

COUNTERPOINT

THIRD SPECIES

It is during the study of third species counterpoint that the less hardy souls decide to change their major to economics, or are found weeks later in a dark alley sucking their thumbs. At this point it is helpful to remember that the whole pedagogic method for teaching counterpoint is meant only to strengthen various contrapuntal “muscles”. Each species concentrates on a particular problem and beats it into the ground until you REALLY get it. Leg lifts, sit-ups, pushups, etc., strengthen only certain muscles, but have no real practicality in everyday life-- but the next time you need to use all those muscles, say, in moving a couch into a dorm room, you are thankful for the strength you have developed through those exercises. Just as real life physical tasks require development in dozens of muscles, so does real music require strength in all the various aspects of counterpoint.

The THIRD SPECIES of counterpoint pits four notes, expressed in quarters, against the cantus firmus (CF), which still moves in whole notes. As this is the fastest of all species, this is where you must strive for the smoothest lines. Strive for a mostly stepwise line, which reaches natural high point, each successive high point of which is even higher in the last, culminating in THE high point, near the end of the counterpoint.

If you move by step in the same direction, you may go as far as you want, providing the line is within the voice range. Any line which contains a skip may not go further than a sixth before turning around. With certain exceptions, you may not skip farther than a fourth, and then you must reverse direction and fill in the unused space by step. You may not repeat tones in third species. You may skip an octave, but you must reverse direction and fill in at least a fourth by step before changing direction. It is rare, but you may skip twice providing you outline the first and fifth degrees of the modal scales, e.g., in Dorian the following lines are permitted:



In third species, the first and third quarters are defined as strong rhythmically, and the second and fourth quarters are defined as “weak”. You may not leap UP from a strong quarter, but you may leap DOWN. In other words, all of the following are prohibited:



The following, however, are acceptable:



Consonance and dissonance: The same rules apply for strong and weak quarters as applied for strong and weak halves in second species: all strong quarters must be consonant, and weak quarters may be consonant or dissonant.

A dissonant quarter must be approached by step and must be resolved by step in the same direction.

CAMBIATA: the “cambiata” figure gives you the only exception to the above rule: This is a cambiata figure:



You will note that the ‘C’ forms a 7th with the CF and is thereby dissonant. It is not resolved by step, however, until the next quarter. This figure is considered to be equivalent to



with the ‘B’ delayed by a quarter. The cambiata figure as demonstrated here is acceptable ONLY when the first, third and fourth quarters are all consonant with the CD. (Hint: this only happens when the first quarter is an octave above the CF).

ENDING FORMULAS: above you may use either of the following melodic formulas: 2-1-6-7-8; or 4-5-6-7-8. (These are expressed as four quarters and a whole note). As before, 7 must be raised in Dorian, Mixolydian and Aeolian modes and 6 must be raised in Aeolian mode. In Aeolian mode these various endings look like this:



In Phrygian mode, these are the endings:



Below, you must end with the formula 7-5-6-7-8, as in the first example below for Dorian. In Phrygian, the suggested counterpoint ending is the second example:



As before, try singing your counterpoint as a melisma at $\text{♩} = 120$ to see if it is too jumpy, too painful to sing, or too segmented or motivic.

CHROMATICISM: since the line is moving very fast now, you are given the option of using E^b , B^b , F^\sharp , G^\sharp , C^\sharp in all modes. The same rules apply as to their melodic resolutions, but now you need not resolve them right away, providing their correct resolutions are provided, in register, somewhere along the line.