Side Quest: Counterpoint

In other music programs with a longer theory sequence you might spend a few weeks studying counterpoint, which is the art of weaving lines together so that they create a compelling and pleasant combination. Here we really only have time for one day and then we'll move on to a related topic (i.e. writing chord progressions that also obey the rules of counterpoint.)

However, if you are interested in a side project which will make you a stronger composer, here it is, a whole packet of old materials that you could use to learn counterpoint. If you want to make some first- and second- species counterpoints for me I would definitely check them out.

Since this is a compilation of old handouts it is unfortunately not as well-organized as our theory text - it doesn't have continuous page numbers and such. I start with some "quick guides" for you to get oriented and then you can continue from there.

Version 0.8 created 11/6/23 by Dave Smey

Quick Counterpoint Rules

(for Renaissance-style "first-species" counterpoint)

Four Motion Types

First we need to define these terms.

contrary motion

lines move in opposite directions

oblique motion

one line moves, the other one doesn't

parallel motion

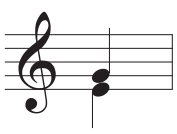
the lines move the same distance in the same direction.

similar motion

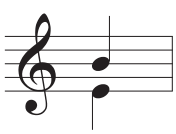
moving in the same direction, but not the same distance

Rule One: Good Consonances

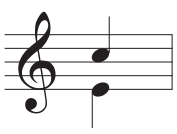
When we make our line we want to make **3rds, perfect 5ths, 6ths and 8ves** against the pre-existing line. We are not allowed to make 2nds, 4ths, diminished 5ths or 7ths.



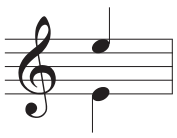
third



(perfect) fifth



sixth

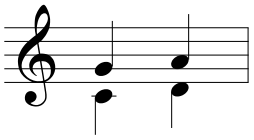


octave

Rule 2: No parallel 5ths, no parallel 8ves

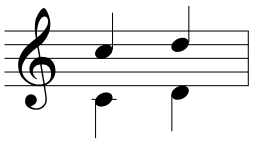
When you are making a fifth you may not move on to another fifth.
When you are making an octave you may not move on to another octave.

BAD



parallel fifths

BAD



parallel octaves

Rule 2b: No consecutive 5ths or 8ves by contrary motion either

You also aren't allowed to shoot out in opposite directions to go fifth-fifth or octave-octave.

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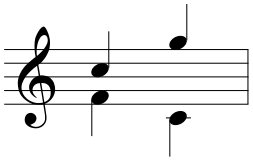

fifths by contrary

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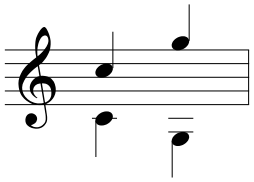

octaves by contrary

Rule 3: "Direct" 5th and 8ve

You are only allowed to approach a 5th or 8ve by contrary or oblique motion.
If you do it by similar motion that's a "direct" fifth or octave (and we already know parallel 5's and 8's are bad.)

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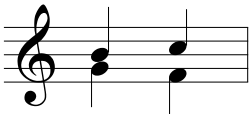
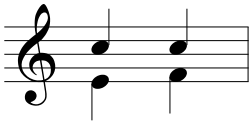


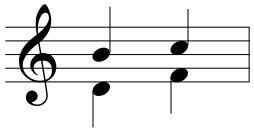
approaching by contrary

GOOD



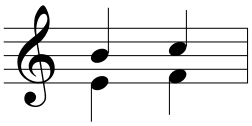
approaching by oblique

BAD



approaching by similar = direct 5th

BAD

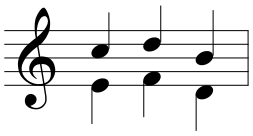


parallel fifths

Rule 4: Limit on 3rds and 6ths

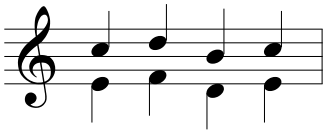
Parallel 3rds and 6ths are good. However, three 3rds or three 6ths in a row is considered the maximum.

