Introduction

The study of counterpoint has traditionally observed two distinct areas of authority and historical orientation. “Free counterpoint” customarily denotes an interest in the compositional techniques of the Baroque period, exemplified particularly in the music of J.S.Bach. “Strict counterpoint”, in contrast, focuses on the music of the sixteenth century, the central figure being Palestrina.

Under the “strict counterpoint” rubric, however, there is a second division, which reflects sharply contrasting pedagogical approaches. What is sometimes referred to as the “direct approach” is anchored in an analysis of actual repertoire, and purports from this analysis to derive a set of rules and procedures enabling the student to emulate Palestrina’s style with precision. In contrast to the claims of the “direct approach”, the “species counterpoint” method is decidedly less engaged with the study of historical exemplars. At the core of “species counterpoint” is a technique of composition which calls for the addition of one or more parts to a given *cantus firmus*, laid out as a series of some eleven or twelve whole notes (semibreves). Consideration of the details of dissonance treatment and linear design generates a body of rules, some strictly enforced, some less so, in an effort to steer the student towards a grasp of the fundamental principles of voice-leading and melodic shape.

Any attempt to decide which of these methods is the better one will begin by admitting that both fall decidedly short of their goals. In the case of the “direct approach”, the emphasis on Palestrina and his contemporaries such as Victoria comes at the expense of earlier masters, most notably Josquin, but including de la Rue, Isaac, Willaert, and many others. The reason for this emphasis is that the more restrictive handling of dissonance in the later 16th century disposes the music of that generation more readily to the formulation of systematic prescriptions and consistent rules. At the same time, it is clear that, however “direct” this approach may be, its chronological purview is also a narrow one, in that it offers at best only a passing account of such developments as changes in matters of dissonance over a century-long period of style change, but a period in which the music itself clearly subscribes to a common, underlying set of principles. In addition, in modeling itself on the study of actual compositions, whether by Palestrina or by a wider range of 16th-century musicians, the “direct approach” is necessarily difficult to absorb, since “real music” so often has an annoying way of resisting presentation in an orderly manner.

A rigorously ordered exposition of the material is, of course, at the very heart of “strict counterpoint” and is, arguably, the main reason for the method’s wide acceptance. Nonetheless, the approach has attracted its own fair share of criticism, from not one, but two historical perspectives. The central document in the promotion of the species method was J.J. Fux’s *Gradus ad Parnassum*, which appeared in 1725, although precedents have been identified some two centuries earlier. Fux professed a deep admiration for the style of Palestrina, and a concomitant respect for the ecclesiastical modes, but his methodical progression through the five species results in musical utterances which frequently offer only a vague simulacrum of late

16th-century polyphony. In Fux's workings of his own *cantus firmus* examples, many of them included here, one detects a palpable tension between the musical language of the model style on the one hand, and the influence of the major-minor key system and functional harmony on the other. To put it succinctly, Fux was more a man of his own musical times than his pedagogy was disposed to admit. This is particularly clear in his use of disjunct motion in the examples he sets out for the edification of his pupil, Joseph, including melodic leaps which often create an impression of triadic harmony quite unlike what one would expect to find in Palestrina. Additionally, many of Fux's cadence formulations, restricted as they are by his species requirements, also carry a pronounced dominant-tonic feeling, especially in second species.

As unfaithful as Fux may have been to any historical style - or indeed, perhaps for this very reason - his treatise was a mainstay in the training of uncounted numbers of composition students, the most illustrious including Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. In recent years, the species approach has experienced a renewed lease on life, particularly on the part of Schenkerian analysts, who recognize in its attempted elucidation of the underlying laws of voice-leading a reflection of their own preoccupation with the background, large-scale unfolding of musical architecture. And while Fux's induction as a sort of proto-Schenkerian has been noted and criticized as a second layer of historical distortion, the species method itself continues to exert a strong appeal not only within certain constituencies of the analytical community, but also in the teaching of counterpoint at the undergraduate level.

It may also be worth pointing out that both the "direct approach" and the "species approach", as distinct as they may be, might with equal justification be taken as instances of the pedagogical "tail wagging the dog". As already suggested, it is hardly an accident that, for both, Palestrina's music has been accepted as a sort of ideal. The control of dissonance found there is such that this repertoire lends itself more readily than the music of other composers to the formulation of a fairly strict set of rules and directives. Human psychology being what it is, it is not surprising that one is drawn to teach what is teachable, and in the process to validate one particular style over others which, this consideration aside, are equally worthy of study and imitation.

The pages that follow represent an attempt to draw on the best of both approaches. On the species side, there are both rules and examples taking the reader as far as a combination of second and fourth species for three voices. The decision to stop short of third and fifth species in three voices is largely related to the fact that this material was generated in response to the limitations imposed by a single-semester course in counterpoint at York University in Toronto. But beyond the purely circumstantial background to this decision, my own experience in working with species counterpoint is such that, in my view, competence in writing in three parts, with sustained half-note motion in one of the voices, provides sufficient preparation for the study of harmony to follow.

