

Modal Counterpoint (Palestrina Style)¹

It is widely stated that modal counterpoint reached its peak in the music of the Italian composer Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina (c. 1525-1594). The following discussion is a summary of some important elements of Palestrina's style.

Metric structure

There are two rhythmic dimensions in Palestrina: that of a weak but present metric structure (ONE-two-Three-four in half notes) and the accentuation of the individual parts based on syllabic (text) accent. The tension and interaction of these two rhythmic dimensions provide forward momentum for the music, as do the tension and interaction of vertical (harmonic/intervallic) and linear (melodic) aspects of the pitch sphere.²

Modal approach

Palestrina's music is polyphonic and triadic, but decidedly diatonic. He adds accidentals in keeping with a relatively conservative approach to the modal system, not unlike chant.³ For simplicity and as an introduction to the style, we will avoid accidentals except in the cadence formulas studied in class.

Overarching principles

Palestrina style is founded on a principle of moderation and smooth flow in all the parts. In particular, two elements are to be handled with care:

- A. Large melodic leaps arouse more attention than smaller intervals.
- B. Higher notes stand out more than lower notes; hence ascending motion stands out more than descending motion.

Dissonance treatment

"The feature which represents the real essence of the evolution of style is *the dissonance*."⁴ Jeppesen cites 3 phases of dissonance treatment:⁵

1. Dissonance as an incidental phenomenon (organum, Ars Nova).
2. Dissonance as a "musical" phenomenon, in "conscious, deliberately stressed contrast to consonance." (conservative Renaissance music, Palestrina)
3. Dissonance employed as a means of poetic expression (later Renaissance, Baroque).

Since dissonance was unavoidable, Palestrina used it in a way that minimized the interruption of the musical flow.⁶ Our study of Palestrinian dissonance treatment will unfold as a series of focused exercises based on the 5 species of Johann Joseph Fux.⁷

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, page numbers in the footnotes refer to Knud Jeppesen, *The Style of Palestrina and the Dissonance* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946; reprinted New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970). This essay is adapted from Jeppesen by Mark Feezell. Copyright © 2003 by Mark Feezell. All Rights Reserved.

² 29.

³ Jeppesen discusses some instances of Palestrina's chromatic usage at p. 32 ff.

⁴ p. 293. Many other factors, such as approach to pitch structure, instrumentation, text, etc., influence style, but dissonance treatment is indeed worthy of examination.

⁵ 94.

⁶ 108.

⁷ Expounded in his 1725 treatise *Gradus ad Parnassum*.

Melodic Guidelines for Palestrinian Species Counterpoint

1. General:
 - a. Common meters: 4/2 or 3/2 or 3/1; ♩ gets the beat.
 - b. Arch contour, with high focal point 2/3 of the way through.
 - c. No “noodling.”
 - d. Sequences must be metrically shifted.
2. Melodic intervals:
 - a. ONLY 2nds, 3rds, **P**4ths, **P**5ths, **minor** 6ths (↗ only⁸) & 8ves.⁹
 - b. NO aug/dim intervals.¹⁰
 - c. Avoid emphasizing the TT (A4/d5), melodically, harmonically, or through melodies like B-G-F, B-D-F, B-__-F, F-__-B, etc. Exception: #9 on quarter handout is possible.
3. Leaps:
 - a. Leap-step when ↗, step-leap when ↘ throughout entire ↗ or ↘ motion.¹¹
 - b. Larger leaps first when ↗, smaller leaps first when ↘.¹²
 - c. Leaps ↗ >3rd more striking than ↘, so they are nearly always followed by steps ↘.¹³
 - d. Leaps ↘ usually followed by steps ↗; Other patterns: ↘3-↗4, ↘4-↗5.
 - e. 2 consecutive leaps in 1 direction are **uncommon**, but must form a triad if present.
4. Accidentals:
 - a. Approach accidentals only from a 2nd or 3rd above, or a **M** or **m** 2nd below.
 - b. Avoid stating the natural and raised pitch in close proximity in the same voice (e.g. C-D-C#-D or Bb-C-B-C in one voice, etc.)

