

## The Rationale for “Contextual Counterpoint” Kristi Hardman

At many schools, counterpoint continues to be offered as an upper-level elective, even as a required course for many students. This syllabus offers an approach to teaching counterpoint that broadens the repertoire, familiarizes students with a variety of styles of counterpoint, and asks students to think deeply about how various styles of music from around the world are structured. By examining a variety of music, students have an opportunity to evaluate the benefits and limitations of a Western-focused theory of counterpoint, leading students to reflect on the hegemonic aspects of counterpoint theory as a Western classical tradition. Students will adjust, adapt, and develop guidelines on what constitutes a “good” counterpoint that are contextual, culturally salient, and style-specific. During this course, students will additionally build skills in comparison, deduction, and synthesis through analysis of model compositions and explore the practical application of counterpoint through the composition of their own short pieces.

This syllabus is intended as an upper-level undergraduate course in Counterpoint, whether required or as an elective, for a 15-week semester. It assumes prior coursework in core undergraduate music theory courses, including a comprehensive understanding of scales, intervals, triads, chord progressions, and a basic understanding of small- and large-scale forms.

The first four weeks serve as an introduction to fundamental, generalized counterpoint concepts, such as the composition of a melody, consonance/dissonance, and types of motion between two voices. These are examined in a variety of musical pieces, which allows students to compare and contrast how these concepts are treated contextually given a specific style. Weeks 5–14 are modules and can be included or removed from the course schedule depending on instructor/student interest, how quickly the students progress through the topics, and the time permitting in a semester/quarter at an instructor’s school.

To broaden the repertoire discussed in this course, species counterpoint has been allotted two weeks in the course schedule. While species counterpoint is often a focus of counterpoint courses, this syllabus aims for familiarization with species counterpoint rather than a mastery of species counterpoint, focusing instead on providing students with exposure to various musical pieces and styles from around the world and from different time periods. Of 30 compositions suggested to serve as models, twenty compositions are by women and/or people of color (6 are by women and 16 are by people of color). The places from which these examples come include Bali, Brazil, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the Solomon Islands, Sweden, the UK and the USA. The musical styles covered are just as broad, including Western classical music, Balinese gamelan, panpipe music, musical theatre, popular music, jazz, and video game music. All music examples used in the class are publicly accessible through online resources, including open-access articles in music theory journals or databases, such as Music Theory Examples by Women, the Composers of Color Resource Project, Diverse Music Theory Examples, and IMSLP. Links are provided in the course schedule for those compositions that are not found in one of these resources. Recordings of the music can be found on YouTube or other streaming services.

Each week is structured similarly. In the first hour, we carefully analyze one composition which serves as our model. Students work in small groups to develop a list of characteristics found in the piece, using the notetaking form provided on page 1 in the appendix. In the second hour, we establish guidelines and procedures for the students’ composition assignment based on the model

and examine, more cursorily, 1–2 more pieces to see how these guidelines correspond to other types of music (some will be similar and some will be quite different), giving us an opportunity to discuss the cultural context in which the guidelines are established. In the third hour, we begin to create a composition in the style of the model based on the guidelines we established together as a class. This serves as an example for when the students work on their own compositions during the following week. This process gives the students ownership over their learning and encourages the development of critical thinking skills and problem-solving.

For the following week, students work independently at home on a short composition based on the guidelines and procedures established in the previous week (two example assignments have been provided on page 2 in the appendix). Students may also be asked to reflect, in a short response, upon the differences in counterpoint styles that they encountered in the previous week's lessons and how this affected their approach to composing their counterpoint. After submission of an assignment, students receive comments on their composition and one week to revise and resubmit their composition, if they wish. This approach continues the learning process, ensuring an ongoing building toward a deep understanding of the contrapuntal concepts discussed in class. This grading approach works well for me as I regularly teach a small class size for Counterpoint (<10 students); however, this may be cumbersome for larger class sizes and so instructors may prefer to limit the number of times in a semester that students can resubmit work or suggest a threshold for when students can resubmit, such as a statement which reads "a student can resubmit if their grade for an assignment is less than X%."

For the final project, students follow a similar process as those established each week in the course. The students choose a piece featuring counterpoint to serve as their model, produce an in-depth analysis of the structural and expressive features of the work, create a list of characteristics found in the piece, and then create an outline of procedures to follow while composing a similar style piece. The result is a short composition based on those procedures. The flexibility of this project allows students to explore a style of music that interests them while synthesizing the main principles of counterpoint, broadly construed. The full details of this project are provided in the appendix on page 3. With this final project, students will gain further understanding that the guidelines for any counterpoint must be contextual and style-specific.

