

**TONAL COUNTERPOINT:
STUDIES IN
PART-WRITING**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649722501

Tonal Counterpoint: Studies in Part-Writing by Walter R. Spalding

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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WALTER R. SPALDING

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PRICE, TWO DOLLARS

Arthur P. Schmidt

BOSTON
120 Boylston St.

LEIPZIG

NEW YORK
136 Fifth Avenue

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Mus 327.10
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The Fort Hill Press
SAMUEL USHER
176 TO 184 HIGH STREET
BOSTON, MASS.

To
A. M. S. and H. L. A.

PREFACE

On the subject of "Counterpoint," as that term is generally understood, this book does not profess to be an exhaustive treatise. Rather is it intended as a practical textbook, to deal with the principles of free part-writing and to offer suggestions for the cultivation of such a musical instinct that wherever polyphony* is desirable in composition the various parts shall be made interesting and truly melodious. It seems to the writer that at the present day the import of the word counterpoint is largely historical. Certainly the rules still in vogue in the majority of the books on counterpoint are those which were practised when music was under the influence of the old modal system, was written almost exclusively for voices, and long before the principles of rhythm and of tonality, so deeply implanted in our modern instrumental music, had come into existence at all. Moreover in these textbooks there is little to stimulate the imagination of the student or to develop a broad musical judgment. The subjects given, with their heterogeneous and unrhymic collection of whole notes, seem at best merely to furnish opportunities for the acquisition of a rudimentary power of selection. But this selecting and grouping of the various chord-factors in the most effective way have already been taught the student during his course in harmony,—when that subject has been properly taught, that is, without a servile dependence upon the figured-bass system. In fact, whoever has been writing free exercises in harmony under competent instruction has also been writing counterpoint of a certain kind; that is, he has been making the separate voices as varied and melodious as possible. Every one will recognize the great discrepancy in style between the counterpoint of the textbook and that of a Mozart String Quartet, a Beethoven Symphony, or even the contrapuntal accompaniment of a Franz song. There must of necessity be some difference; one is an exercise for the young student, the other the work of mature genius. Nevertheless the difference should be one rather of degree than actually of kind. In both exercise and work of creative imagination should be found the broad principles of all musical art; there should be life, spontaneity and freedom, and all the voices, whenever possible, should say something, except where a confessedly homophonic † style is being used. In music, of all arts, "the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." Hence the writer has no sympathy with the arbitrary division of counterpoint into two classes, strict and free.

* That is, music in many independent parts.

† Since the time of J. S. Bach there is no reason for considering harmony and counterpoint as separate and unconnected subjects; each is indissolubly bound up with the other.

‡ That is, where there is one chief melody, and the other voices are frankly subordinate, furnishing merely an accompaniment.

For the last two hundred years all contrapuntal writing which has had any intrinsic musical value has been free, save those occasional instances in which the composer has written in the old style as a historical *tour de force*. Those, however, who approve of the above classification claim that it is as necessary for the young composer to submit himself rigorously to the strict style before he attempts the free, as it is for the would-be pianist to practise five-finger exercises before he undertakes the works of Beethoven, Chopin and others. This, however, is a fallacious form of argument, for the cases are really not parallel. The pianist is training himself to perform and to interpret adequately works *already written*. The young musician is training himself to express clearly whatever his fancy may suggest, and to make intelligent and inspiring use of the manifold riches of harmony. At first his style is naturally simple before it becomes varied and complex, but nothing is gained by keeping him for months in the so-called strict style, where only triads are allowed, and no six-four chords, and no modulations, etc., and then suddenly telling him that now he is to write free counterpoint, that in which he is to do whatever he likes, without any previous practice in adapting means to ends. Rather from the outset the student should be led on gradually to make original use of as broad a harmonic scheme as possible. Without foregoing the technical training gained by the observance of certain fundamental laws, this book is meant to embody a plea for the *spirit* of modern counterpoint or free part-writing; that is, the combination of rhythmical, freely moving melodies within the limits of concordant harmonies. As in its general style all part-writing must be largely "vocal," the first part of this book is devoted to writing for voices "a capella." This is the most natural as well as the simplest approach to the subject. But as all music must be outwardly performed* and as each instrument — the human voice, the violin, the pianoforte, the organ — has its special characteristics of limitation or advantage, music must always be written with a clear conception of the nature of the medium through which it is to be presented; for example, that which is possible with strings or pianoforte might or might not be feasible for voices. The counterpoint of a Bach Prelude for pianoforte is not of the same nature as the counterpoint of a Beethoven string quartet. In no respect is the student more likely to go astray than in his failure to realize the special idiom of the instrument for which he may be writing. The second portion of the book, therefore, deals in writing for strings, concluding with some general suggestions with reference to free composition for the pianoforte.