GOOD



three sixths in a row

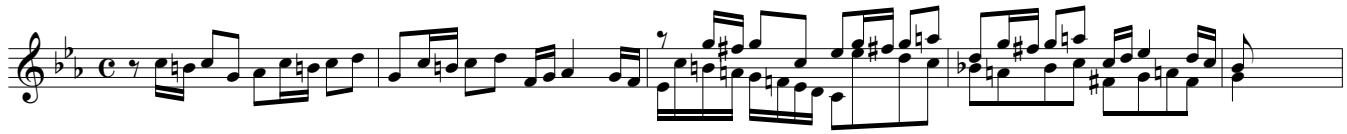
TOO MANY OMG



First-Species Counterpoint: Lesson One

Counterpoint is the art of combining musical lines so that they sound good together and yet retain a certain independence. It is an extremely valuable skill for a musician to study – historical evidence shows that Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven all worked on counterpoint from the same theoretical text, Fux's *Gradus ad parnassum*, (even, in Beethoven's case, when he was already a very successful composer.)

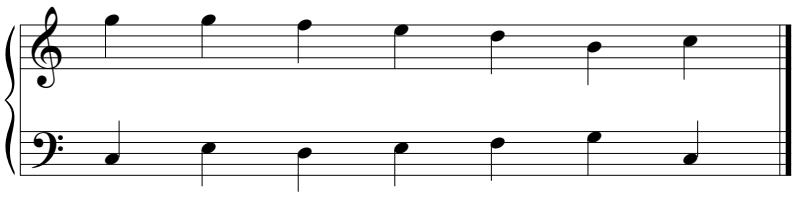
Counterpoint is typically approached in very strictly controlled exercises called *species*. In each species there is a particular rhythmic relationship between parts. So, even though a great contrapuntal composer like Bach writes lines that are rhythmically independent, like so –



J. S. Bach, Fugue in C minor from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* Book I

– our *first species* counterpoint will simply match a quarter-notes against quarter-notes in a "one-to-one" rhythmic ratio.

Example of first species counterpoint



First species may thus seem very crude and abstract, but it is, in fact, essential! It is the foundation of all musical composition in the Classical style, and it taps into fundamental principles of musical perception.

The basic set-up

In order to practice counterpoint one starts with a fixed melody or *cantus firmus*. It is your job to compose a melody that goes with the CF.

I'll list off a dozen melodies that can be used as cantus firmi on the next two pages.

Cantus Firmi

Here are some short melodies for you to write against. These cantus firmi were written by George Fisher, as part of his counterpoint materials for the NYU Music Department.

Bass Clef

It's probably easier to start with some bass lines at the bottom of the texture, writing a new line on top.

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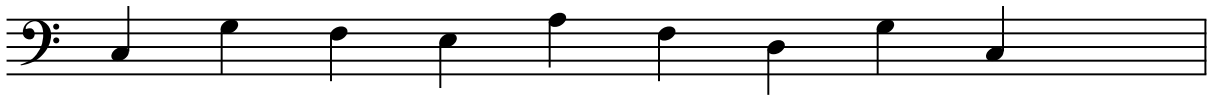

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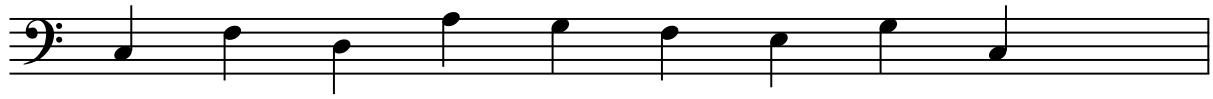

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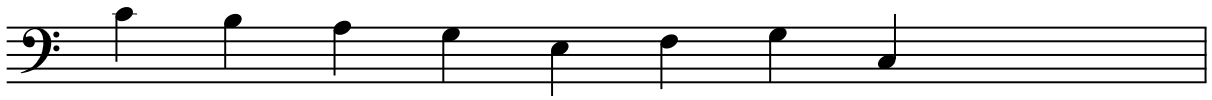

