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INTRODUCTION

Why Study Counterpoint?; Learning by Modeling; Tasting the Food; Different Road Maps through the Book

WHY STUDY COUNTERPOINT?

You have no doubt heard many works of Handel, Vivaldi, and Bach. Their music is played all across the world in concert halls, movie theaters, living rooms, and fast-food chains. These works have given many people the most profound musical experiences of their lives, and they remain cultural landmarks. Baroque fugues especially amaze and fascinate us. As Alfred Mann puts it, "The term fugue . . . suggests . . . the most intricate expression of the complex language of Western music."[1] As musicians, we are fortunate to be able to play and study this music—and once we have studied it, we not only admire it but we begin to understand why it is so powerful.

Counterpoint is a well-defined discipline with a long tradition that is central to the study of all music. By studying it, we reenact the activities not only of Baroque musicians (especially church organists, who had to be able to improvise chorale preludes and fugues) but also of later composers. The works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Hensel, Mendelssohn, Clara and Robert Schumann, Brahms, Schoenberg, Webern, and Hindemith would not be what they are without a solid grounding in Baroque counterpoint. It is important even to movie composers, like Jerry Goldsmith, who wrote the score for the movie *Patton*. For that score, he said he composed three themes, each representing a facet of General Patton's character (warrior, religious man, intellectual), and added, "It was designed contrapuntally so that all three could be played simultaneously, or individually, or two at a time, whatever."[2]

His remark shows how counterpoint stresses independence of melodic parts, which is quite different from the concept of "melody and accompaniment." The distinguished eighteenth-century German theorist Johann Mattheson (who helped us write this book) gives a good illustration of the difference. For each of the two phrases of a little gigue, Mattheson provides two different basses. The basses in examples 1.1a and 1.1b supply harmonic accompaniment; those in examples 1.1c and 1.1d provide

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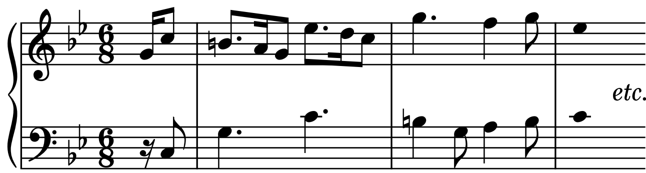
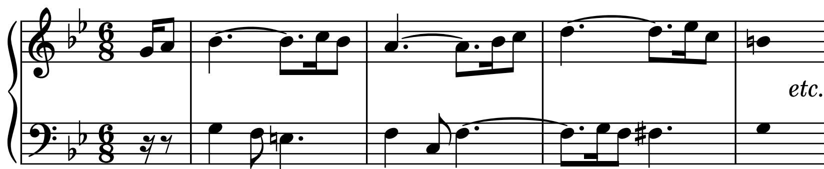
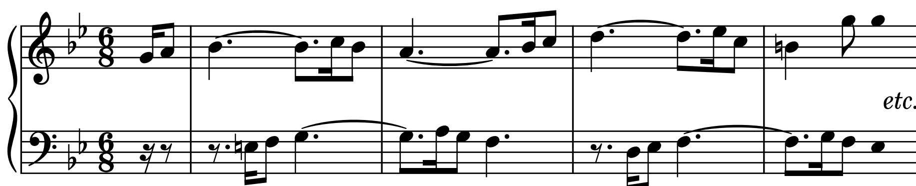


Example 1.1a. (Mattheson)



Example 1.1b. (Mattheson)

Example 1.1c. (Mattheson)



Example 1.1d. (Mattheson)

harmonic support too but, in addition, imitate. "It is the imitation," says Mattheson, "without which everything would sound wooden."[3] The two versions have almost the same chord progression, but solutions c and d are more contrapuntal.

Studying counterpoint is broadly useful because it teaches us to "think in music." The activity of writing counterpoint starts from a given problem to which one is to find an appropriate solution. Eventually, you develop an instinct for spotting the musical potential of an idea because of your experience with a wide range of musical situations.[4] Knowing how to write or improvise counterpoint (even if you do not plan to be a composer or improviser yourself) means understanding how music works. Such knowledge is invaluable to performers in an ensemble or orchestra, who need a good understanding of their role in the texture; to conductors, who need to understand how to bring out this or that melodic part; to musicologists, who need to get into the composer's mind when studying

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sketches or analyzing pieces; and to theorists, for whom the rigorous mental exercise is fun in its own right.

