

COUNTERPOINT

"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 harmony/melody package because it places an emphasis on the line/melody as a primary motivator (rather than the chord progression, or the melody/chord combination that is so common). Moreover, counterpoint requires the mixture of at least two 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 made between the different lines, 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 study of counterpoint. Imperfect consonant intervals (3rds, 6ths, 10ths) are handled 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 are handled carefully, usually as passing or neighbor tones, or as suspensions in a syncopated rhythm – all for the sake of de-emphasizing the sonority. Dissonance, like spice in a recipe, is good in moderation but overpowering otherwise.

Resulting Chords

When lines combine 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 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

Imitative Counterpoint

One common way to activate 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 to a piece.