

16th Century Counterpoint “Rules” (primarily based on Knud Jeppesen’s *Counterpoint*)
TWO-PART COUNTERPOINT

PREAMBLE

Knud Jeppesen’s *Counterpoint* contains a wealth of information on writing vocal polyphony in the Palestrina style, and I understand it was considered the best-researched text on the subject for many years after its publication. Many other fine textbooks on this topic are currently available, but I suspect many (or even all) owe some debt to Jeppesen’s research, and his text remains eminently usable for a 16th-century counterpoint course today, although it should be supplemented with numerous complete mass movements and motets by different composers from the period (which should be sung) to illustrate (a) differences between Palestrina and his contemporaries (and predecessors), (b) the degree to which Jeppesen’s guidelines are accurate, (c) context, and (d) form. I have students form small groups – one to two per part – for the purpose of singing various 2-, 3-, and 4-part selections from the period. We typically sing at least 20 works if you include motets sight-read by the entire class, and this, perhaps more than any text, gives students a feeling for the style, one with which most have only a passing familiarity at the beginning of the course. (I use a marks-based incentive to ‘encourage’ students to sing, wherein students grade each other’s performances in class.)

Interestingly, there are numerous examples of “rules violations” in the repertoire of the period (many Lassus 2-part songs contain sequences, for example), and these are often the exact spots where many of us falter while sight-singing through works (but not always; sequences, for example, are easy to sing). The wonderful conclusion that we draw from this is that, in spite of the dryness of a rules-based approach, there is a practical reason for every guideline, which, if followed, will result in more natural (as in “easier to sing”) and beautiful counterpoint. Speaking as a composer of contemporary music, I can attest to the fact that this has a practical application in composing music in any style and of any period.

A challenge in Jeppesen’s text, at least in the English translation, is that his writing style can be opaque for many. I often had to re-read guidelines several times before their meaning sank in (not necessarily a bad thing), and the challenge was increased by his use of a wide array of C-, G-, and F-clefs. As a student, I would often copy out his examples using more familiar treble G clef, alto C-clef, or bass F-clef instead.

While preparing for my doctoral comprehensive exam in counterpoint, I decided to summarize Jeppesen’s guidelines in language that I could understand better, and this became the basis for the summary that is to follow. I have also used texts by Robert Gauldin and Peter Schubert in teaching this course, and I have periodically revised my rules summaries to incorporate their ideas and expand the number of music examples.

This is not intended as a replacement for Jeppesen, or indeed of any other currently available text. For one thing, my summary is a bit dry, and each point requires explanation and illustrations. However, I have used it as a supplement in my teaching for about eighteen years, making many small modifications along the way (with more still to come; each time I teach the course, it never fails that something that I thought was quite clear turns out to be otherwise), and it has proven to be useful as a point-form summary of the guidelines for each species, as well as a useful aid in marking student assignments; “5th-sp. M. 8” means that melody “rule” #8 from the fifth species has been violated, for example. It saves me having to write out the rule on a student’s work each time an error occurs, and it requires the student to re-read that guideline if s/he wishes to understand the problem. Students use this method for critiquing one another’s work in class as well.

Finally, my summary contains some musical examples, but requires many more to facilitate understanding. When I present species guidelines in class I write short musical illustrations on the blackboard, and/or ask students to make up their own examples (which are then put on the board), and refer to examples in whatever text we happen to be using.

If you spot any errors, omissions, organizational weaknesses, or lack of clarity, kindly let me know so that I can make improvements (you could use the “[Contact](#)” form at my website, or [E-mail](#) me directly).