Attention is particularly called to the fact that very few rules are given as to "what not to do" in music. Almost anything can be done at some time or other (for music is not a matter of morals), when for the sake of special effect a departure is made from the normal rules. What is needed is a well-trained instinct as to whether any given effect justifies itself. In no way is this power gained so surely or quickly as by a thorough study of the compositions of the great masters, Bach, Handel, Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and others. No one ever becomes a geologist merely by the study of books on the subject but rather by going out into the fields and

* The written notes are merely dead symbols until the air is put into vibration in accordance with them.

examining the works of nature at first hand. Likewise in music, example is much better than precept. Very few prohibitive rules will be found in this book, and as far as possible every suggestion and recommendation is confirmed and illustrated by an example from some standard composer. Particular attention has been paid to rhythm and to the underlying principles of melody formation, and the Canto Fermi have been carefully selected with reference to their melodic possibilities. Too often it happens that the subjects given for treatment in the various textbooks are in themselves not melodious; they are either unrhymic or unsuggestive, and far too much in the nature of musical conundrums. In fact, it would often be very difficult to decide whether they were iambic or trochaic. Surely an easily recognized rhythm in a given subject is an absolute necessity (many effects, for instance, being possible on a weak beat which on a strong beat are questionable). Accordingly, with the broad definition before us that counterpoint is the "art of inventing melodies," it is only fair to the student that the character of the Canto Fermo should not make a flowing and melodious contrapuntal treatment impossible.

As soon as the first principles of contrapuntal style are understood, much attention is paid to original work, for in the study of counterpoint the chief object is to increase the power of musical expression. The student is thrown entirely upon his own resources, and whether he has much or little to say he must practise till he can express his musical thoughts with clearness and conviction. The value of the creative spirit should be kept constantly in mind. Let both teacher and student, then, cherish and cultivate the desire to give outward utterance to some musical thought. This may seem like a very advanced standpoint for the average student, yet the writer is convinced that most of the textbooks on harmony and counterpoint make a great mistake in laying so much stress on "what may not be done" rather than adopting a definite policy of encouragement. Gradually a large part of the student's energy is taken up in obeying long lists of rules more or less arbitrary, and his natural instinct is thereby deadened. By this criticism no encouragement is meant to be offered for shirking strict methodical discipline. An earnest worker soon sees that the truest command of freedom from normal procedure is gained by a thorough understanding of the general rule. In art as well as in ethics there is a "perfect law of liberty." Rules, however, which are merely prohibitory, have in general been avoided in this book. Better is it to encourage the young musician to do something even though he flounders around a bit at first, than to have his spontaneity checked on every side by "what not to do." In fact, to write really musical exercises in accordance with the restrictive rules found in many books would be as impossible as to exercise freely and joyously in a suit of mediæval armor. The way in which one learns to handle the boundless resources of modern musical material is to make use of them until there has been acquired a keen and accurate judgment on which the composer can rely.

It would be disingenuous for the writer to claim originality for this book. On the contrary he has made a free use of the researches and methods of such distinguished theorists and teachers as Dubois, Lavignac, Rheinberger, Riemann, Buesler and Prout. The method of teaching outlined is that followed in the best foreign conservatories and successfully used in Harvard University, — that is, plenty of free, original work and copious examples from