

Renaissance Counterpoint for Continuo Players

(Prepared by L. Harris 8/23/99)

I. Introduction

In the period of the birth of *basso continuo*, it is certainly true that musicians and composers began to think more 'vertically' and less 'horizontally,' meaning that harmonic thinking in terms of block chords began to challenge the long-reigning contrapuntal procedures of Renaissance composition. This probably happened for a number of different reasons, not least of which is that it simplified accompaniment, thereby making self-accompanied singing more practical as well as freeing more attention to focus on expressing the text.

However, the highly evolved and complex system of Renaissance counterpoint could not have just disappeared overnight. In fact, despite the radical challenges that it sustained around 1600, Renaissance counterpoint still informed how music was made throughout the whole Baroque (think of music today nearly a century after the 'collapse of tonality'). This is just to recognize that in many ways we are coming to the *basso continuo* repertoire from the opposite direction from its composers: the dominant approach to making music in our day involves melodies over chords, whereas theirs was one where individual but inter-dependent parts meshed to form a texture.

It might do us some good to get some basics as to how Renaissance music theory worked. Though the whole corpus of rules is huge and took years to learn and master, we can be selective and brush on a few topics that are easiest to grasp and will offer the most help in understanding the 'horizontal' component of *basso continuo* repertoire.

For starters, for a moment prohibit yourself from thinking in vertical harmonies (i.e., "d minor" doesn't exist yet, no major/minor tonality system). Instead, think of each note as being some type of interval away from the lowest sounding 'voice' at any given time.

II. Intervals

There are three types:

A) Perfect consonances

- 1) Unisons
- 2) Octaves
- 3) Fifths

B) Imperfect consonances

- 1) Thirds (both major and minor)
- 2) Sixths (both major and minor)

C) Dissonances

- 1) Seconds
- 2) Fourths [!]
- 3) Sevenths
- 4) All augmented and diminished intervals.

For our purposes, the main thing to know here is that upper parts must be perfect or imperfect consonances with the bass. In general, perfect consonances tend to *begin and end* phrases and are treated with care since parallel motion is hard to avoid (there are special ways to approach and leave them – best is by step-wise contrary motion). Imperfect consonances are preferred *within* phrases; they have fewer restrictions.

Dissonances must be passing notes on weak beats *unless* they undergo a special procedure: they must be prepared on a weak beat, occur on the following strong beat, and then resolve by one voice moving down a step on the next weak beat. That means that the most common (upper-voice) dissonances are 4-3 and 7-6. The dissonance 9-8 (or 2-unison) is usually avoided since it resolves to the 'empty' octave/unison, however, this one can be resolved by the

lower voice going down a step (9-10 or 2-3). Augmented/diminished intervals were rarely used, they are only for especially expressive moments in pieces of rule-breakers like Gesualdo, Monteverdi, etc.

III. Cadences

A. A 'perfect cadence' has four components (voices):

There are four different cadential 'clauses,' each of which is named for what each voice does in the above cadence:

1. Discant clause:

2. Alto clause:

3. Tenor clause:

4. Bass clause:

B. An 'imperfect cadence' is one in which the lowest sounding voice does not perform a Bass clause.

1. The most common of these is the 'tenor cadence,' which, predictably, has a tenor clause in the lowest part:

2. The version where the half-step is in the tenor clause is called a 'mi' cadence after the solmization syllable which is landed upon:

3. When the descant clause is in the bass, it's a so-called 'descant cadence':