IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Johannes Tinctoris, The Art of Counterpoint (1477)

Johannes Tinctoris (c1435–1511) was one of the most important, and certainly the most encyclopedic, music theorist of the early Renaissance. Tinctoris was a student of both law and music. As a young man he had studied with Guillaume Dufay at the cathedral of Cambrai and went on to become a skillful but not truly exceptional composer. By the early 1470s Tinctoris had made his way to Naples, where he would spend the next twenty years. (In these years many court officials of the duke of Burgundy and citizens of the Burgundian Lands went to Naples because there was a close alliance between the duke of Burgundy and the king of Naples at this point in history.) Musical Interlude 4, Fig. 1, depicts Tinctoris in his study in Naples. It was mostly here, where Tinctoris's job seems to have been to serve as composer and musical intellectual in residence, that he generated most, perhaps all, of his twelve books on various aspects of music theory. Ten of these remained only as manuscripts, and two were published. They vary greatly in purpose. Some seem to be addressed to the general reader; Tinctoris's Definition of Musical Terms, for example, is the first “music dictionary” of the modern Western world. Other volumes, such as On the Nature and Propriety of the Tones and Art of Counterpoint, are practical guides for composers and performers. Two somewhat later works, The Various Effects of Music and the incomplete On the Creation and Use of Music, relate to issues of musical philosophy and aesthetics. Indeed, few are the musical topics that the encyclopedic mind of Tinctoris failed to engage.

What follows are four extracts from Tinctoris’s Art of Counterpoint, which, contrary to its title, is as much a “how to” book for composers as it is an exercise manual in counterpoint. But the rules are important to the discipline of music, so Tinctoris explains these first, and then, toward the end, outlines how these rules can inform the higher order of composition itself. Although Tinctoris refers to the resulting compositions as “counterpoints,” it is clear by his musical examples that he is talking about composition as we understand it—for him, as well as the later theorist Gioseffo Zarlino (see next In Their Own Words), at the foundation of every good composition rests good counterpoint. Tinctoris’s Art of Counterpoint is a long work divided into three books—157 pages in the modern Latin edition—so these extracts are a mere sampling of the issues presented therein.

We begin with Book I, Chapter 4, where Tinctoris discusses the interval of the perfect fourth. The function of the fourth had changed in the history of music. During the high Middle Ages it was perceived to be a consonance. Then during the fourteenth and fifteen centuries—and for reasons still not entirely understood—it gradually came to be treated as a dissonance. Tinctoris is one of the first theorists to discuss the fourth as a dissonance, and even he is somewhat ambivalent about its status, first (Book I, Chapter 2) listing it among the consonant intervals, but then (Chapter 4) saying that it produces an “intolerable discord” and suggesting ways that this discord can be mitigated.

Book I, Chapter 4: On the Diatesseron, That Is the Fourth

The diatesseron is a concord in the sense that it contains two whole tones and a semitone, as for example D to G. It is called the diatesseron from “dia” the Latin “i” for through and [the Greek] tesseron, meaning four—thus, through four pitches, as is evident by singing up or down it. Thus it is commonly called the fourth.
Thus the diatesseron contains two tones and a semitone. But although musicians a long time ago placed it from among the consonances, it really is not a consonance. Rather, to learned ears—those ears that [Roman orator] Cicero said cannot stand discordant harmony—it sounds as an intolerable discord. For this reason it is to be rejected from counterpoint, except when there are many singers improvising out of a book [an important mode of improvisation discussed below]. In this case one of the singers takes a note a fifth below the tenor [thereby turning a 6/4 chord into a 5/3 chord], which frequently happens in the next-to-last chord of a [V-I] cadence. For then another voice [the alto] has the fourth above the tenor, which soon moves to a more agreeable concord, as is evident here in the musical example:

The unmitigated fourth is only allowed by itself in a style of composition called fauxbourdon [see Chapter 16] where its sound is absorbed by the presence of a third or sometimes a fifth below, which makes a sweeter consonant harmony than the third, as appears here:

In res facta [composed polyphony as opposed to improvised polyphony], however, the fourth appears in many places, not only with a fifth or third but also with a tenth and a twelfth placed under it [all 5/3 or 6/3 chords and not 6/4 chords]. Thus in this manner, by placing of concords beneath, a sweeter song is made than otherwise would have been, as is evident below. [Note in the example below that there are fourths without thirds or fifths below in bars 2, 4, and 7, but that these are all treated carefully as 4-3 suspensions—Tinctoris is very concerned with the proper handling of dissonance.]
In Book II, Chapter 19, Tinctoris introduces the distinction between note-against-note counterpoint and diminished counterpoint, which over the course of 250 years will culminate in the species counterpoint that we still study today.