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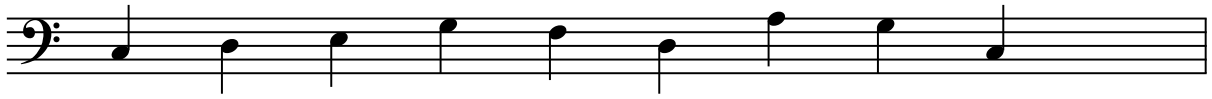

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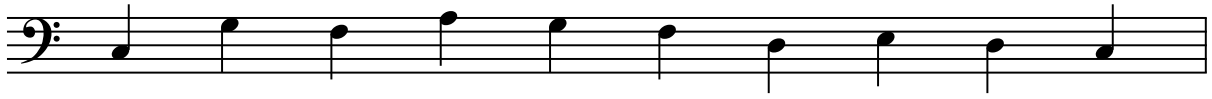

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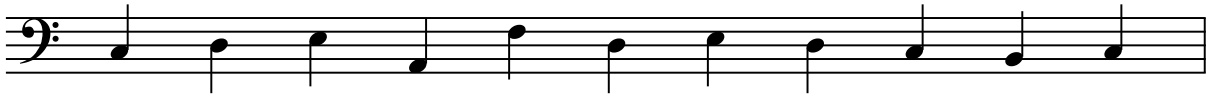

Treble Clef Cantus Firmi

You could use these as a fixed top line, composing a new bass part underneath.

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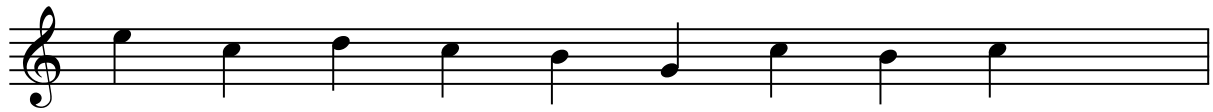

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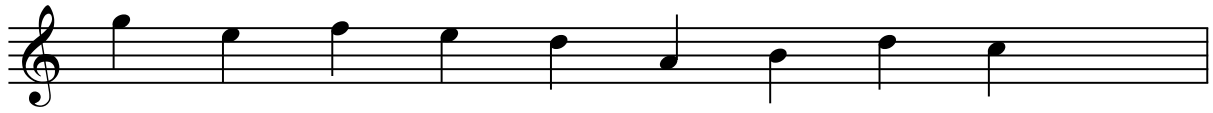

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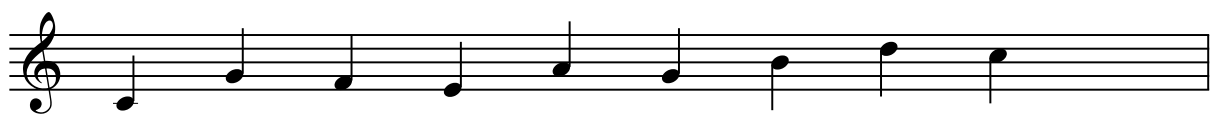

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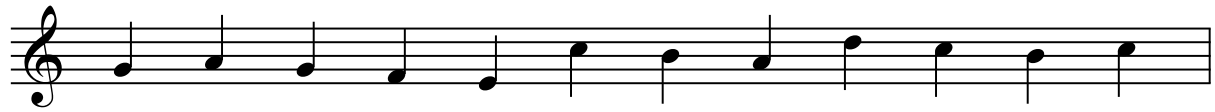

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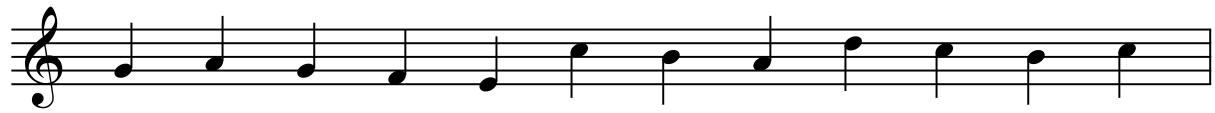

