

# Chapter Eleven

## Two-Part Tonal Counterpoint

### Introduction

In the last section of [Chapter 8](#), “Soprano-Bass Counterpoint” (p. 122), we provided a preliminary discussion of **counterpoint**, the combining of relatively independent musical lines. We discussed its relationship to harmony—its focus on horizontal relationships, in contrast to the vertical focus of harmony, and that these two components are two sides of a single coin. In tonal music, contrapuntal lines must generally combine in such a way as to make a convincing harmonic progression, which means that they cannot be completely independent. But we also showed how each line should ideally have its own unique contour and rhythm.

While the treatment of counterpoint in [Chapter 8](#) was discussed primarily from the perspective of analysis and textural reduction, the approach in this chapter is on composition. The history of counterpoint instruction is many centuries old. Certainly the most famous and influential counterpoint manual of all time is the 1725 treatise entitled *Gradus ad Parnassum* by Johann Joseph Fux (1660–1741), an Austrian composer and theorist, whose text was used by composers from Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven to Brahms and Ravel, among many others. Fux’s approach was to teach counterpoint in the context of five “species” representing increasingly complex levels of rhythmic motion and dissonance treatment among the voices.

First-species counterpoint features a contrapuntal voice that moves at the same speed as the *cantus firmus*; hence, it is also called **one-to-one (or 1:1) counterpoint**. The intervals formed by these two voices employ only consonances. Second-species counterpoint increases the relative speed of the contrapuntal voice to 2:1, with passing dissonances being allowed on the offbeats. The third species involves 4:1 motion, while fourth species adds syncopations and suspensions. Finally, fifth species is a mixture of the other four species and also introduces even shorter note values. After working through all five species using two-voice examples, the same procedure is applied to three and then to four voices.

As a tool for understanding tonal harmony and counterpoint, however, it has one weakness: It was designed to emulate a musical style—that of Palestrina, a late sixteenth-century composer—that used the traditional church modes (Lydian, Dorian, etc.) and an emphasis on intervals between voices rather than between chords. Our brief introduction to the art of writing counterpoint in this chapter makes some use of first species—[Chapter 12](#) (pp. 188 and 192) will treat second and fourth species in a similar manner—but it does so in a harmonic context—using major and minor scales, modern meters, cadences, and triadic harmony. That is, we will try to keep in mind the principles of good counterpoint while, at the same time, writing lines that conform to good tonal progressions. The resulting compositional examples will bear a strong resemblance to the soprano-bass (or outer-voice) counterpoint examples achieved through textural reduction that we illustrated in [Chapter 8](#).\*

172

### Composing an Unembellished Bass Line

In this first section, we will practice writing unembellished bass lines—that is, bass lines in which there is only one note for each chord. For most of these beginning exercises, you will be provided a harmonic progression to use instead of being asked to create your own. Because these bass lines are more like textural reductions than fully worked-out pieces, they will have a more restricted character, with the following features in common:

1. **Length.** The bass lines will consist of short, 4- to 6-measure phrases, or they will combine two such (roughly equal-length) phrases to form a period. If the example is a period, you do not need to try to smoothly connect the counterpoint or harmonic progression *between* the two phrases; treat them each separately.
2. **Harmonic rhythm.** The chords, and the bass line, will generally move in half notes in  $\frac{4}{4}$  time. The line can begin on either beat 1 or 3, but use the same initial beat placement for each phrase of a period, and always begin the final pitch on beat 1. If

a phrase begins on beat 1, use a whole note for the final pitch.

3. **Key.** Each example will use a single major or minor key. Use melodic minor when appropriate.
4. **Beginning and ending.** Each phrase will begin and end on tonic or dominant harmonies. If a phrase begins with a dominant harmony, make it an upbeat by beginning on beat 3.

Next, follow these steps to compose an effective bass line and its corresponding harmonic progression.

## STEP ONE: COMPOSING THE BASS LINE

1. **Notate in root position.** Notate the bass line in root position using the given progression.
2. **Range.** Stay within the approximate range of E2 to C4, and use leaps larger than a fifth only occasionally.