⁸ The ascending minor sixth was used because it almost always resolved downward by step to a fifth (e.g. C-Ab-G, with the Ab decorating the motion C-G). In the case of the descending m6, the resolution was not as apparent to the ear and so was avoided.

⁹ Regarded as “a kind of repetition of the note” without literally repeating it. See p. 209.

¹⁰ 57.

¹¹ This is in contrast to the usual practice for chant melodies, i.e. step-leap when ascending, leap-step descending.

¹² An upward leap cannot be followed by larger leaps, because it calls too much attention to them. Similarly, using smaller intervals before larger ones when descending ameliorates (softens) the striking effect of a descending leap.

See p. 74.

¹³ 78.

FIRST SPECIES (1 against 1)

1. General:
 - a. All melodic guidelines apply.
 - b. Write the interval numbers between the parts.
 - c. Crossing of parts is permissible.
 - d. Favor contrary motion over other types.
 - e. Limit simultaneous skips (except if one voice skips an 8ve).
2. Intervals:
 - a. Start and end w/ a **perfect** consonance (U, P8, may start w/P5 only if ctpt ON TOP).
 - b. Perfect and imperfect consonance allowed, but use more imperfect than perfect.
 - c. NO unisons in the middle of the piece in first species.¹⁴
 - d. 8ves may be used sparingly; approach and leave by contrary motion.
 - e. Favor simple over compound intervals.
 - f. No dissonance.¹⁵
3. Parallels/hidden intervals:¹⁶
 - a. No parallel fifths or octaves.
 - b. No hidden fifths or octaves.
 - c. Limit parallel 3rds and 6ths to 3 in a row.
4. Remember the *clausula vera* cadence formula:
 - a. Both voices move by step.
 - b. Contrary motion.
 - c. Exactly ONE voice will have a half step. In all but Phrygian, Lydian, and Ionian, you will need to create a LT by adding an accidental.

¹⁴ “It is altogether somewhat unusual in Palestrina that two voices move towards unison at the same time; as a rule one is stationary while the other moves [to the unison].” p. 300.

¹⁵ “Allow dissonance only when introduced in such a manner that the mutually dissonant voices do not simultaneously proceed to the discord. Dissonance in first species is consequently prohibited.” p. 108.

¹⁶ These relate to the independence of the parts. p. 300.

SECOND SPECIES (2 ♩ against 1 ♩)

1. General:
 - a. All rules of first species and melodic guidelines apply.
 - b. NO DISSONANCE other than passing tones on weak beats! Label all PTs.
 - c. Avoid parallel 5ths and 8ves between strong beats.
 - d. No repeated notes.
2. “Weak” (i.e. unaccented) beats:
 - a. Definition: the second ♩ in 2/2 or 3/2 time, the second and fourth ♩ in 4/2 time.
 - b. Unisons allowed on “weak beats;” approach and leave via **contrary** motion.¹⁷
 - c. Dissonant passing tones may be used on “weak beats.” NO NEIGHBOR NOTES.
 - d. “Consonant passing tone” may be used (6-5 or 5-6, in passing motion).
3. Starting and ending:
 - a. May begin with a ♩ rest, but first note must be a **perfect** consonance.
 - b. First species may be used in the pre-cadential measure.
 - c. End with perfect consonance using standard *clausula vera* cadence formula.

¹⁷ “It is altogether somewhat unusual in Palestrina that two voices move towards unison at the same time; as a rule one is stationary while the other moves [to the unison].” p. 300.