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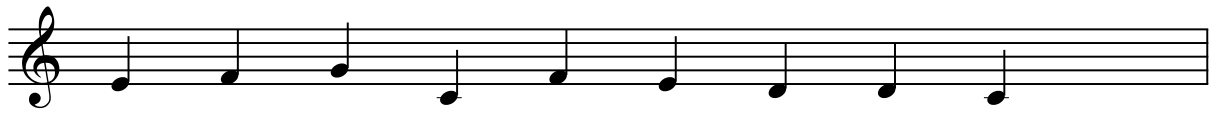
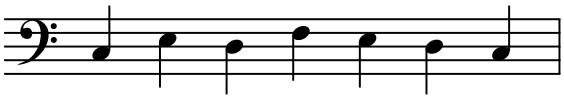
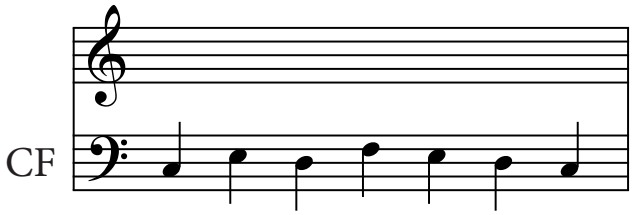


So, let's imagine that we choose this short cantus firmus to start with. Maybe we got it from a source like this packet, or maybe we composed it out ourselves.



It's written as a bass line, so I'll copy it over and add a blank staff on top:



I could easily move this line up an octave and write a bass line beneath it, though. It is usually a good idea to mark the CF like I have above - this reminds you that the bottom line is fixed (you can't change it), and it makes it easier for your instructor to correct.

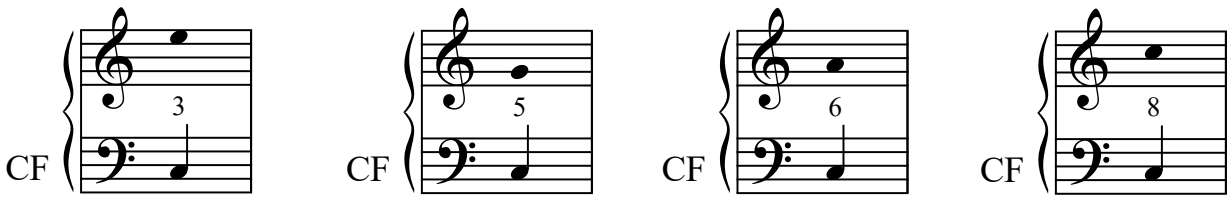
The Big 4 Rules

There are many rules to remember in order to write proper counterpoint. For our first lesson, however, we will only learn four.

Rule One: Make "Good" Intervals - third, fifth, sixth, and octave

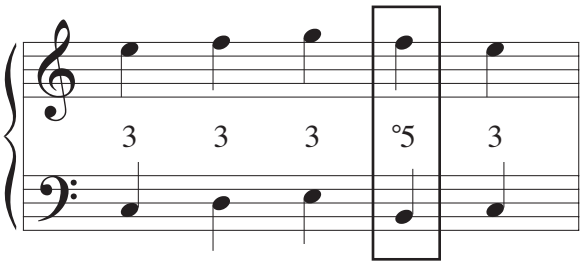
In order for your lines to sound good together, they need to be based on *consonant* (or relatively pleasant-sounding) vertical intervals. Every note you put in your new line must be either a third, a perfect fifth, a sixth, or an octave away from the note in the CF. It doesn't matter whether the thirds or sixths are major or minor - either is fine.

So, given a note C in the bass, we can add four different notes on top.



We keep track of the intervals we make by writing the number in between the staves. Notice that we consider "compound" intervals (say, a third plus an octave) to be the same as close intervals - the extra octave does not matter.

Be careful to avoid making the diminished fifth (aka the "tritone.") In the key of C this interval lies between B and F. In first-species counterpoint it is considered an undesirable dissonance.



While we are here, I'll add a minor "extra" rule: Stick to the scale (usually C major.) Don't add flats or sharps in order to make the good intervals, use the intervals that are naturally occuring in the scale.

