

COUNTERPOINT - BASIC OVERVIEW

"In its most general aspect, counterpoint involves the writing of musical lines that sound very different and move independently from each other but sound harmonious when played simultaneously" –Wikipedia

Counterpoint is different from the chords-and-melody approach to making music because it places an emphasis on melody as the primary feature rather than the chord progression, or the melody & chords combination that is so common. Moreover, counterpoint requires the mixture of at least two melody lines, each sounding different and "independent", meaning that each line holds its own (each line sounds good by itself). The two or more independent lines combine so that, as the saying goes, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Intervals

In counterpoint, we pay attention to the harmonic intervals formed between the different melodies, and there are many "rules" that govern how the intervals are to be used and mixed.

Consonance and dissonance

The treatment consonant and dissonant intervals dominates the art of counterpoint.

- Imperfect consonant intervals (3rds, 6ths, 10ths) are incorporated rather freely.
- Perfect consonances (unisons, 5ths, 8ves, 12ths) are handled so that they are never over-emphasized due to their intense stability.
- Dissonant/unstable intervals (2nds, 4ths, 7ths, 9ths, and anything augmented/diminished) are handled carefully, all for the sake of not over-emphasizing the sonorities. Dissonance, like spice in a recipe, is good in moderation but overpowering otherwise.

Resulting Chords

When melodies combine simultaneously and harmonic intervals result, it is possible to recognize these intervals as part, or all of a chord. This is how chords used to be thought of, as a byproduct of multiple, simultaneous harmonic intervals: the interval symbols used in figured bass notation are an outgrowth of this kind of thinking.

Types of Motion

There are three general ways that the interaction between lines is described:

Similar/Parallel Motion

Both lines move in the same direction, either approximately or exactly

Contrary Motion

The lines move in opposing directions (towards each other or away from each other)

Oblique Motion

One line stays on the same note (remaining static) while the other line moves

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Imitative Counterpoint

One common way to set up a contrapuntal texture is by way of imitation. One line imitates (echoes) the other at a later point in time. A common example of this is the round, like “Row, Row, Row Your Boat”, where each line follows the same melody, but at a delay. This is a technique that was heavily relied on in the Renaissance and Baroque eras. It’s a technique that lends a simultaneous sense of cohesion and variety.

Everyday Counterpoint

While writing in a “contrapuntal style” had its heyday in the Renaissance and Baroque eras, many styles of music have incorporated counterpoint—sometimes obviously, sometimes with subtlety, sometimes perhaps unconsciously.

Beyond the Western European styles that employ counterpoint overtly, it is worth examining examples of less formal and even non-notated music to hear counterpoint at work in different ways and to appreciate how it is still a viable way to approach composition.

In class we will look at (or just listen to) a variety of examples that feature counterpoint in one way or another. For now, delve into your own music collection and see if you can find an example or two that feature counterpoint in some manner. The counterpoint could be between multiple instruments, within a single instrument (like the left and right hands of a piano), between two (or more) voices, or between a voice and instrument. Any combination is possible.

As a guide, check out the accompanying example from The Rolling Stones’ *Satisfaction*. The interaction of the main guitar riff and the accompanying bass line form a contrapuntal relationship. The example has been crafted to emphasize this relationship—and the accompanying score excerpt also emphasizes this component of the music. It’s true that in this example the bass line takes a subordinate role to the guitar’s, and that the riff does not evolve as a line, which minimizes the sense of counterpoint, but for that brief moment, the two lines do combine into something greater than the sum of their parts.

The image shows a musical score excerpt for two instruments: Guitar and Electric Bass. The music is in 4/4 time. The Guitar part is written in the treble clef and features a repeating eighth-note riff: G4 (quarter), A4 (quarter), B4 (quarter), C#5 (quarter), D5 (quarter), E5 (quarter), F#5 (quarter), G5 (quarter). The Electric Bass part is written in the bass clef and features a repeating eighth-note line: G2 (quarter), A2 (quarter), B2 (quarter), C#3 (quarter), D3 (quarter), E3 (quarter), F#3 (quarter), G3 (quarter). The two parts are played in parallel motion, creating a strong contrapuntal relationship.