals between the upper and lower voices.

Approaches to composing suspensions

Each measure of example 6-5 can have either a suspension or a syncopation using chord tones added in the empty staff. In bar 'a' the objective is to add a syncopated quarter note that is a consonant chord tone with both the G and C. The consonant intervals are 3^{rds}, 5^{ths}, 6^{ths}, and octaves. However, only one of these intervals above 'G' is also consonant relative to the 'C' on beat 2. The 'E' which is a 6th above G is also a 3rd above C, so this is the only option in bar 'a'.

In 6-5b the objective is to choose a syncopated quarter that is consonant with 'G' but creates a 4th or 7th (the two "good" suspension types in the upper voice) above the 'C' on beat 2. The note F is a 4th above C, but F is a dissonance relative to the G on beat 1, so a 4-3 suspension is not possible here. The note B is a 7th above C, and B is also a consonant 3rd above G. So a 7-6 suspension is the only option in bar 'b'. The key point is that the preparation of a suspension must be prepared with a consonant interval

Ex. 6-5 Creating syncopations

a) chord tones b) suspension c) chord tones d) suspension

In bar 'c' of example 6-5, where we want a consonant syncopation, the issue again is to select a note which creates a consonant interval to both the B and the A. A 3rd below B is a G, but that creates a 2nd to the A. A 5th below B is creates a 4th relative to the A, and of course 4^{ths} are unusable dissonances. However, a 6th below B is the note D, which creates a consonant 5th with the A, therefore D is the only option in bar 'c'.

Since the only "good" lower voice suspension is the 2-3 suspension the task in bar 'd' is simply to determine what note is a second below A, and hope that it can be prepared as a consonance beneath the B. Of course a second below A is G, and G is also a third below the B so it works perfectly. Example 6-6 realizes these solutions.

Ex. 6-6: the solutions to ex. 6-5

a) chord tones b) suspension c) chord tones d) suspension

It should be pointed out that in bars a and c above the last note does not have to be a consonant interval, since beat 2 is consonant there is no reason the 'and' of beat 2 can't be a dissonant passing tone, or one can leap from beat 2 as seen above.

When a number of suspensions occur in a row they are referred to as *chain suspensions*. Chain suspensions are quite easy to write when the cantus firmus descends by step. This works equally well for 7-6 and 2-3 suspensions in addition to the 4-3 suspensions are seen in example 6-7. As with all suspensions the dissonance occurs on the beat and the resolution occurs off the beat. In chain suspensions the preparation for a suspension is also the resolution of the preceding suspension.

Ex. 6-7 Chain Suspensions

Often composers added ornamental notes between the note of suspension and its resolution. Two common ornaments can be seen in example 6-8 from a Handel flute sonata. The first is in the lower voice and is perhaps the most common ornament, a pair of lower notes which seem to circle in on the note of resolution. The higher voice uses another type of ornament in bar 2. Here the voice leaps down to a consonant chord tone before leaping back up to resolve the suspension. Example 6-3 also contains these same ornaments.

Ex. 6-8 Handel: Sonata in D

Example 6-9 is noteworthy because although it has a number of tied notes that seem to be suspensions, in fact every tied note is a consonant chord tone, and not true suspensions. Furthermore, these two voices are also a strict canon at the time span of one beat. Canons, which will be taken up in a later chapter, are a type of imitative counterpoint where the following voice mimics the first voice exactly, in this case at the interval of a 12th below.

Ex.6-9 Corelli: Sonata VII, op. 5, Preludio

One final example from Bach’s Two-Part Invention No. 6 is remarkable for creating a wedge-like texture while also using all manner of different suspensions, chord tones, anticipations and so forth. Also, notice how the second half of the excerpt is identical to the first half, but with the parts exchanged. This is referred to as *invertible counterpoint*, another topic which will be considered more fully in a later chapter.

Ex. 6-10: Bach; Two-part Invention No. 6



Sadly, it is still possible to unwittingly create illegal parallel fifths or octaves in fourth species counterpoint. These are hard to notice, because they occur “on the diagonal.” Essentially if you find that the second half of two successive beats is octaves or fifths then you have written illegal parallels. Ex. 6-11 is an example of syncopated parallel octaves which are marked by the X’s above the treble staff.

Ex. 6-10 Parallel octaves in fourth species