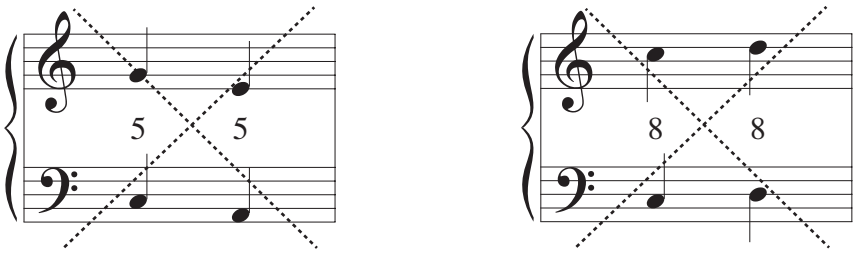
Rules Two and Three - The Motion Rules

The fifth and the octave have special acoustical properties that require restrictions on how they can be used. (I'll explain why in Chapter 2.) When using a fifth or octave you have to be careful to avoid certain kinds of "motion." In general, there are four categories of motion that can occur from one beat to the next:

Parallel Motion	**Similar Motion**	**Contrary Motion**	**Oblique Motion**
same direction, same interval	same direction, different intervals	opposite directions	one voice moves, one is stationary

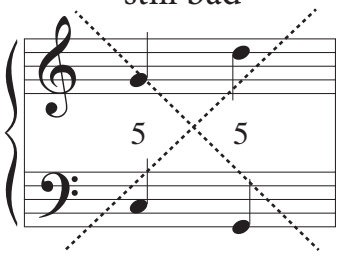
Rule Two: No parallel fifths or octaves

If you employ a fifth you are not allowed to continue on to another fifth in parallel motion. Going from an octave to another octave is also bad.



You actually aren't allowed to go to another fifth or octave by contrary motion, either.

still bad

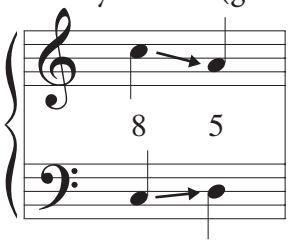


Thus, a really simple version of this rule would be "no two fifths in a row, and no two octaves in a row." Check your work by putting the interval numbers in the middle of the staff. If you've got "5 5" or "8 8," you've messed up.

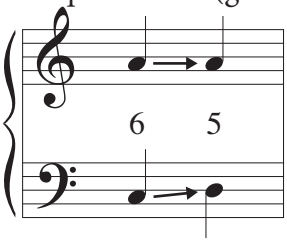
Rule Three: No "direct" fifths or octaves.

There are also restrictions on how you may "approach" a fifth or octave (or, in other words, what happens before the interval.) You are only allowed to approach a fifth or octave from contrary or oblique motion.

approaching fifth with contrary motion (good)

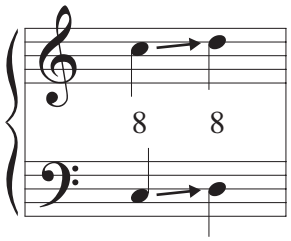


approaching fifth with oblique motion (good)

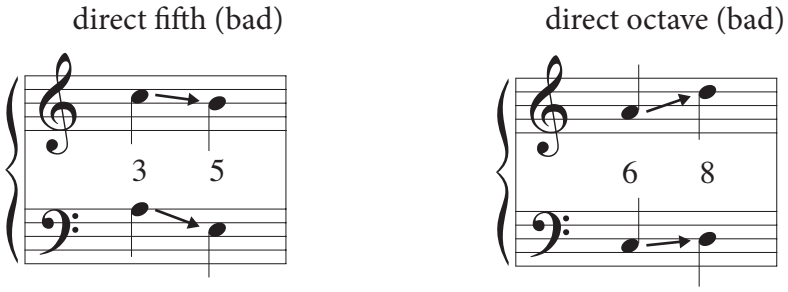


If you are approaching it by parallel motion, you are creating parallel fifths or octaves. We already know this is bad!

octave by parallel motion (bad according to rule two)



