

Course: 16th-Century Counterpoint (Renaissance Style)

Instructor: Sahasra Chakkirala

Course Duration: 6 Weeks (3 sessions per week, 90 minutes each) - if requested (otherwise one lesson per week)

Course Description

This course explores the art of 16th-century counterpoint, focusing on the compositional techniques used by Renaissance masters such as Palestrina, Lassus, and Victoria. Students will study the rules of species counterpoint, voice-leading, imitation, modality, and harmonic conventions to compose music in the authentic style of the Renaissance. Emphasis will be placed on both theoretical understanding and practical composition exercises.

Course Objectives

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

1. Understand and apply the rules of species counterpoint (first through fifth species).
2. Analyze and compose music in the 16th-century style.
3. Recognize modal harmony and the function of dissonance in Renaissance polyphony.
4. Employ imitation, canonic techniques, and textural balance in counterpoint.
5. Produce original contrapuntal compositions adhering to Renaissance stylistic conventions.

Required Materials

- **Textbooks:** *Gradus ad Parnassum* by Johann Joseph Fux (recommended translation), *Counterpoint in the Style of Palestrina* by Knud Jeppesen
- **Scores:** Selected works of Palestrina, Lassus, Victoria (accessible online or via library)
- Manuscript paper and notation software (e.g., Finale, Sibelius, Dorico)

Course Schedule and Lesson Plans

Week 1: Introduction to 16th-Century Counterpoint

Session 1: Introduction and Historical Context

- Objectives: Understand the historical and stylistic background of 16th-century counterpoint.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Renaissance music and polyphony (Palestrina, Lassus, Victoria).
 2. Listening examples with score study.
 3. Group discussion: Characteristics of Renaissance polyphony (smooth voice leading, careful dissonance treatment, modal harmony).
- Assignment: Read *Fux*, Book I, Chapters 1-2; analyze a two-voice Palestrina motet excerpt for melodic contour and consonance/dissonance treatment.

Session 2: Review of Modes and Consonance/Dissonance

- Objectives: Reinforce modal theory and treatment of intervals.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture and board work: Authentic vs. plagal modes, finalis, ambitus, reciting tones.
 2. Exercise: Identify modes in short Renaissance excerpts.
 3. Discussion: Perfect vs. imperfect consonances, handling of dissonances.
- Assignment: Compose a one-voice melodic line in Dorian and Phrygian modes (8-12 measures).

Session 3: First Species Counterpoint

- Objectives: Master note-against-note counterpoint.
- Activities:
 1. Review: Perfect and imperfect consonances.
 2. Exercise: Compose two-voice counterpoint in first species over a given cantus firmus.
 3. Peer review and instructor feedback.
- Assignment: Write 4 first species exercises using C, D, F, G as cantus firmi.

Week 2: Second Species Counterpoint (Two Notes Against One)

Session 4: Rules and Applications

- Objectives: Understand passing dissonances and consonant preparation.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Introduction to second species rules (preparation, passing tones, consonant skips).

- 2. Analysis of a two-voice Renaissance excerpt in second species.
- Assignment: Compose two second-species exercises in C major and D Dorian.

Session 5: Rhythmic Interaction

- Objectives: Explore rhythmic counterpoint and syncopation in the Renaissance style.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Rhythmic displacement, syncopation, and hemiola in 16th-century polyphony.
 2. Exercise: Convert a first-species exercise to second species with rhythmic variations.
- Assignment: Compose a second-species counterpoint using a chosen cantus firmus with rhythmic contrast.

Session 6: Third Species Counterpoint (Four Notes Against One)

- Objectives: Integrate passing and neighbor tones with increased rhythmic activity.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture and examples: Third species rules and voice-leading concerns.
 2. In-class exercise: Compose a 4-measure third-species line above a given cantus firmus.
- Assignment: Complete a full third-species two-voice exercise (16 measures).

Week 3: Fourth Species (Syncopation and Suspensions)

Session 7: Understanding Suspensions

- Objectives: Master suspensions as expressive devices.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Preparation, suspension, resolution in 16th-century counterpoint.
 2. Score study: Palestrina motets highlighting suspensions.
- Assignment: Compose two 4-measure suspension exercises.

Session 8: Combining Species

- Objectives: Blend different species to create expressive counterpoint.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Species combination and voice-leading flexibility.
 2. Exercise: Transform a second-species exercise into fourth species with suspensions.
- Assignment: Prepare a 16-measure composition combining third and fourth species.

Session 9: Imitation and Voice Interaction

- Objectives: Apply imitation techniques.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Imitative entries, canon, and points of imitation.
 2. Exercise: Compose a two-voice canon using a given motive.
- Assignment: Compose a two-voice exercise using imitation over a cantus firmus.

Week 4: Fifth Species (Florid Counterpoint)

Session 10: Introduction to Florid Counterpoint

- Objectives: Master combination of note values and dissonances.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Rules of fifth species (combining first through fourth species).
 2. Score study: Analyze a Palestrina motet in fifth species.
- Assignment: Compose a 4-measure fifth-species exercise.

Session 11: Expanding to Three Voices

- Objectives: Extend skills to three-voice counterpoint.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Voice leading and spacing in three-part textures.
 2. Exercise: Compose a three-voice second-species counterpoint over a cantus firmus.
- Assignment: Complete a full three-voice third-species exercise.

Session 12: Modal Harmony and Cadences

- Objectives: Understand cadential formulas in Renaissance style.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Authentic vs. plagal cadences, modal inflections.
 2. Exercise: Compose four 2-voice cadential progressions in various modes.
- Assignment: Analyze three Renaissance motets for modal cadences.

Week 5: Advanced Techniques and Stylistic Composition

Session 13: Text Setting in Counterpoint

- Objectives: Apply counterpoint to vocal lines with textual clarity.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Syllabic vs. melismatic settings, text accentuation, and declamation.
 2. Exercise: Set a 4-line Renaissance-style text in two-voice counterpoint.
- Assignment: Complete a 16-measure texted counterpoint exercise.

Session 14: Chromaticism and Expressive Dissonances

- Objectives: Explore early chromaticism within stylistic limits.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Occasional chromaticism and expressive tension in 16th-century music.
 2. Exercise: Add controlled chromatic passing tones to an existing composition.
- Assignment: Compose a 16-measure florid counterpoint incorporating stylistic chromaticism.

Session 15: Peer Review Workshop

- Objectives: Develop critical listening and compositional feedback skills.
- Activities:
 1. Students present exercises for group critique.
 2. Instructor-guided discussion on adherence to 16th-century style.
- Assignment: Revise previous exercises based on feedback.

Week 6: Capstone Composition and Analysis

Session 16: Four-Voice Counterpoint Composition

- Objectives: Apply all learned techniques to create a full composition.
- Activities:
 1. Lecture: Strategies for balancing four voices in Renaissance style.
 2. Begin in-class drafting of final composition (16–32 measures).

Session 17: Composition Continuation and Refinement

- Activities:
 1. In-class work on final compositions.
 2. Instructor consultation and individualized guidance.
- Assignment: Complete final composition.

Session 18: Performance, Analysis, and Reflection

- Activities:
 1. Student presentations of final compositions (performed or MIDI playback).
 2. Analysis and discussion of peer works.
 3. Reflection on course objectives, stylistic growth, and compositional challenges.

Optional Extensions

- Transcribe a Renaissance motet into modern notation and analyze its counterpoint.
- Explore instrumental adaptations of vocal counterpoint (e.g., consort arrangements).