Example 11-1 illustrates a root-position bass line and its associated progression. Note that the progression has been constructed using the principles given in Chapter 7. (p. 105)

### Example 11-1 Root-Position Bass Line



## STEP TWO: DETERMINING CHORDS THAT MUST REMAIN IN ROOT POSITION

There are certain chords that should always be left in root position for the purposes of these exercises.

1. **First and last chords.** The first and last chords of each phrase should be in root position.
2. **V in a V-I cadence.** In addition, if the cadence (the last two chords of the phrase) is V-I, the V should also be in root position.
3. **vi in a V-vi progression.** If a progression contains the deceptive progression V-vi (or V-VI in minor), at least the vi (or VI) should be in root position.

173

The bass line from Example 11-1 is shown again in Example 11-2, this time with circles around the notes that should remain in root position.

### Example 11-2 Mandatory Root-Position Chords



## STEP THREE: DETERMINING CHORDS THAT MUST BE USED IN FIRST INVERSION

Next, there are a few triads that should be used in first inversion rather than in root position.

1. **Diminished triads.** These include the ii° in minor keys and the vii° in both major and minor keys. (Review Chapter 8.) Example 11-3 shows our bass line with the vii° changed to a vii°<sup>6</sup> and the ii° to a ii°<sup>6</sup>. (Review Chapter 8, p. 117.)

### Example 11-3 Mandatory First-Inversion Chords



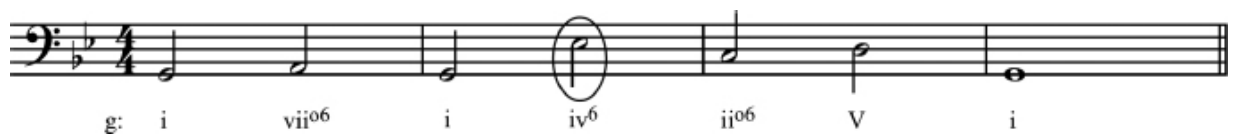
2. **Either V or I (but not both) in an internal V–I progression.** If the progression contains a V–I (or V–i) *within* the phrase (not at the very beginning or at the cadence), it is usually best to keep it from sounding too final by using  $V^6-I$  or  $V-I^6$  (avoid  $V^6-I^6$ ).

## STEP FOUR: IMPROVING THE BASS CONTOUR

Here are a few additional suggestions concerning the overall flow and contour of the bass line.

1. **Repeated bass notes.** First, it is a good idea to avoid repeating bass notes across the barline because such repetitions tend to confuse the harmonic rhythm. There was a repetition across the barline in [Example 11-3](#) (the two C3s), which [Example 11-4](#) corrects by inverting the iv chord.

### Example 11-4 Repeated Note Avoided



2. **Focal point.** Also, it is best if the bass line contains a focal point, a *single highest point* or a *single lowest point* in the line. In [Example 11-4](#), the E  $\flat$  3 provides the focal point.

174

3. **Convert large leaps.** First inversions are often used to convert large leaps into smaller leaps or into stepwise motion. The sixth between G2 and E  $\flat$  3 in [Example 11-4](#) becomes a fourth in [Example 11-5](#) when the i chord is inverted.
4. **Tonal variety.** Notice that inverting the i chord also helps the bass line in another way: Where we once had three Gs (out of seven pitches), we now have only two, and we have added a new pitch class, B  $\flat$ , to the line. This is called “tonal variety,” and it is preferred over “tonal redundancy,” the overuse of a single pitch class.

### Example 11-5 Leap Converted and Tonal Variety Achieved



5. **Change of direction.** If a large leap occurs in the line, change the direction of the line after the leap (and, if possible, before the leap as well).
6. **Dissonant intervals.** Avoid the use of augmented intervals, sevenths, and any interval larger than an octave. The only diminished intervals used are the  $^{\circ}4$  ( $\hat{3}-\hat{7}-\hat{1}$  in minor) and the  $^{\circ}5$  ( $\hat{4}-\hat{7}-\hat{1}$  in major or minor); both such intervals are illustrated in [Example 11-6](#). In either case, the line changes direction after (and usually before) the leap.