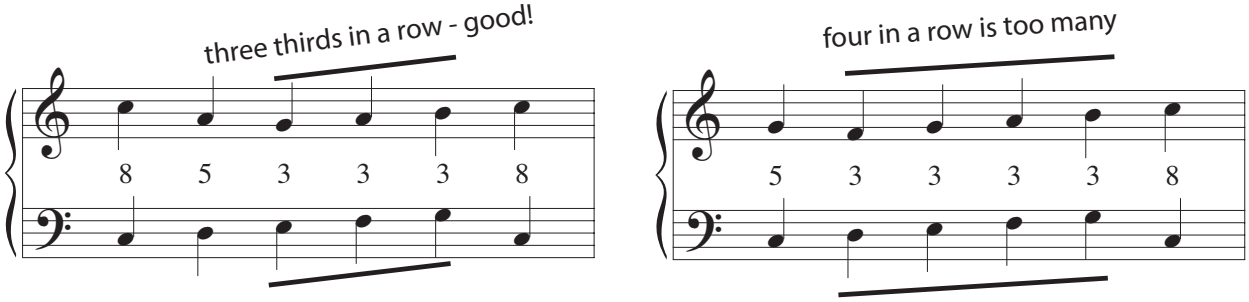
You are also not allowed to approach a fifth or an octave by similar motion. This is the "direct" fifth or octave - if both parts move up or both parts move down it is considered unacceptable.



The best way to avoid this error is simply to put your fifth or octave down on paper and then look at it. Ask yourself, "Am I approaching it in similar motion?"

Rule Four: Limits on thirds and sixths

Obviously, fifths and octaves are a lot of trouble. Aside from all of these motion rules they involve, they sometimes sound disappointingly "spare" or "empty" as well. Thirds and sixths, on the other hand, are easy to work with. The only thing you need to worry about with them is that you cannot use four thirds or four sixths in a row. It's just too boring.



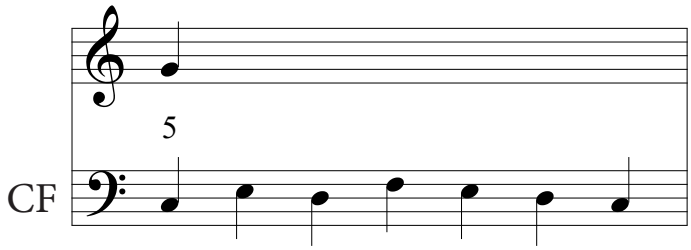
So that's easy, right? The first four rules we are going to learn are:

- Make "good" intervals - third, fifth, sixth, and octave.
- Avoid parallel fifths and octaves (no two 5's or 8's in a row.)
- Avoid direct fifths and octaves (approach them with contrary or oblique motion.)
- No more than three 3rds or three 6ths in a row.

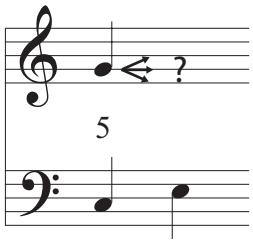
Now, how do we proceed?

Basic Workflow (for Beginners)

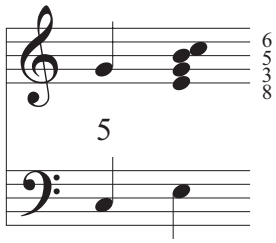
Copy over your cantus firmus and give yourself a blank staff to work with. Since good counterpoint usually involves a lot of trial and error, it is absolutely necessary to use a pencil. Pick an arbitrary interval for the first note. (We'll choose 5.)



Now you've basically got two possible strategies to find the next note. You can look for notes close to the G that make the "good" consonances...



...or you can list all four "good" notes and select from those.



Once you've selected your note, check and make sure you are obeying rules 2-4. Not every note from these four possibilities would be valid. (Which one is illegal?) Of course, while you are obeying these rules you also want to try and make a nice melody. Make sure you listen to your counterpoint by playing it on an instrument.

As you become more advanced, you will plan different parts of your melody at different times, rather than working strictly from left to right. Perhaps you'll fill in the end first or start with some tricky part in the middle that you want to be a certain way.

Now you are ready to take your first stab at counterpoint! I recommend that you try a few exercises with only these four basic rules, and then consult Chapter 3 for some more refined guidelines.