THIRD SPECIES (4 ♩ against 1 ♩)

1. All rules of first and second species and melodic guidelines apply.
2. “Weak” (i.e. unaccented) quarters:
 - a. Defn: Even numbered ♩’s (2, 4, 6, 8=♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩ ♩). Different from weak *beats*!
 - b. No upward leaps on weak quarter notes, they disrupt the flow.
 - c. Dissonant LOWER neighbors (not upper) are allowed **only** on weak quarters.¹⁸
 - d. No upper neighbor motions on quarters 2 and 4 (“WEAK” quarters), even if consonant. These sound too much like syncopations and interrupt the smooth flow of the melody.
 - e. Dissonant passing tones are allowed on quarters 2, 3, or 4, but must be surrounded by consonances and approached and left by step in the same direction (up or down).¹⁹
3. The cambiata figure may be used:
 - a. Begins with consonance on an accented quarter note.
 - b. Moves down 1 step to a dissonance (rarely, a consonance).
 - c. Leaps down to a third to a consonance.
 - d. Resolves upward by step.
 - e. Example: D-C-A-B → C above a D → A.
 - f. Avoid patterns like C-B-G-A → G; G-A-G violates rule 2d.
4. Intervals to watch out for:
 - a. Because of increased scalar passages, the melodic tritone may be more difficult to avoid. Try not to emphasize it.
 - b. Parallel 5ths and 8ves should be separated by at least 4 ♩’s.
 - c. Unis. may **ONLY** occur on weak ♩’s or weak beats (the 2nd ♩ in 2/2 or 3/2, 2nd & 4th ♩ in 4/2 time).
 - d. Begin with perfect consonance; an imperfect consonance may be used if the ctp starts offbeat, but the first main beat (strong or weak) must be a perfect consonance.

¹⁸ 180.

¹⁹ Jeppeson, on page 180, seems to forbid dissonances on the 3rd quarter. Fux is more lenient, allowing passing tones on the 3rd quarter if the 2nd and 4th quarters are consonant. See Fux as translated by Alfred Mann in *The Study of Counterpoint from Johann Joseph Fux’s Gradus ad Parnassum*, 50-51.

FOURTH SPECIES (♩ ♩♩ ♩ against ○ ○)

1. All rules of the first three species and melodic guidelines apply as appropriate. The species rules to follow depend on the relationship between the voices at any given time (1 against 1, 2 against 1, 4 against 1, or tied half notes against whole notes).
2. General:
 - a. Tied half notes may be used for consonances or dissonant suspensions.
 - b. You may use 2nd species as necessary, but try for as many ties as possible. When in 2nd species, follow its rules.
 - c. Start with a **perfect** consonance, even if it is an upbeat.
 - d. End with 7-6-8 if ctpt is above the C.F., 2-3-8 or 2-3-1 if ctpt is below the C.F.
3. Suspensions:
 - a. PREPARATION as a consonance on an UNaccented (“weak”) beat.
 - b. SUSPENSION holds over to become a dissonance on an *accented* beat.
 - c. RESOLUTION to a consonance by stepwise descent.
 - d. Avoid 4-3 suspension in 2-part writing.
4. Ties allowed in 4th and 5th species:
 - a. ♩♩ → 4th species relies almost exclusively on this pattern
 - b. ○○
 - c. ○♩ or ○· → only if started on a strong beat
 - d. ♩♩ or ♩· → only in FIFTH species, NOT in FOURTH
 - e. ○||| → rarely used, and only at the end of a piece

