

7 - Fifth Species Counterpoint

Fifth species counterpoint is usually referred to as free counterpoint and is the final category to be considered. Unlike the others rhythms are not specified but it is the student's task to create rhythms that complement the cantus firmus. When composing an exercise in free counterpoint the basic process is the same, first scan the cantus firmus and determine the underlying harmonic structure, second compose a counterpoint to the c.f. that helps flesh out these harmonies. With regard to rhythms one should scan the c.f. and decide what the basic rhythmic pulse is and then compose rhythms in the counterpoint, which contribute to making the pulse more apparent. Finally, one should try to unify the exercise by "recycling" rhythmic and/or melodic figures in both parts. Ex. 7-1 is a fairly typical fifth species exercise.

Ex. 7-1 Free counterpoint cantus firmus

Bb: I V⁶ vi V⁶/vi vi ii⁶ V⁷ I
Optional chords (V I) (V⁴²/ii V⁷/V)

In 6/8 there are two strong beats per measure, so rather than harmonizing each 8th note it would be wise to first consider a simple harmonic rhythm of two chords per measure. Beneath ex. 7-1 are Roman numerals that suit this line quite well. The line beneath that are some "extra" possibilities that might work too.

The next consideration should be to think about the rhythmic pulse, usually the pulse is the division of the beat unit. In 6/8 the dotted quarter note is the beat unit, and the division would be 3 eighth notes. This suggests that the solution should have every eighth note articulated in one of the two voices, but not necessarily both. The keyword here is "complement" - the rhythms of the two voices should complement one another. Or as baseball's Wee Willie Keeler said, "hit 'em where they ain't."

In ex. 7-1 clearly the treble voice should be more active in the second half of each measure than the first half. In fact a simple dotted quarter note in the first half of each bar would be fine. It might be more interesting though to "recycle" the rhythm found in the second half of bar one by using it in the treble part too. Conversely, in the second half of bars one and two it would be good to use the 3 quarter note pattern heard in the lower voice in the first half of these two bars, possibly borrowing not only the rhythm, but the "leap, leap, return" contour as well.

The c.f. rhythm in bar 3 often produces some odd solutions. If one takes too literally the idea of complementation the treble voice rhythm might become the rather awkward rhythm seen in ex. 7-2a. Avoid these sorts of "backwards" rhythms in general, and in this case a more flowing rhythm such as 7-2b would be preferable, although others could work well too. The use of the two sixteenths rhythm in ex. 7-2b relates to the second beat of bar 1 in the c.f., but is purely optional, it would be adequate to simply use 6 eighth notes in measure 3. It is important however for the treble voice to articulate a note on the 2nd and 5th eighth notes of bar 3 to fill in these blank spots in the cantus firmus.

compose a suspension in the lower voice at this point to match the one in the first measure. One other rhythmic consideration is the eighth followed two sixteenths figure near the end. This rhythmic figure is one that can be exploited more fully in the counterpoint that is added.

Harmonically the D# suggests a V chord in E minor, and the D natural that follows suggests a V⁷ / iv chord which leads to a iv chord on the downbeat of bar 2. The A# at the end of bar two suggests a V⁷/V chord, which must resolve to V in bar 3. Example 7-5 shows some of the potential rhythms that were discussed above as well as a harmonic analysis based on these points. The combination of the rhythmic aspects of these two parts produces at least one articulation on each beat division, the eighth notes, and also recycles some of the figures introduced in the cantus firmus.

Ex. 7-5 a rhythmic and harmonic outline

Emi: i V i V⁷/iv iv i iv V⁷/V V⁷ I

On beat 2 the bass line should sound a note that produces either a 7-6 or 4-3 suspension with the top part. This would be either the note B or F# on beat 2. Similarly in beat 2 of bar 2 the bass voice should create a syncopated suspension relative to the B in the soprano. Since the only bass suspension type is 2-3 then the first note of bar 2 should be 'A - G' which will create the 2-3 suspension. In bar 3 where a V chord is intended the note D# should be prominent in the bass voice as this important leading tone is not present in the c.f. at this point. Ex. 7-6 presents one solution to this problem which utilizes these thoughts and changes a few other elements from ex. 7-5 in ways that aren't too significant.

Ex. 7-6 One possible solution

To recapitulate some of the key concepts in this chapter, when composing a free counterpoint to a given part try to determine the basic rhythmic pulse, which is most often the division of the beat unit. Also, endeavor to reuse rhythms presented in the given part. Harmonically one should consider using a harmonic rhythm that is not too active, but be open to the idea of adding optional chords at times. Melodically where possible try to make use of intervallic patterns already in the cantus firmus to unify the composition.