### Example 11-6 Allowable $^{\circ}4$ and $^{\circ}5$



7. **Melodic minor.** In minor keys, remember to use melodic minor. This may occasionally change the quality of the triad, as shown in [Example 11-7](#). For example, in the progression  $iv-V-I$ , if you invert the first two chords, you should change  $iv^6$  to  $IV^6$  to avoid an augmented second in the bass. Likewise, in the progression  $i-V-iv-V$ , if you invert the middle two chords, you should change  $V^6$  to  $v^6$ . (Review [Chapter 4](#).) (Review [Chapter 4](#), “The Minor Scale,” p. 55.)

### Example 11-7 Use of Melodic Minor



175

8. **Six-four chords.** You may have noticed that all of the inverted triads we have used have been first-inversion triads. When you begin writing your own progressions, you may include cadential 6/4 chords before the cadential dominant. For now, however, *avoid using 6/4 chords*.

## Self-Test 11-1

(Answers appear in [Appendix D](#).) (p. 593)

- A. Compose bass lines to the following progressions, inverting harmonies and changing chord labels as necessary. Follow the suggested procedures and explain your decisions. There is more than one acceptable answer to these exercises, so please review solutions with your instructor.

For example, given:



Here is the example with mandatory root-position pitches shown:



And then with mandatory first-inversion pitches also shown:

(one or the other)

e: i V<sup>6</sup> i V VI ii<sup>°6</sup> V

1.

F: I vii<sup>°</sup> I vi V I ii V I

176

2.

d: i ii<sup>°</sup> V VI iv V i vii<sup>°</sup> i V i

Exercise 11-1 See Workbook.

## Composing a Counterpoint to the Bass Line

Once you have composed a simple bass line to a given progression, the next step is to compose a simple contrapuntal voice above it. The two lines will not be independent rhythmically at this stage, but they will have their own contours. While the counterpoint is still rather elementary, we are learning principles that will serve as the foundation for more advanced compositional or analytical procedures. The guidelines in this unit—and there are quite a few of them—are not as arbitrary as they may seem. Some of them pertain only to tonal counterpoint, but others would hold true for counterpoint in any period of style of music.

When composing a contrapuntal voice above the bass line, we will need to consider four categories of guidelines:

1. Features of the melodic line.
2. Beginnings and endings.
3. Harmonic intervals.
4. Types of motion.

Categories 1 and 2 will remain the same throughout our study of counterpoint. However, categories 3 and 4 will require some changes as we add rhythmic variety and other elements in [Chapter 12](#). (p. 193) We will look at each category in turn.

### FEATURES OF THE MELODIC LINE

Each suggestion in the following list is illustrated by a separate line in [Example 11-8](#) (p. 177), showing examples of what should be *avoided*.

1. **Contour.** The melody should be more conjunct than disjunct.
2. **Variety.** Variety is preferred over redundancy. Avoid reusing the same pitches again and again.
3. **Pitch repetition.** Use *no more than two* consecutive occurrences of the same pitch. Also, don't repeat the same pitch *across a barline*.
4. **Directionality.** Don't let the melody pull too much in one direction.

5. **Focal point.** The shape of the melody should be interesting but clear and simple, with a single focal point (a single highest point or single lowest point in the line). Move toward and away from it gradually.
6. **Range.** The range of the added voice should be no less than a fifth and no more than a tenth.

