

Counterpoint and Voice-Leading

Syllabus

Course Description:

This course is an in-depth exploration of the art of counterpoint in Western music from the common-practice era to the present, with significant compositional and analytical components. The course is intended for upper-level undergraduate and graduate students who have completed the core Music Theory curriculum. Some interest and experience in composition will be a significant asset in the course, but is not a requirement.

The first half of the course will consist of detailed study of Baroque counterpoint as represented by the oeuvre of J.S. Bach. Students will engage in close analysis of preludes and fugues composed by Bach and complete numerous focused composition exercises, culminating in the composition of their own fugue or fughetta as a midterm project. The second half of the course will trace the historical evolution of the practice of counterpoint in Western music since Bach, from the Classical and Romantic periods through to 20th-century Jazz and popular music. We will study the usage of strict counterpoint, including imitation and canon, in 19th and 20th-century music. In addition we will explore how principles of counterpoint generalized and morphed into principles of voice-leading and harmonic progression, with special emphasis on how concepts of counter-point are still relevant at structural levels, even in simple musical textures.

Course Goals:

1. You will learn to compose stylistically appropriate two- and three-part counterpoint in an 18th-century style.
2. You will become familiar with the most important contrapuntal techniques, terminology, and forms of the European contrapuntal tradition.
3. You will develop a good understanding of the historical and theoretical relationships between counterpoint, voice-leading, and harmonic progression.
4. You will be able to analyze the usage of counterpoint at both the surface and middle-ground levels in diverse styles.

Course textbooks

- J.S. Bach, *The Well-tempered Clavier - Part I* ; Henle Urtext Edition
- J.J. Fux, *The Study of Counterpoint: From Gradus Ad Parnassum*
- Course pack (provided by instructor)

Grading:

20%	Participation
30%	Weekly assignments
25%	Midterm composition project
25%	Final analysis project

Class Preparation and Participation:

Your daily schedule and all course materials will be posted online. To focus class time on practical exercises, music listening, and discussion, all lecture material will be presented in short online videos outside of class time (5–10 minutes per class), or in assigned readings from the course pack. The onus is on you to attend carefully to these materials before coming to class, so that you can participate in in-class discussions and activities. Failure to adequately prepare will slow the progress of the class and negatively affect your grade.

Assignments:

There will be short composition assignments due every class during the first half of the semester, changing to weekly analysis assignments in the later half of the course. No late assignments will be accepted unless you have obtained an excused absence.

Midterm Composition Project:

You will compose a short three- or four-part fugue or fughetto in the style of J.S. Bach, consisting of at very least an effective exposition, two episodes, and one reexposition of the subject. The work may be for keyboard, or for a small ensemble, and will be performed in class. You will be graded mainly for demonstrating mastery of the basics of 18th-century fugal style, but creativity will also be rewarded. Use of stretto, inversion, or other advanced techniques are highly encouraged.

Final Analysis Project:

You will analyze a piece, or set of pieces, of your own choosing that was composed after 1850. The analysis must explore the use of counterpoint in the passage, either at the surface level or at deeper structural levels. Pieces will be chosen well in advance, with the instructor's permission to ensure appropriate length and content. The project will be comprised of three components: an annotated analysis and/or contrapuntal reduction of the score, a written explanation of your analysis, and a short (ten minute) presentation to the class.

Class Schedule

Week	Topic
1	1st–2nd species counterpoint
2	3rd–4th species counterpoint
3	Florid counterpoint
4	Imitation Tonal and real imitation Canon
5	Transformations Inversion and retrograde
6	Fugue Anatomy of a fugue
7	Fugues in the WTC three-part fugues four-part fugues
8	Advanced techniques Stretto Double fugue Retrograde fugues
9	Composition workshops
10	Midterm In class performances
11	Counterpoint and harmonic progression Voice-leading: the vertical dimension of counterpoint Voice-leading: the horizontal dimension of harmonic progression
12	Contrapuntal reduction Graphing the middle ground
13	Counterpoint and fugue in the Classical and Romantic periods Chromaticism and semitonal voice-leading
14	Counterpoint and imitation in Jazz and Rock music New sonorities, new progressions, new scales, still the same principles
15	Analysis project workshops
16	Final In class presentations