The reader of this book will run across examples from trio sonatas, dances, concertos, and choruses and arias from cantatas, oratorios, and operas. But our focus is fugue because it's theoretically richer, with more technical constraints than other genres. If you can write a fugue, you can probably write a ritornello, but it doesn't work the other way around.

You will need to know basic harmony: scales, intervals, triads, keys, figured bass, voice-leading rules, and nonharmonic tones. Musical examples involving continuo are presented without any keyboard realization, so a familiarity with figured bass is important and some keyboard skills are necessary. Note: You will need to obtain a copy of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* (*WTC*), books I and II, as we refer to its fugues often throughout this book.

LEARNING BY MODELING

This book teaches Baroque compositional technique through writing and improvisation exercises and analysis of repertoire examples. Because compositional technique is fundamental to style, the book teaches appreciation of Baroque style from the inside out. We focus largely on principles taught in the period from 1680 to 1780 as documented in treatises, and thus provide the student with a historical outlook. The most important difference between this book and all the other ones we have looked at is its emphasis on the harmonic progression as the basis for contrapuntal study. Other books begin with two-part writing, which we have always found to be too difficult for the beginner.

Many of the exercises we propose consist of material taken from treatises or repertoire, and the student is to add complementary material. Mattheson believes that the best way to learn to compose is to model on good composers. He says:

> One cannot advise a beginner better than to say that he first do an exercise by trying to compose a bass to an upper voice already made by someone else. . . . It goes without saying that whoever wants to take pleasure and profit from this exercise must hide from his eyes the basses of the master and not see a note of it until he has tried his luck himself. . . . The comparison of the new bass with the old will soon show where it is wrong, where it is good, and also where it could have been better.[5]

He also suggests taking a bass and composing a new upper line: "One hereby proceeds as before, namely, by means of choosing one or another piece already written by a competent master and keeping the upper voice secret until one can compare the melody invented over the bass alone with the original. The best opportunity can be found in extended sections of church pieces."[6] Of three-part pieces, he suggests leaving out one or two voices and composing the remainder. Here he says that if the student is given the first upper part and the words, "one can even invent the second voice and the bass. The teacher has to give a *little* assistance and help. The *less* such takes place, the sharper the student's reflection becomes."[7]

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Now who are his "competent masters?" When it comes to three-part music, Mattheson lists, among others, Marcello, Corelli, Fux, Handel, and Krieger. We quote them and many others. Just as Bach tinkered with fugues by Reincken and Fischer, we will use contemporaneous materials as the basis for our exercises. We have included a wide range of composers in part I to give a picture of mainstream Baroque music in Bach's time. We all want to study the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, but the models it provides are too complex for the beginner. Art critic Peter Schjeldahl put it nicely. Reviewing an exhibit at the Guggenheim that recreated the Salon Exhibition of 1900 in which several Impressionist masters were shown for the first time, along with lesser contemporaries, he wrote, "Gems by Cezanne, Degas, Munch, Klimt, and other heroes of modernity [at first] seemed . . . tormented by the context, like aristocrats at a tractor pull." But such contrast is valuable, he says, because "a cultivated appreciation of the pretty good sets us up to register the surprise of the great, which baffles our understanding and teaches us little except how to praise."[8] By studying the often easier-to-understand music of Bach's contemporaries, you may better appreciate the features that make his music stand out.