177

7. **Leading-tone resolution.** The melody should not contain notes outside of the prevailing key. Resolve the leading tone ( $\hat{7}$ ) up to  $\hat{1}$ , except in the stepwise descent  $\hat{1}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}$ . This principle does not apply to the *subtonic*—the lowered seventh-scale degree—in the minor mode.
8. **Melodic minor.** In minor-mode examples, use the *melodic minor* scale. For example, use the *leading tone* when leading to the final  $\hat{1}$  or as part of a  $\hat{5}-\hat{6}-\hat{7}-\hat{1}$  motion. If  $\hat{6}$  precedes  $\hat{7}$ , raise  $\hat{6}$  as well. Use lowered  $\hat{6}$  and  $\hat{7}$  in descending stepwise lines such as  $\hat{1}-\hat{7}-\hat{6}-\hat{5}$ . Use your judgment in ambiguous situations.
9. **Melodic intervals.** Avoid augmented or diminished intervals, sevenths, or leaps larger than an octave. The *descending* intervals  $\hat{3}-\hat{7}$  ( $^{\circ}4$ ) in minor and  $\hat{4}-\hat{7}$  ( $^{\circ}5$ ) in either mode are acceptable.
10. **Treatment of leaps.** If an isolated large leap occurs in the line (fourth, fifth, sixth, or octave), precede and follow it with motion in the opposite direction. *Exception:* Fourths can be *preceded* by motion in the same direction.
11. **Consecutive leaps in same direction (number and resolution).** Use *no more than two* consecutive leaps in the same direction. When using two consecutive leaps, you should precede and follow the entire *pair of leaps* by motion in the opposite direction (compare to the previous guideline).
12. **Consecutive leaps in same direction (total span).** Two consecutive leaps *in the same direction* should together span a fifth, a sixth, or an octave. Precede and follow the pair by motion in the opposite direction.

### Example 11-8 Errors in Writing Contrapuntal Voices

- a. Error type 1: Overly disjunct line



- b. Error type 2: Redundant pitches



- c. Error type 3: Three repeated pitches, pitch repeated across a barline



178

- d. Error type 4: Pulls too much in one direction



- e. Error type 5: No upper (or lower) focal point



f. Error type 6: Overly restrictive range (and boring!)



g. Error type 7: Improperly resolved leading tone



h. Error type 8: Incorrect use of melodic minor



i. Error type 9: Problematic leaps (in this case, a 7th and a leap larger than an 8ve)



j. Error type 10: Isolated large leap not preceded and followed by motion in opposite direction



k. Error type 11: Three consecutive leaps in the same direction



l. Error type 12: Two consecutive, same-direction leaps that do not span a 5th, 6th, or 8ve



## Self-Test 11-2

(Answers appear in [Appendix D.](#)) (p. 594)

- A. Analyze and critique each contrapuntal voice in terms of the guidelines for melodies discussed in “Features of the Melodic Line.” To avoid cluttering up the score, label the errors using the numbered list given in that section. (For example, for an improperly resolved leading tone, place the label “#7” above the location of the error.) If the errors are general and apply to the entire example, place the number to the left of the score. If the error occurs over a range of notes, show this with an additional bracket or circle.

1. B ♭ major



2. G major



### Exercise 11-2 See Workbook.

180

## BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

1. **Beginnings.** If the first chord is a tonic harmony, begin the contrapuntal voice on any note of the tonic triad ( $\hat{1}$ ,  $\hat{3}$ , or  $\hat{5}$ ). If the first chord is a dominant harmony (on beat 3), begin the contrapuntal voice on any note of the V chord *except* the leading tone.
2. **Cadences.** End each phrase with one of the following three cadence types: PAC, root-position IAC, or HC. Avoid using  $\hat{5}$  above a final I (or i) chord in an IAC. If you are writing a period, give the second phrase a stronger cadence than the first (HC-PC, HC-IAC, or IAC-PAC). Use smooth voice leading when writing cadences. Remember that all of these cadences should be placed so that the final chord is located on beat 1.

## HARMONIC INTERVALS

These guidelines refer to the intervals between the two voices that occur as the counterpoint proceeds. Each species has its own conventions related to harmonic intervals; the following list refers only to 1-to-1 counterpoint.

1. **Chord tones.** Every note of the contrapuntal voice, like those in the bass line, should correspond to the given chord label—that is, they should be chord tones.
2. **Consonances.** Because only root-position and first-inversion triads will appear in these phrases, only consonant intervals—unisons, thirds, fifths, sixths, and octaves—will be used as harmonic intervals. Avoid all dissonant harmonic intervals, including seconds, fourths, sevenths, and all augmented and diminished intervals. Remember that *the perfect fourth is a dissonance in two-voice counterpoint* and should be avoided.
3. **Unisons.** Avoid unisons except (if needed) at the beginning and/or end of the counterpoint.
4. **Imperfect versus perfect consonances.** Imperfect consonances (thirds and sixths) have a more pleasing sound in the tonal



style and should predominate over perfect consonances (unisons, fifths, and octaves), *especially in the middle of the phrase*. Avoid using more than one or two perfect consonances in the middle of the phrase.

