

Quick-and-dirty summary of strict
note-against-note counterpoint in FOUR voices

HORIZONTAL successions:

Within each part, the voice-leading ought to proceed: *mostly* by step (or tie), with *some* skips of a third, and only a *few* leaps of a fourth, fifth, or sixth.

The dissonant interval of seventh is strictly forbidden, as are all augmented and diminished intervals.

Leaps are best handled according to a zig-zag model.

An upward leap ought to be preceded AND followed by downward steps; conversely, a downward leap ought to be preceded AND followed by upward steps. The larger the leap, the more important it is to adhere to this model.

The *inner voices* (alto and tenor) may incorporate more steps and ties (and thus fewer steps and leaps).

The bass may incorporate more leaps, but you must take care to maintain coherence (generally achieved through stepwise relations between temporally *non-adjacent* notes).

The overall melodic shape of a good soprano line is a sort of arch, with a unique high point somewhere around the middle of the line.

VERTICAL successions:

Within one harmony, the voicing may change by having one (or two) voice(s) retain their tones, and having the other voices move to other chord tones (often involving a voice exchange); note that by definition, this produces simultaneous leaps. The smaller these leaps are, the better.

When changing from one harmony to another: With all four voices sharing identical rhythms, virtually the **ONLY** vertical intervals permitted are consonances. The **APPROACH** to each kind of consonance is constrained to some degree, as follows:

[see table on reverse]

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| | apply to any and all voice pairs | | permitted in the UPPER voices only! | |
|--|--|---|--|-----------------|
| | PERFECT consonance (P1, P5, P8, P12, etc.) | IMPERFECT consonance (3, 6, 10, 12, etc.) | OTHER P4 | DISS. A4, d5 |
| Oblique | good | good | good | good |
| Contrary both move by step | good | good | good | good |
| one by step, one by leap | acceptable | good* | good | good |
| both move by leap | FORBIDDEN | FORBIDDEN | FORBIDDEN ¹ | |
| Similar one by step, one by leap | acceptable | good* | good | good |
| both move by leap | FORBIDDEN | FORBIDDEN | FORBIDDEN | |
| Parallel both move by step | FORBIDDEN | good | good | acceptable |
| both move by leap | FORBIDDEN | FORBIDDEN | FORBIDDEN ² | |

*The smaller the leap, the better.

Q: What guidelines or rules of thumb can you abstract from the table above?

Keep in mind that these rules govern the APPROACH to each class of interval. For example, a diminished fifth can be approached by oblique, contrary, similar, or parallel motion, but it MUST be resolved by stepwise contrary motion inward (i.e., the diminished fifth resolves to a third). Likewise, an augmented fourth can be approached in several different ways, but it MUST be resolved by stepwise contrary motion outward (i.e., the augmented fourth resolves to a sixth).

¹ Exception: If both voices move by a third, such that they exchange pitch-classes.

² Exception: If both voices move by a third, such that all their notes belong to the same triad.