

A Practical Approach to Eighteenth-Century Counterpoint

by Robert Gauldin

Reviewed by Douglass M. Green

The role of counterpoint in the undergraduate theory curriculum is a subject that has engendered a good deal of controversy and continues to do so. Various points of view have appeared in print. Leo Kraft wants a modified form of species counterpoint as part of the lower-division core theory program.¹ John Rothgeb proposes an orthodox Fuxian approach in the freshman year, to be followed by figured bass in preparation for a Schenkerian approach to harmony.² Ellis B. Kohs calls for stylistic counterpoint, apparently on the upper-division level, but broader in scope than merely the styles of Palestrina and of Bach.³ Nearly a decade has passed since these articles were published. Yet most schools that offer counterpoint to undergraduates, beyond a token gesture in lower-division core theory, do so exclusively as courses in sixteenth-century vocal styles (modal counterpoint) and/or eighteenth-century instrumental style (tonal counterpoint). Few

¹Leo Kraft, "A New Approach to Species Counterpoint," *College Music Symposium* 21 (1981):60-66.

²John Rothgeb, "Schenkerian Theory: Its Implications for the Undergraduate Curriculum," *Music Theory Spectrum* 3 (1981):142-149.

³Ellis B. Kohs, "Current Needs and Problems in the Teaching of Undergraduate Music Theory," *Music Theory Spectrum* 2 (1980):138.

require it for all majors, and many schools have entirely excluded counterpoint from the undergraduate curricula.

It is doubtful that most music departments in the U. S. have always dealt responsibly with certain basic questions regarding what *all* music majors should learn and what can be required only of those who specialize in the academic side of music. The purpose of education is surely to learn to think for oneself by acquiring the knowledge and skill that alone will give one the freedom to do so. Is an understanding of counterpoint necessary in order to think deeply about music? Is the ability more or less to duplicate Palestrina's and Bach's styles indicative of an understanding of counterpoint? These are questions that need to be addressed and with more specific data than I can provide. In the meantime, for those (like me) who believe strongly in the importance of a thoroughgoing course in counterpoint for all musicians, Professor Gauldin's counterpoint book is good news.

In this companion volume to his fine textbook on modal counterpoint (*A Practical Approach to Sixteenth-Century Counterpoint*), Gauldin sums up its chief characteristics (p. xiii):

Three aspects of counterpoint are stressed: history, to establish the origins of different forms; analysis of music literature, often in voice-leading reductions; and practical work in writing counterpoint utilizing various textures, devices, and genre of the period.

This book differs, then, from most counterpoint texts in the emphasis put on music history--but not so much by dwelling on the origins of forms as by appealing to historical theoretical treatises for

the determination of many of the initial approaches to this or that specific technique to be introduced, treatises dating back to Tinctoris and Zarlino, as well as to theorists of the Baroque era, including Bernhard, Rameau, Heinichen, and Kirnberger. Such a focus leads naturally and properly to a review of tonal harmony via figured bass. Indeed, the book's important advantages over other counterpoint texts are its consistent stress on figured bass, not only at the beginning but throughout the book, as well as the heavy reliance on voice-leading graphs. Figured bass focuses attention on the two-voice framework typical of Baroque music, a framework that simultaneously produces good lines and good harmony. Voice-leading graphs, of course, clarify essential motion lying within the often dazzling figurations of compound melodies, yet they seldom play a strong part in texts devoted specifically to the teaching of tonal counterpoint.

The musical examples are drawn from the works of many composers besides Bach, and the topics dealt with include not only counterpoint as such, but forms, procedures, techniques, and genres. Since the book contains such an enormous amount of material to be learned, Gauldin suggests that while it would be ideal to spend a full year in its study, it may be necessary to omit part of it in order to accommodate shorter allotted spans of time or differing emphases (p. iv).

Overview

After three introductory chapters dealing with diatonicism, tonicization, harmonic progression, characteristics of melody, and pedagogy during Baroque times, Chapter 4 takes up counterpoint proper: note-against-note in two voices. The next six chapters also

concentrate on two-voice counterpoint, introducing diminution in an orderly fashion, with studies in the writing of counterpoint against a cantus firmus--that is, for this stylistic period, chorale preludes for organ. Taking up writing in which both voices are free, Chapter 7 provides an admirable approach to the composition of small dance pieces in a two-reprise scheme. Chapter 8 brings in further diminution techniques with a resulting musical style more typical of eighteenth-century preludes or Bach's inventions. Chapter 9, on real imitation and double counterpoint, prepares the student for writing canons and inventions in two parts (Chapter 10).

Chapters 11 through 17 deal with three-voice counterpoint, following a plan closely related to that used for two-voice counterpoint: after exercises with a modified species approach, the writing of chorale preludes is taken up. Then follows more extended dance pieces, three-part inventions, triple counterpoint, further study of canon, and, finally, three-voice fugue. Interrupting this progress, Chapter 13 introduces genuine chromaticism (as opposed to tonicization).