5. **Melodic minor** and **harmonic progression**. In minor keys, use melodic minor, and *you may change the triad qualities of the chords as needed to accommodate this*. For example, given the progression i–iv–V–i, using  $\hat{5}-\hat{1} \hat{6}-\hat{1} \hat{7}-\hat{8}$  in the upper voice will require that the progression be changed to i–IV–V–i.
6. **Awkward doublings**. Avoid doubling the bass pitch in the upper voice whenever a  $I^6$ ,  $IV^6$ , or  $V^6$  ( $i^6$ ,  $iv^6$ , or  $V^6$  in minor) chord is used. In the case of the  $V^6$  chord, this pitch is the leading tone, which should never be doubled. The other doublings are awkward and should also be avoided.

## TYPES OF MOTION

It is important to consider the relationship between the contrapuntal voice and the bass line in order to maintain the relative independence of the two parts. In general, follow the basic guidelines for the treatment of outer voices as given in [Chapter 5](#), “Parallel Motion,” (p. 73): avoid parallel and contrary perfect consonances, avoid direct fifths and octaves, employ a variety of motion types—contrary motion, parallel motion of

181

imperfect consonances, similar motion, and oblique motion—and give preference to *contrary motion*.

Here are some additional guidelines for moving from one harmonic interval to the next in 1-to-1 counterpoint.

1. **Static motion**. If one voice repeats a pitch, the other voice should move (oblique motion). In other words, static motion should not be used in one-to-one counterpoint.
2. **Parallel imperfect consonances**. Parallel imperfect consonances (thirds, sixths) are fine, but avoid using more than three thirds or three sixths in a row.
3. **Direct fifths and octaves**. If there is similar motion between voices into a P5 or P8, recall that the upper voice must move by step. A special case is that in which both voices move upward into a P8—here, the top voice must move by a *half step* to be acceptable. Various possibilities are evaluated in [Example 11-9](#).

### Example 11-9 Similar Motion into Perfect Intervals



4. **Voice crossing**. Do not allow your voices to cross. As illustrated in [Example 11-10](#), voice crossing occurs when the contrapuntal voice momentarily moves *below* the bass line.

### Example 11-10 Voice Crossing

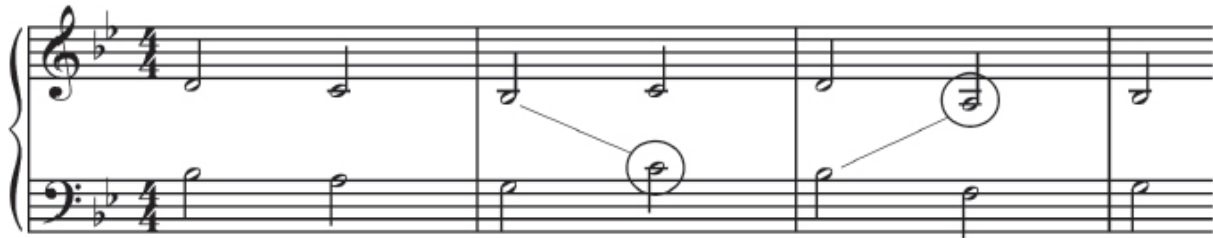


5. **Overlapping**. Also to be avoided is overlapping, which is similar to voice crossing. It occurs, as in [Example 11-11](#), when the bass voice rises up above where the upper voice was in the previous chord or when the upper voice dips below where

the bass was in the previous chord. (Most examples of voice crossing also involve overlapping—label such instances as voice crossing.)

