

5.1 A Word of Warning

Writing for three voices is much more difficult than writing for two. That is because, while two-voice counterpoint produces just one series of intervals, three-voice counterpoint produces simultaneously not two series but three. You should therefore expect the tasks ahead of you to be roughly three times harder than those you have carried out hitherto.

At your aid, of course, are all the two-voice rules, plus some new ones. But the complexity introduced by a third voice requires certain rules to be subject to frequent exceptions. In other words (to paraphrase a well-worn adage):

You can observe some of the rules all of the time
And you can observe all of the rules some of the time
But you can't observe all of the rules all of the time

5.2 Scoring

The convention of scoring exercises for adjacent voices means that only two scorings are possible in three-voice work: bass + tenor + alto; or tenor + alto + soprano.

Because the cantus firmus may appear in any of the three voices, the question arises of what to do when an alto cantus firmus needs to be placed in the lowest voice, or when a tenor cantus firmus needs to be placed in the highest voice.

The answer in such cases is to transpose the alto cantus firmus an Octave lower, writing it in the bass clef, and to transpose the tenor cantus firmus an Octave higher, writing it in the soprano clef.

Exercises on an **alto** cantus firmus are therefore scored as follows:

alto	cpt	soprano	cpt	alto	c.f.
tenor	cpt	alto	c.f.	tenor	cpt
bass	c.f. –Octave	tenor	cpt	bass	cpt

And exercises on a **tenor** cantus firmus are scored as follows:

soprano	cpt	alto	cpt	soprano	c.f. +Octave
alto	cpt	tenor	c.f.	alto	cpt
tenor	c.f.	bass	cpt	tenor	cpt

5.3 Labelling Intervals

Three voices sounding together produce three harmonic intervals:

from the middle voice to the highest voice
 from the lowest voice to the highest voice
 from the lowest voice to the middle voice

In counterpoint exercises, intervals from the middle voice to the highest voice are labelled **above** the top staff, while intervals from the lowest voice are labelled **between** the staves.

The diagram shows three staves of music. Above the top staff, the intervals between the middle and highest voices are labeled 6, 3, 6, 3. Between the top and middle staves, the intervals between the highest and middle voices are labeled 10, 12, 10, 5. Between the middle and bottom staves, the intervals between the middle and lowest voices are labeled 5, 10, 5, 3.

5.4 Harmonic Intervals

In counterpoint for three (or more) voices, all intervals **from the lowest voice** are classified as consonant or dissonant in exactly the same way as in two-voice counterpoint, and are treated accordingly. Certain intervals, however, are treated differently when they do **not** involve the lowest voice.

When they occur between middle and highest voices, the following (otherwise dissonant) intervals are treated as if they were **imperfect consonances**:

the perfect Fourth (d+g, a+d')
 the augmented Fourth (f+b, g+c#)
 the diminished Fifth (b+f', c#+g')
 their compounds (g+c'', f+b', B+f')

To qualify for treatment as imperfect consonances, these special intervals have to be accompanied by another, lower voice, so that they form three-part chords such as d+a+d', e+g+c', d+f+b or e+c#+g'. Each of these chords is deemed consonant **as a whole** because its middle and highest voices are individually consonant with the lowest voice.

Task 5.4.1—Write out the foregoing three-part chords for bass, tenor and alto. Label the intervals.

Task 5.4.2—Copy and complete the following three-voice exercise. Label the intervals. Which voice is the cantus firmus?

The exercise shows three staves of music. Above the top staff, the intervals between the middle and highest voices are labeled 4, 3, 4, 6, 3. Between the top and middle staves, the intervals between the highest and middle voices are labeled 10, 10. Between the middle and bottom staves, the intervals between the middle and lowest voices are labeled 6, 3.