**Book II, Chapter 19: There Are Two Types of Counterpoint: Simple and Diminished**

Because, as we said in the above first book, sometimes dissonance is admitted, we should therefore first note that counterpoint is of two types: simple and diminished. Simple counterpoint is that type that simply has one note placed against another of the same duration, as here: [he then gives a straightforward example of note-against-note counterpoint]. And this kind of counterpoint is called “simple” because it is constructed exclusively with equivalency of duration and not by any flowering of diversity.

Diminished counterpoint, however, is that which is made by placing two or more notes against one, sometimes of equal value and sometimes not: [he then gives an example with equal semibreves in the lower voice and many different types of note values, both longer and shorter, sounding above]. And this kind of counterpoint is called diminished because it is made by dividing the basic note value into many parts. And thus it is also metaphorically called “florid,” for just as a diversity of flowers makes for the most delightful kind of fields, so a variety of proportions renders counterpoint the most pleasing.

In the next chapter Tinctoris makes an allusion to an important but highly unappreciated aspect of early music: vast amounts of it were improvised by performers, both singers and instrumentalists, who had first memorized certain rules or procedures regulating the extempore production of unwritten music. Tinctoris calls the written music we know and study *res facta* (a “made thing”) and the other (which we can’t study because it was never written down) mental counterpoint.

**Book II, Chapter 20: How Both Simple and Diminished Counterpoint Can Come in Two Types, Namely Written and Improvised; How Composed Counterpoint Differs from Improvised Counterpoint**

Moreover, both simple and diminished counterpoint come in two types, namely written and that improvised mentally. Written counterpoint is commonly called *res facta*, and that which is extemporized is called absolute counterpoint, and this is the sort of thing that is commonly called “singing on the book” [improvising around a melody found in a chant book]. And here is the way in which written or composed polyphony [*res facta*] differs entirely from this [absolute] counterpoint: all voices of a composed polyphonic piece, be they three, four, or more in number, are to be regulated one against the other according to the rules of consonance, each one paying attention to what the other is doing, as it appears in this five-voice example in which first three,
then four, and finally all five voices sound together. [Here follows an example of five-
part sacred music typical of the style of the late fifteenth century.]

By contrast, two, three, four or more voices singing together on the book [super
librum] need not be attentive each to the other. All that is necessary is that anything
having to do with vertical consonance is regulated against the tenor. Indeed, not only
is it not reprehensible, it is praiseworthy if, when all singing together, they shall sing
prudently with a common understanding of the consonances. For so in this way they
will make a more full and sweeter sonority.

Finally, having treated the subject of the most advanced sort of counterpoint known
at the end of the fifteenth century, Tinctoris moves on to Book III and the subject of
composition. For each of the first eight chapters of this book he posits and then
explains one rule of composition. Below are given the chapter titles of the eight
chapters and then a simple explanation in brackets, often drawing the proper con-
clusion from the musical examples Tinctoris provides.

Book III, Chapter 1: On the eight rules which every contrapuntal composition should
follow, and the first is that every contrapuntal composition should begin and end with
a perfect consonance. [Self-explanatory]

Chapter 2: The second general rule is that imperfect consonances [thirds and sixths]
may ascend or descend with the tenor but not perfect ones. [In other words, parallel
imperfect concords are permitted, but parallel perfect ones are not.]

Chapter 3: The third general rule is that the tenor may continually repeat the same
pitch while sounding against imperfect as well as perfect consonances. [When a tenor
repeats the same pitch, it is permitted to repeat the same interval above, but changes of
intervals are more desirable.]

Chapter 4: The fourth general rule holds that contrapuntal motion should be made
with the closest proximity in mind and with as much order as possible. [Stepwise mo-
tion is always preferable.]

Chapter 5: The fifth general rule holds that the melody should not cadence on
any note that causes the composition to be taken outside of its mode [distonari]. [Self-
explanatory]

Chapter 6: The sixth general rule prohibits repetitions. [The example suggests that
neither the tenor nor the contrapuntal lines should repeat themselves.]

Chapter 7: The seventh general rule holds that cadences should not be made repeatedly
on the same pitch. [The composer should not continually cadence on the same
degree of the scale.]

Chapter 8: The eighth and last general rule holds that variety must be intensely
pursued in every contrapuntal composition. [Self-explanatory]

Source: Translated from the original Latin of Liber de arte contrapuncti, edited by Albert Seay (1975).