TWO-PART COUNTERPOINT

Summary of The Species

In two-part species counterpoint we add an additional part to an existing melody, either above or below it.

The existing melody is called the **cantus firmus**. The added part is called the **counterpoint**.

You will learn how to effectively write counterpoint in the five distinct ways (or "species"):

1. note against note
2. two notes against one
3. four notes against one
4. tied notes across the bar line
5. mixed (florid) counterpoint

You will become confident in:

- distinguishing harmonic (vertical) and melodic (horizontal) intervals,
- the classification of consonances (perfect and imperfect) and dissonances,
- the correct preparation and resolution of dissonances,
- the use of tritone, ligature and cambiata
- the three types of motion: similar, contrary and oblique

TWO-PART FIRST SPECIES: 1-AGAINST-1

In first species counterpoint, one note of counterpoint is written against each note in the cantus firmus. We'll use the semibreve (whole-note) for convenience, but the same principles apply whichever note value you choose to use.

The following guidelines apply to first species counterpoint:

1. Allowed Harmonic Intervals

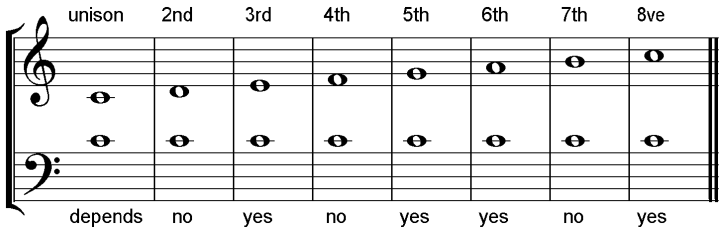
The harmonic (vertical) interval between the two parts can be a:

- ✓ **Perfect consonance** (perfect 5th, perfect octave) or an
- ✓ **Imperfect consonance** (major or minor 3rd or 6th).

No harmonic dissonances are allowed (i.e. 2nds, 4ths[2], 7ths, plus all augmented or diminished intervals). (In strict counterpoint, unisons should also be avoided apart from at the start/end of the piece).

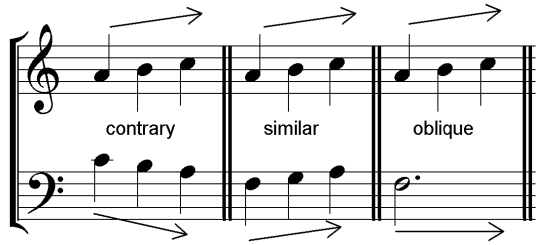
[2] Despite its name, the perfect 4th is considered dissonant in 2-part counterpoint.

Here are some examples of allowed and forbidden harmonic intervals:

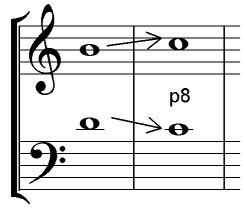


2. Types of Motion

There are three ways that two parts can move together. “Contrary motion” = opposite directions. “Similar motion” = the same direction. “Oblique motion” = one part is stationary.

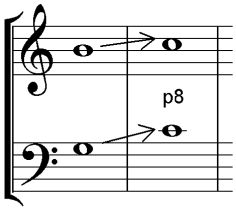


If you write a harmonic **perfect** consonance (i.e. 5th, unison or octave) you should not approach it by similar motion**. Contrary** and **oblique** motion are allowed.
Here, there is a perfect octave (“p8”) between the two parts.



It is correctly approached by **contrary** motion – one part rises and the other part falls.

However here, the same perfect octave is approached by **similar** motion – both parts rise. This must be avoided.

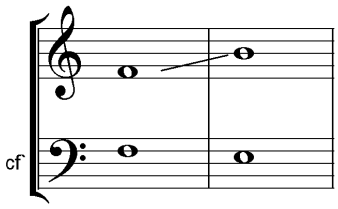


In general, always move by contrary or oblique motion if you can. Keep similar motion to a minimum.

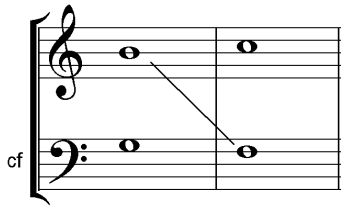
3. The Melodic Tritone

A **tritone** is an interval of an augmented 4th or diminished 5th. This is a very dissonant melodic interval and should be avoided. The tritone exists between the 4th/7th of the scale in major and minor keys (with a raised leading note), and also between the 2nd/6th degrees of the scale in minor keys.

In this case, the counterpoint part moves from F to B, which is incorrect.



In earlier styles, the tritone that occurs across two parts was also avoided. For example, here, the B in the top part is followed by F in the lower parts. You may choose not to observe this rule.



4. Allowed Melodic Leaps

Each individual counterpoint part will sound effective if it is "singable", which really means that it mostly moves smoothly and does not leap up or down too much. A "leap" is an interval of a 3rd or greater.

Most of the time, you should make the part move by step (2nd). Occasional leaps are fine though and add interest to a part.

Preferred melodic leaps/falls are:

- Major or minor 3rd
- Perfect 4th
- Perfect 5th
- Minor 6th (upwards only)
- Octave