Chapters 18 through 20 deal with counterpoint in four voices, again beginning systematically with note-against-note and diminutions thereof, continuing with variation genres, and finally four-voice fugues from the WTC, the larger organ fugues, multiple fugues, and fugues in five and six voices. This part of the book ends with a short chapter devoted to contrapuntal settings for chorus.

The last two chapters discuss counterpoint during the classical period. Chapter 22 is a brief account of Fux's *Gradus ad Parnassum* and its relationship to Mozart and Beethoven. Chapter 23, again rather brief, cites examples of the use of counterpoint by

the classical composers--how it occurs within their own musical styles and how it sometimes is used to invoke past styles.

In addition to a pair of thorough indexes, there is a valuable annotated bibliography divided into three main sections: (1) [twentieth-century] textbooks on counterpoint; (2) treatises from the seventeenth to the twentieth centuries; and (3) other reference sources including twenty-nine books, seventeen articles on tonal counterpoint, and fifteen published analyses. Gauldin's comments are quite informative, though those on the counterpoint textbooks may be considered somewhat self-serving. It should be pointed out here that Kent Kennan's text came out in a revised third edition in 1987 and that it includes a useful workbook. It is hoped that his comments on Piston's excellent 1947 book on counterpoint will not deter students from reading it. Gauldin dwells only on what Piston does not include rather than praising it for its valuable contribution to our understanding of what counterpoint is all about.

Production

Like its predecessor, the book is nicely bound and beautifully printed, with extremely well-done musical illustrations. On the other hand, it is in dire need of editing--so much so that one wonders if it was edited at all. No editor is acknowledged, and the numerous typographical errors (an important one on p. 13 is Figure 1-2: B[#] should read B^b) would indicate the lack of a proofreader as well. There are occasional misspellings (throughout the book we are subjected to "spacial"), and a few garbled sentences (e.g., p. 118, second paragraph, and again on p. 120, end of first paragraph). More persistent is the lack of precision in Gauldin's use of the

English language: "polyphony" for "counterpoint" (p. 49 and elsewhere), "utilize" for "use" (almost every page), "which" for "that" (several times causing ambiguity), "traditionally" for "today" (p. 47), "textural" for "textual" (p. 146, though this may be only a typo), and "pacing" for "tempo" (p. 24). Ambiguity often occurs due to his penchant for using relative pronouns without definite antecedents. Lack of clarity is present in other places as well.

Lest I be accused not of *reading* this book but of *proofreading* it, let me defend myself by pointing out that clarity is as important as any other of a textbook's features. Otherwise, students are frustrated and the instructor is forced to spend valuable class time in explanation.

Value as a Text

Gauldin's approach is deductive. Typically, he begins with broad general remarks about the topic at hand, proceeds to more specific remarks, then offers illustrations either composed for the occasion, or, more often, from the literature. Each aspect of the topic is given a clear subheading. There are numerous musical examples and a fair number of diagrams as well as the aforementioned voice-leading graphs. Assignments are interspersed at appropriate points within each chapter, but it is unfortunate that no self-tests are offered.

There is no doubt in my mind that this textbook is and will be successful at the Eastman School and similar institutions where it is used by talented and committed students, taught by teachers who are sympathetic to its approach. But I wonder how valuable it will be to most music faculty across the country who decide to offer

counterpoint to more students than a few undergraduate theory majors. The book is not really "user-friendly." Its prerequisites, all of which are reviewed in Chapter 1, are "a standard two-year course in harmony . . . some skill in four-voice part-writing with figured bass . . . chord function with Roman numerals . . . non-harmonic tones, and modulation to closely-related keys" (p. xiv). But if the students have not had experience in interpreting voice-leading graphs, they are very unlikely to learn much from such examples as 8-1 through 8-3 (p. 97), and still less from 10-9 (p. 127). To be sure, back on pages 51-53, there was a short explanation of voice-leading reduction, but the composed musical illustrations were very simple. Again, the instructor will have to spend class time in explanation. Yet most instructors choose to use a text either because theory is not really their specialty (in which case can they explain it?) or because they want to free class time for their own original lectures.

Another questionable aspect of the book is the deductive approach itself. The initial presentation of a topic addressed in abstract terms will find a sympathetic response only in the minds of the most sophisticated students. To observe specific events in particular pieces of music and to draw conclusions from observation of these facts is a clearer method of teaching as well as a more interesting one.

One of the difficulties I have with this book is that there is no mention of what matters most to me: how the great composers achieve tension and relaxation, climax, and a feeling of direction (voice-leading graphs do not accomplish this). Nor is there mention of the time spans appropriate to such features so typical of beautiful music. An account of the excitement engendered by the climactic rise in each of the three sections of Bach's C major two-part

invention, for instance, would do much toward steering a student away from the mindless meanderings one so often comes across. Perhaps Gauldin would prefer to leave this sort of thing up to the instructor, but if so, there should be a remark to this effect in the Preface.

While these are not minor issues, I do not mean to imply that they make the book unusable. Provided the teacher is convinced that the discipline of counterpoint is one of the most important means by which students can acquire the mental and musical skills to think independently, this book can probably do more than any other present text to accomplish that end.