

Advice for the Study of Counterpoint

Purpose of This Study

These exercises you'll be doing as you go through the book aren't meant to be, in and of themselves, great works of art. They are fundamentally a teaching method - and a very good one. They are meant to train your ear and mind to hear and understand the relationships independent musical lines have with each other. That being said, make make each exercise as beautiful as it can be. You should be able to look at each completed exercise with pride, having created the best thing you were capable of creating at the time, given the restraints imposed on you.

Hopefully, if you work hard, you'll emerge with a much greater capacity to compose and appreciate contrapuntal music. If you're a composer, you may still decide that the texture which most fits the music you want to write is, for example, homophonic (accompanied melody). But, you'll be making an informed decision - knowing that you could, if it were to fit, create an intricate contrapuntal web instead of a block of chords. You'll hopefully be using these principles from here on in your compositional life.

Core Principles

1. Internal listening (Audiation)

Don't just fill in these exercises with appropriate intervals and then go to the piano to play it. That's a waste of your time. Instead, first memorize the *cantus firmus* (hereafter *cf*), "play it" several times in your head. Then, for each note

you write, hear it internally (this can take practice). Then, hear it in context of the full melodic line you're writing. Lastly, and most difficult of all, try to hear it in your head along with the *cf*. This last step needs to be worked at, and you'll need to be patient. At first you're likely to hear the "gist" of it internally - hearing your melody rather clearly, and some harmony that the *cf* implies. This is a great start. Later, you'll hopefully be able to hear the *cf* and your line both clearly, in their proper register, sounding simultaneously. This gets increasingly more difficult as we go. 3 voice counterpoint is already a big step up in difficulty. 4 voice is really quite difficult (I have trouble accurately hearing all 4 voices simultaneously in both 3 and 4 voice composition).

2. Embrace the Constraints

Don't roll your eyes at all the constraints. They're there to help your ear develop musical intuition by laying down principles which usually apply. When learning to read, one is told that the letter *p* is pronounced like the first sound in the word *pot*, for example. The student doesn't need to worry about the various exceptions to this rule in words like *pterodactyl* and *coup*. Also, good composers can create beautiful music under almost any constraints - so, view it as a challenge.

3. The Ear Is the Final Judge

Fux is very clear in the book that the ear should decide what works and what doesn't. The difficulty lies in whether or not your ears are trained enough to be trusted. Probably to some degree yes, and to some degree no. So, when you're writing, if there's a musical idea which really excites you yet doesn't follow the rules, you may decide to use it. Certain rules should be ignored more easily than others. Rules about successive skips/leaps and their compensation are particularly loose. Fux himself ignores these rules in several places. Forbidden parallels and improper dissonances, on the other hand, should be treated as real errors, not suggestions. As your ear improves, your judgment will become more reliable. Until then, trust the process.

Modality

This book is modal, not tonal. This is one of the greatest reasons to use it, because the different modes are super cool. So, try to avoid putting unnecessary accidentals just because that's the sound your ear is used to. It'll likely take some work to appreciate the different flavor of the different modes. For example, you may at first be incapable of hearing an exercise in Phrygian as ending satisfactorily. You may hear it as ending on the dominant in Aeolian. You might have the same issue with Mixolydian, hearing it as ending on the dominant in Ionian. Lydian might just be weird at first. You'll get used to it, then you'll love it. It'll also unlock an immense universe of medieval and renaissance music for you, as you'll be able to hear the cadences as being much more convincing than if your ears were still constantly expecting major or minor.

Basic Interval Categories

Consonances

- Perfect consonances: unison, fifth, octave
- Imperfect consonances: third, sixth

Dissonances

- Seconds, sevenths, tritone, fourth (when between the lowest voice and any voice above)

Consonances are stable. Dissonances are unstable and tense, they need to be treated with care. You'll learn how to prepare and resolve these dissonances as we go through the book.

Types of Motion

The relationship between voices is shaped not only by intervals, but by how the voices move.

- Contrary motion (voices move in opposite directions). Generally preferred, as it promotes melodic independence.
- Oblique motion (one voice stays the same while the other moves).
- Direct motion - Both voices move in the same direction. Needs to be treated with much more care. You'll learn how to properly use direct motion as you go.

The goal is to maintain the independence of each voice while preserving a coherent, and hopefully beautiful, musical line.

Working Method

1. Internalize the cf. Sing it several times, and “play it” internally.

2. Start writing

- Which note are you starting on, which are you ending on? Can be helpful to write the ending first, so you have a better idea of the trajectory your melody should have.
- Hear each note as you write, always trying to hear it internally against the cf.
- Write the intervals between the staves. This will be enormously helpful especially at first to avoid dumb mistakes.

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3. Work slowly and deliberately. Try to make it as musical and as independent from the cf as possible. For example, melodies almost always have one highest note that isn't repeated. Does your highest note coincide with the highest note of the cf? If so, it might be worth changing - they'll likely sound more independent if their climaxes fall at different points.

4. Once you're finished, try to listen to the full thing internally. Then, check how accurate your internal picture of it was by playing at the piano.

Final Thoughts

Even very great composers spend years returning over and over again to the Fux, refining their exercises each time. So go slowly. Don't write anything that doesn't convince you. Every exercise should represent something you're proud of, so take as much time as you need.

If you take this work seriously, it will permanently change how you hear and compose music. This study will then have done its job, and I will be happy to have been part of that process.

Feel free to email me at ben@benheschmeyer.com with any questions.