

Music 231

Cantus Firmus Writing

These notes are a distillation of Salzter/Schacter's Counterpoint in Composition. It is in no way a substitute for reading and working through the actual text book.

New Material

- Constructing a melodic line with a desirable shape, sense of direction, a balance of steps and leaps, continuity, variety and correct handling of leaps
- Consonant and dissonant horizontal intervals

I. General considerations

- A. Cantus Firmus = a given line against which counterpoint will be added
- B. Simplest melodic (horizontal, linear) organization
 1. Harmony, rhythm, and motive are excluded, so not a melody, but an abstraction
 2. Aesthetic qualities still important
 3. "Reveals in embryo many of the characteristics of more highly developed musical organisms" (p.3)

II. Rhythm and length

- A. All whole notes (to minimize any rhythmic dimension)
 1. When all tones receive equal stress, there are no hierarchical groupings
- B. 8 - 16 tones

III. Tonal materials; melodic range

- A. All notes must be diatonic (not chromatic—no accidentals)
- B. All melodic lines should be suited to the voice
- C. Unusable intervals:
 1. Larger than an octave
 2. Augmented and diminished intervals
 3. Sevenths
 4. Chromatic half-steps example: c-c# (diatonic half-steps are OK: c to d-flat)
- D. Usable intervals: m2, M2, m3, M3, P4, P5, m6, M6, P8. descending m6 and M6 are seldom used (hard to sing).
- E. Range
 1. Maximum = M10
 2. Usual = P8
 3. Many use just M6 or P5

IV. Direction

- A. A Clearly defined beginning and goal achieved by single climax and clear shape supports tonal motion
- B. Climax may be highest or lowest note
 1. A low climax works best in the bass register and should be reserved for two-part counterpoint

V. Continuity is achieved by using predominantly stepwise motion

VI. Variety is achieved by

- A. two - four leaps
- B. several changes in direction

VII. Use of leaps

- A. Leaps larger than a 3rd should be followed by a change in direction (preferably stepwise)
- B. Leaps are usually prepared by stepwise motion from the opposite direction
- C. A leap up of a P4 does not need to be prepared by stepwise motion from the opposite direction
- D. Avoid two consecutive leaps in the same direction
- E. Avoid two consecutive leaps forming triads
- F. Avoid more than two consecutive leaps

VIII. Balance

- A. Avoid excessive motion in one direction by any means
 1. Conjunct: no more than five notes
 2. Conjunct with thirds: no more than M6
 3. Conjunct motion followed by a leap in the same direction

IX. Unresolved melodic tension

- A. Avoid outlining a dissonant interval: an outlined interval is the interval formed by the first and last tones of a motion in a single direction
- B. Do not climax on the leading tone

X. Repetition of a single tone

- A. Immediate repetition of a tone is not allowed because it emphasizes that note
- B. Do not use the climactic tone more than once
- C. Do not emphasize a single tone through overuse or by leaping from and then back to it

XI. Repetition of groups of tones

- A. Repetition of groups of tones (immediately, or with intervening material) implies motivic work, which is avoided in species counterpoint
- B. Sequences are avoided for the same reason

XII. Beginning and end

- A. Start and end on the tonic in the same register (it is ok to have an unprepared leap at the very beginning)
- B. Penultimate note is either the leading tone or supertonic (the supertonic for our purposes)
- C. The penultimate note should not be preceded by a leap larger than a third
- D. Usually ends from above: scale degrees 3-2-1 or 4-2-1 (1-2-1 & 7-2-1 are also possible)

XIII. Modal cantus firmi

We will explore Mixolydian and Dorian modes/versions

XIV. Writing cantus firmi

- A. Use the treble, alto, or bass clef
- B. To further deemphasize rhythm, do not use bar lines (except for the double bar at the end)
- C. For practice, write several in different major and minor keys, varying the length and placement of the climax

Please note: the information on this page has been assembled with the help of Dr. Ronald Caltabiano

Cantus Firmus Examples