TASTING THE FOOD

If music is like food, composing is like cooking. You must always taste what you are doing. We encourage you to sing and play as much as you can—everything you write or analyze—and not to use the computer to write something and then find out how it sounds by having it played back through MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface). It's better to struggle through slowly. Later on you can be like the Italian tailors, who measure so carefully they never need to have the customer try on the clothes—you'll know how your music sounds! Playing and singing all your compositions and exercises helps range, crossing voices, skippiness, and rhythm stay under control. Mattheson says that vocal music is the most basic type and a good training for writing instrumental music.[9] He says writing vocal music helps the beginner learn where to place cadences and to emphasize melody over harmony. He says that instrumental melody has more "fire and freedom," more leaps, a wider range, a more "impulsive, punctuated nature," and more regular phrase structure than vocal melody[10] but that it's dangerous for beginners: "Through the great freedom in writing for instruments one is led to all kinds of shapeless melody."[11]

DIFFERENT ROAD MAPS THROUGH THE BOOK

There are more exercises and topics in this book than any class can cover, so depending on your purpose, you can skip some chapters. If the focus of the class is imitative pieces, it will be OK to skip chapter 5 on variation techniques. If your goal is to write fugues on given subjects, it will not be necessary to read chapter 17, "Writing an Original Subject." You may not have time to master invertible counterpoint at the tenth and twelfth and so may skip chapter 16. We strongly recommend skipping chapter 14, "Advanced Embellishment—Free Style," since many sophisticated techniques can be accomplished in strict style and students have trouble managing the use of dissonance in free style.

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We also recommend working in three parts, trading the fourth part for more sophisticated techniques like tonal answer and stretto. Here are some scenarios for teachers of a one-semester course:

(1) "Take it slow": Do chapters 1–6 and 12 with beginners. The first six chapters are highly detailed, putting together harmony and counterpoint. Chapter 6 shows pieces with imitative openings and sequential continuations; if sequences (chapter 12) and invertible counterpoint at the octave (chapter 9) are consulted early, students will be able to write successful chorale preludes, trio sonatas, or two-part inventions. If things go well, imitation at the fifth can be undertaken (chapters 7–8).

(2) "Get fancy in three parts": If your students are comfortable with harmony and embellishing tones, skip chapters 1–5 (except for the definition of "strict style" in chapter 4) and do chapters 6–13. Final projects can be three-part double fugues with tonal answer, invertible counterpoint, intermediate cadences, and sequential episodes. If things go well, the class can leap ahead to writing original subjects, stretto, or pedal (chapters 17–19).

(3) "Hands on": This revised, expanded edition includes many new partimento and rule of the octave exercises. Carried out at the keyboard or written, these exercises can account for most of the work in the course. They have been carefully chosen to reflect the content of the chapters they appear in. Thus partimento exercises at the end of chapter 8 contain remodulations and retransitions and no partimento before chapter 10 uses tonal answer. If students have prepared a partimento fugue at the keyboard, they can rely on one line as a guide but are playing the rest of the music out of their head! Whether written or partially memorized and played, partimento affords a deeper knowledge of a single piece and a tangible realization of the concepts introduced in the particular chapter. With such restraints, partimento assures stylistic and technical success.

In two semesters, the most sophisticated techniques in the book (multiple splices, hybrid themes, time-shifted countersubjects, augmentation and diminution, multiple counterpoint, and mirror inversion) can be attempted. We believe it may still be a good idea to work in three parts while mastering these techniques.

NOTES

1. Mann, *The Study of Fugue*, p. ix.
2. Composer Jerry Goldsmith, interview by Terry Gross, *Fresh Air*, WHYY-FM, January 7, 2002.
3. Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, III, 16, §§5–6.
4. See the little story about J. S. Bach in "A Bach Story" in chapter 16.
5. Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, III, 16, §3, §7, and §8.
6. Mattheson, 16, §15.
7. Mattheson, 17, §38.
8. Peter Schjeldahl, review of "1900: Art at the Crossroads," *New Yorker*, August 7, 2000, pp. 79–80.

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9. "The former, so to speak, is the mother, but the latter is the daughter. . . . For as a mother must necessarily be older than her natural daughter, vocal melody doubtlessly existed in this lower world before instrumental music. The former thus not only has the rank and priority but also requires the daughter to adjust to her motherly direction to make everything beautifully singable and fluent so that one may hear whose child she is" (Mattheson, *Der vollkommene Capellmeister*, II, 12, §4). Mattheson asks, "Does not everybody first reach for all kinds of instrumental pieces, sonatas, overtures etc. before he knows how to sing and notate a single chorale correctly, let alone artistically?" (§6).

10. Mattheson, II, 12, §20.

11. Mattheson, §9.

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