This said, one should avoid the suggestion that the study of species counterpoint is somehow merely a preparation for four-part harmony in the major-minor key system. In expressing such a

caution, I also have to acknowledge the role of my personal interests and predilections in deciding how to approach this study. The reader who is familiar with Fux's species guidelines will recognize some significant departures here, particularly with regard to a number of cadence formulations. To be sure, everyone who has contributed to the discussion of species counterpoint over the past three centuries or so has had to decide which of Fux's rules to accept, which to modify, and which to reject, and in doing so to cultivate a sense of the range of voice-leading situations in which certain rules might be best applied. In my case, a long-standing interest in polyphony of the later fifteenth and earlier sixteenth centuries has predisposed me to make choices in support of what is found there, in the music of Josquin and his contemporaries, without compromising the realationship with music of later generations. The end result may a bit less "strict" in certain respects than some readers would prefer, but such tradeoffs are surely unavoidable.

An appreciation of the rhythmic power and sonic beauty of late 15th- and early 16th-century polyphony has informed the selection of many of the examples assembled here, and reflects a desire on my part to acknowledge the value of a somewhat historically expanded "direct approach" as a fitting partner to the "strict" one. The anthology includes some two hundred examples of two- and three-voice polyphony, mainly mass movements, but also including Dufay hymns settings, Lassus's famous instructional duos, and Zarlino's *bicinia*, intended as illustrations of each of the twelve modes. Chronologically, the pieces more than a century, from ca. 1475 to ca.1600, and thus afford an abundance of material to anyone wishing to study the voice-leading techniques not only of the latter 16th century, but of the earlier masters. It is perhaps significant that the one of the few major studies of dissonance in an individual composer's music -- and certainly the best known one -- remains Jeppesen's work on Palestrina, published as early as 1922. As already suggested, Palestrina's music was the obvious candidate for this sort of in-depth treatment, but it can hardly be denied that compositions by earlier figures, quite apart from their intrinsic musical beauty, offer an equally rich body of material for anyone interested in the details of contrapuntal style, as practiced by generations of musicians for whom it was a regular occupation.

ABOUT THE USE OF SOLFA SYLLABLES.

All of the repertoire examples have been supplied with solfa syllables, according to the "movable do" system. The addition of syllables is a response to the low level of skill among most of the students I have encountered. Except for rank novices and the musically bereft, the use of syllables has proven helpful in anchoring the mind and in securing the intonation; and this seems to apply even to those who are just familiar enough to be comfortable using the names, but not quick enough to supply them unaided. For anyone attempting to fast-track a capacity to imagine what these pieces sound like, the printed "lyrics" are a critical resource.

Because there are in fact two different methods which go by the name of "movable do", it seems in order to offer some further clarification. The "movable do" system in which the tonic note is

consistently labeled as “do” is of virtually no use in dealing with Renaissance music (or a great deal of other music, besides). Perhaps the main thing to grasp about the system used in these pages is that any solfa syllable may function as a tonic note. This flexibility, succinctly reflected in the statement that any solmisation syllable may represent any scale degree, would have been completely transparent to any musician of the time. Central to this approach is a psychological theory of sorts, according to which the solfa names function fundamentally as reminders or cognitive “triggers” to indicate the disposition of whole and half steps. In the world of mode-based music, it is quite possible for a melody to begin and end on, say, “re”, and for the “re” to sound like the tonic and to “feel” like “note #1”.

For those who have been exposed to the unfortunate “do equals the tonic” approach, the application of syllables herein may require some mental adjustment. On the other hand, it will be of some comfort to discover that nearly all of the compositions are notated in one of two “key signatures”: no accidental or one flat. There are, therefore, only two possible syllables for any given pitch. Welcome to the world of “movable re”!

For anyone embarking upon the study of counterpoint for the first time, it may challenge the imagination to suggest that such a project, particularly when it is a curriculum requirement, can prove both rewarding and intellectually pleasurable. Having survived what must at the outset appear as a veritable avalanche of rules and restrictions, and having gradually acclimatized themselves to the vocabulary of voice-leading and dissonance treatment, many students find that ongoing work in species writing becomes not only enjoyable, but even mildly addictive. On a rudimentary level, the reason for this may lie in the satisfaction one experiences in discovering the solution to any puzzle. But counterpoint will always be more than a mere puzzle; it is also a mystery whose more elegant “solutions” capture the imagination with their beauty, and offer a window onto a very special world of sound and sound thinking.

A.L., July, 2013

Suggested reading & reference materials

Andrews, H.K. *An introduction to the technique of Palestrina*. Novello, 1958.

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Jeppesen, Knud. *Counterpoint: the polyphonic vocal style of the sixteenth century*. Prentice-Hall, 1939.

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Schoenberg, Arnold. *Preliminary Exercises in Counterpoint*. Faber, 1963.

Schubert, Peter. *Modal Counterpoint, Renaissance Style*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Soderlund, Gustave. *Direct Approach to Counterpoint in 16th-century Style*. Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1947.

Software: *Counterpointer.* Ars Nova Music Software (www.ars-nova.com). Useful for study and self-instruction.

Internet resources:
1) http://www.listeningarts.com/music/general_theory/species/menu.htm
2) http://humanities.uchicago.edu/classes/zbikowski/species.html
3) http://www.schenkerguide.com/species1.html

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