

Gradus Ad Parnassum

Counterpoint Basics

Catchy Melody

Write a strong melody and leave it (change harmony/counterpoint to suit a great line)

Only write dissonant if stepping down past it (to anything)

Don't lead/skip from a note to its tritone

Don't overuse direct motion & large jumps

Strong Voices

Be contrary more. Small steps (esp. in bass) help this.

Upper voices get more notice. Lower are more subdued.

Never use direct motion from consonant to perfect

You can cheat parallel octaves with a jump of 4 or more (just not parallel 5ths)

Look at least a bar ahead (ideally to the next cadence)

Voice crossing is fine if it sounds good

Unison: Don't write contrary motion to unison

Unison: Don't jump from unison to consonant

Syncopation

Resolve as if there was no delay or ligature

Keep a consonant upbeat if the bass changes

Dissonance resolves best if down by step

Smaller perfects parallel better if in ligature, never octaves

Oblique fixes most issues for any bar

Strong Chords

Try to use triads on beat 1, but always use in each bar

Use overtone series to voice chords (4-part) or aim for root (3-part)

Doubling Priority: Octave is best > 3rd > 6th (Ligature: 2nd > 4th)

The more perfect, the less harmony (Unison > 5th > Octave)

The less perfect a resolve from a dissonant, the better (Imperfect > Octave > 5th > Unison)

With 5 steps up or down, consonance for steps 1 & 3 is strongest (skipping 3rds is helpful)

Tonic

Start on tonic

Avoid it until the end

Tease it more over time

End on on it with root in the bass

A major tonic finale is more relaxing than minor

Counterpoint Exercises

Write the counterpoint above and below, on every staff. In Type 5 (florid), start exchanging staves for types of writing. In three & four part, just add another whole note staff each time.

Two-Part

Type 1: Whole-note against whole (focus on tonic & basic strong voicing, be more contrary)

Type 2: Whole against two notes (now heed the greyed out strong voicing rules)

Type 3: Whole against four notes (now heed the last strong voicing rule)

Type 4: Whole against delayed whole by half rest (heed basic syncopation rules)

Type 5: Combine all types, switching staves per type to make it musically interesting

Three-Part (and four)

Type 1: Focus on the first rule in Strong Voicing & Strong Chords more

Type 2: Same but break rules more

Type 3: Same

Type 4: More heed to Strong Chords, more flexibility with strong voicing

Type 5: Same, go crazy

The Open-Ended Version

Tonicism, counterpoint, syncopation, madrigal exchange across voices and singability are important to make music enjoyable, and as always— if it sounds good, do it.