FIFTH SPECIES
Florid counterpoint; Species 1-4 combined

1. Dissonances:²⁰
 - a. Dissonances should be on comparatively shorter note values.
 - b. Allowed on weak *beats*: ♪ passing tone (PT) (↘ or ↗) *or* ♪ passing tone (↘ **only**).
 - c. Allowed on weak ♪'s: PT, LN, nota cambiata; portamento on 2nd ♪ of beats 1 or 3.
 - d. Never leap into or out of a dissonance, except for the cambiata construction in 3rd species, in which the 2nd and 4th notes *may* be dissonant (see third species rules).
 - e. Dissonances are resolved by conjunct (stepwise) motion (PT, LN, cambiata, portamento, suspensions).²¹
 - f. ♪ ♪ ♪ may be used as a 7-6 or 4-3 suspension rhythm if the ♪ is on a STRONG beat.
2. Portamento or anticipation:
 - a. A weak (“off-beat”) quarter within a metrically strong beat.²²
 - b. Approached by step ↘, NOT by step ↗.
 - c. Anticipates a consonance on the next beat.
 - d. Often used with suspensions, but may be consonant or dissonant.
3. Rhythm:
 - a. It’s better to change rhythms a level at a time. Ex: try not to move from ○ to ♪ w/o ♪
 - b. Dots are often used to launch new rhythms. Ex: ♪ . ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪
 - c. Avoid syncopation except as a suspension preparation.
 - d. Avoid ♪ ♪ ♪ ; it is a halting rhythm. ♪ ♪ ♪ is o.k.
4. Meter:
 - a. At least one voice, either by new note or syllable, should mark every beat.²³
 - b. On strong beats, there must be consonance, except for suspensions.²⁴
 - c. Be careful not to overemphasize the meter through rhythmic or sequential groupings.
5. ♪ ♪ rhythmic pattern:
 - a. Always approached by step.
 - b. Used only to replace weak ♪'s (“off-beats”).
 - c. ♪ ♪ *always* come in pairs.
 - d. 3 uses: PT descending to a consonance *OR* either ♪ is a LN *OR* both ♪'s consonant

²⁰ Jeppesen mentions several important situations beyond the scope of this class. 1) dissonance allowed on the third quarter only when it is a descending stepwise progression followed by a step up (120-122), (2) dissonance in note-against-note quarters (170), and (3) the special case of the consonant fourth (232-234). For points a, b, and d, see p. 108. See also Jeppesen, *Direct Approach to Counterpoint*, p. 57.

²¹ 221.

²² 184.

²³ 90.

²⁴ This injunction dates back to Franco of Cologne’s *Ars Nova* of 1325, which prescribed first-beat consonances. See p. 98.

THREE PART MODAL COUNTERPOINT²⁵

1. Follow rules for the species as appropriate. Check each pair of voices.
2. All types of 4ths, inc. the A4, may be used between the two upper voices, if they are part of a triad in root position or first inversion.
3. Similar motion skips are handled more freely. Avoid all three voices skipping more than a fourth in similar motion.
4. Hidden (not parallel) 8ves and 5ths are allowed, EXCEPT between the outer voices.
5. Unisons may occur between 2 voices at any point. Avoid a total unison except at the beginning or end.
6. Begin with a complete tonic triad or the tonic fifth. If all 3 voices start together the triad must be major and in root position.
7. In canonic writing, the lead voice is the *Dux*, the following voice the *Comes*. Often a third, free voice is added.
8. Closing cadence:
 - a. End on the tonic triad, tonic 5th, tonic 3rd, or tonic 8ve. Often ends w/major triad.
 - b. The 2 upper voices follow the standard 2-voice *clausula vera* cadence formula.
 - c. The lowest voice will descend a fifth or ascend a fourth to the finalis.
 - d. Don't double a tendency (leading) tone.
9. Up to 4 3^{rds}/6^{ths} in a row between any two voices.

INVERTIBLE COUNTERPOINT

1. Not reliable over intervals larger than the interval of inversion.
2. Parts normally don't cross. Proceed at your own risk.
3. Watch for 5ths when composing invertible ctp at the 8ve and the 15th. 5ths become dissonant 4ths under inversion at the 8ve or 15th and must be handled carefully.
4. Watch for the 6th for inversions at the 12th, which become dissonant 7ths. A 7-6 suspension will work if the 7th of the inverted form acts as a passing tone.

At octave: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 8 7 6 5 4 3 2
 (presumes voices within an octave; adds to 9)

At fifteenth: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 15(8) 14(7) 13(6) 12(5) 11(4) 10(3) 9(2)
 8 9(2) 10(3) 11(4) 12(5) 13(6) 14(7) 15(8)
 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
 (presumes voices within two octaves; adds to 16)

At twelfth: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7
 12(5) 11(4) 10(3) 9(2) 8 7 6
 8 9(2) 10(3) 11(4) 12(5)
 5 4 3 2 1

²⁵ This page is based on a sheet by Blaise Ferrandino.