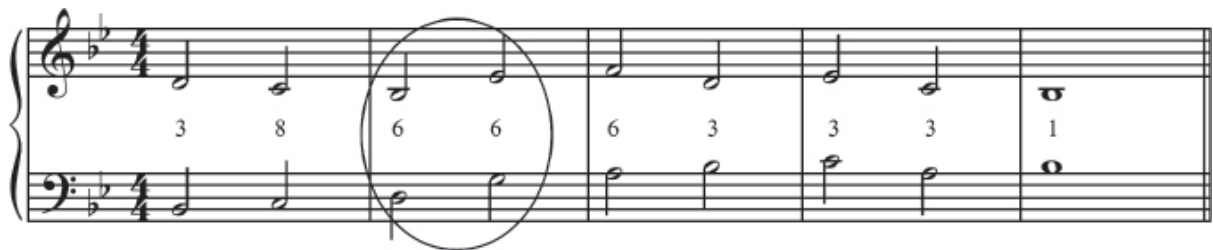
182

### Example 11-11 Overlapping



6. **Simultaneous leaps.** Avoid having both parts use *large leaps* (4ths or larger) simultaneously in the *same direction*, as shown in [Example 11-12](#).

### Example 11-12 Simultaneous Leaps in the Same Direction



## Composing the Contrapuntal Voice

Keeping these guidelines in mind, you should practice writing a contrapuntal voice above different bass line examples. In addition to writing the contrapuntal voice, you should

1. Write the *harmonic interval numbers* between each note and the corresponding note in the bass line. Reduce compound intervals to their simple equivalents.
2. You do not need to include the interval type, only the number, *unless it is an augmented or diminished interval*. In particular, look for all of the 5ths in your example and add ° to them to show the °5 intervals. This will help you to find and correct objectionable parallel intervals.
3. Refer to the guidelines as you work, and don't be afraid to revise. In general, a relatively conjunct line moving mostly by contrary motion (and parallel imperfect intervals) against—and forming consonances with—the bass line will lead to a good solution.

183

## Writing Your Own Harmonic Progressions

In some of the exercises that follow, you will be asked to write your own progressions, using the harmonic progression guidelines in [Chapter 7](#) (p. 105). You can either write out the progression entirely with root-position triads, then follow the procedure from the beginning of the current chapter, or you can also include first inversions as you compose, making sure to

create an effective bass line as described earlier.

## Self-Test 11-3

(Answers appear in [Appendix D.](#)) (p. 594)

There is more than one acceptable answer to these exercises, so please review solutions with your instructor.

- A. Compose a good one-to-one counterpoint to the following bass line. You may either write a PAC or a root-position IAC as the final cadence. Indicate the harmonic intervals formed by the two voices.

G: I    iii    vi    ii<sup>6</sup>    V    vi    IV    V    I

- B. Compose a good bass line using the following root-position progression, inverting harmonies and changing chord labels as necessary. Then, compose a good one-to-one counterpoint above the bass line. Use a PAC for the final cadence. Indicate the harmonic intervals formed by the two voices.

f: i    VI    ii<sup>0</sup>    V    i    iv    V    i

Exercise 11-3 See Workbook.

## Summary

The study of **counterpoint**—the combining of relatively independent musical lines—can provide a solid basis for composing in tonal styles, using principles of musically effective melodic combination in conjunction with effective tonal progressions. Some of these principles derive from a two-voice species approach, wherein increasingly complex rhythmic relationships between voices, increasingly varied dissonance usage, and increasingly shorter note values are employed. So, for example, this chapter is concerned with first-species counterpoint, also called **one-to-one (1:1) counterpoint**, in two voices; in which the voices move in equal rhythmic values (in this case, half notes) using only consonances. Unlike species approaches, however, our tonal counterpoint approach emphasizes major and minor scales instead of church modes, modern meters, harmonic instead of

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“melodic” cadences, and chord membership rather than intervals between voices.

When writing short, unembellished bass lines using given harmonic progressions, it is important to pay attention to issues like inversion usage, contour, melodic variety, and the treatment of leaps and melodic dissonances. When writing simple contrapuntal lines with independent contours above these bass lines, principles related to the shape and constitution of the melodic line, the treatment of beginnings and endings, the types and successions of harmonic intervals employed, and the types of relative voice motion are considered. Finally, the composition of contrapuntal examples from newly composed harmonic progressions should rely upon the normative guidelines for such progressions discussed in [Chapter 7](#).

\* Those who prefer to use a stricter species-based pedagogy that leads gradually into our tonal approach can find an alternate version at [www.mhhe.com/kostka8e](http://www.mhhe.com/kostka8e).