**MUSC 3130: Counterpoint**  
**“Contextual Counterpoint”**

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Office Hours: TBD

Course Meetings: TBD

**Course Description**

Counterpoint is, broadly construed, the study of the interaction of two or more melodies moving independently of each other. Counterpoint is often considered in relation to Western classical traditions; however, many styles of music feature two or more melodies moving independently. Repertoires outside of the Western classical tradition present an interesting contrast and “counterpoint” to the principles of Western counterpoint. This course will introduce students to various contrapuntal styles, including those from Western classical traditions, popular styles, and other global repertoires through extensive examination of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic designs with an emphasis on model composition. The variety of repertoire will contextualize the rules of counterpoint, ask us to adapt these and develop new guidelines for individual pieces of music, and consider the cultural implications of contrapuntal concepts.

**Course Goals/Objectives**

Upon successful completion of this course the student will be able to:

- Describe contrapuntal idioms of various styles of music.
- Demonstrate appropriate and idiomatic writing for voices and instruments in different styles of counterpoint.
- Demonstrate appropriate text setting techniques for voices.
- Apply diatonic and chromatic music theory analysis techniques in creative ways to analyze music.
- Articulate differences and similarities between pieces from different times and/or cultures.

**Readings**

Various open educational resources, including but not limited to the following:

Gotham, Mark, Kyle Gullings, et al. [Open Music Theory](#). 2nd version.

Hutchinson, Robert. 2017. [Music Theory for the 21st-Century Classroom](#).

Hansen, Brad. 2024. <https://hansenmedia.net/courses/counterpoint/>

**Course Materials (bold text = things that must be brought to every class)**

1. LMS Course Site. Readings will be posted to our class LMS site two weeks prior to the scheduled class. Please check our LMS site often for assignment information, handouts, and other class updates, particularly if you’ve missed a class.
2. **Music Staff paper** (This can be downloaded/printed at <http://www.blanksheetmusic.net>)
3. **Pencil and eraser** (Please only use pencil for assignments in this class)
4. Music Notation Software: MuseScore (a free option) or any other that you prefer
5. Music Production Program: BandLab (a free option) or any other that you prefer

## Evaluation

Weekly Model Compositions/Analyses (14): 60% (#1–2: 2% each; #3–4: 3% each; #5–14: 5% each)

In-Class Participation: 15%

Final Project: 25%

## Weekly Model Compositions/Analyses

Each week students will analyze or compose a short contrapuntal piece based on a model examined in class. These assignments will be graded and students will receive comments on what they have done well and errors that have been made based on a list of criteria communally gathered from in-class analysis of the model piece. Students will have an opportunity to revise and resubmit all assignments after an initial grade and feedback are provided.

\*\*Two sample assignments are provided on page 2 of the appendix.

## In-class Discussions and Performances

Students will be asked to participate in activities where they will practice specific techniques discussed in class, and respond to discussion topics based on the assigned reading and video resources and in-class activities. Though these are informal and low stakes assignments, students are expected to provide thoughtful, well-articulated responses to each of the activities. These assignments are usually graded as pass/fail and will receive minimal feedback. Students will also sometimes perform on their voice or instrument. Performances will be graded as pass/ fail and will receive minimal feedback.

## Final Project

The final project will include an analysis of a model composition of the student's choosing, compilation of a list of characteristics found in that piece, creation of a step-by-step procedure for composing a piece in a similar style, an original composition based on the model composition, and a presentation and performance of the project during the final examination period.

\*\*For details on the Final Project, see page 3 of the appendix.

## Possible Weekly Class Schedules

Three 50 min. Class Meetings per Week

Monday	Wednesday	Friday
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Analyze in depth one model piece</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Establish guidelines for student compositions based on analysis from Monday</li><li>Time permitting: A cursory analysis of one other piece, for comparison</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Demonstration/Workshop of beginning compositions</li></ul>

Two 75 min. Class Meetings per Week

Tuesday	Thursday
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Analyze in depth one model piece</li><li>Begin guidelines for student compositions</li><li>Cursorily examine second piece for comparison</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Complete guidelines for student compositions</li><li>Demonstration/Workshop of beginning compositions</li></ul>

\*\*A sample form for notetaking for composition guidelines/analysis is provided on page 1 of the appendix.

## Course Schedule

- Resources for learning are provided via the website links below. If a prose reading and video are provided for a given topic, students may consult both or one of the given resources.
- Students should familiarize themselves with the assigned lesson before the scheduled class and come with questions about any unclear material.

For instructors:

- Weeks 1–4 serve as an introduction to fundamental counterpoint concepts. Weeks 5–14 are modules that can be included or removed from the syllabus depending on time permitting in the semester/quarter.
- Model compositions to be analyzed are provided. The instructor may choose to use all in their entirety or excerpts from these pieces, or only one or two pieces each week to demonstrate the topic. The author of this syllabus typically used excerpts from pieces for analysis classes. Recommendations for specific measures are indicated next to the piece.
- Written notation is provided for all models, found online and mostly open access. No transcribing by students is expected. Links to some transcriptions have been provided below.
- All assignments are due on the last class day of the week, giving students one full week to complete the assignment after the topic has been covered in class sessions.

Weeks	Topic	Resource for Learning/Assignments Due
1	<b>Introduction to Counterpoint and the Principles of Melody Construction</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Isabella Leonarda, “Non scintilate frigide” (1684), mm. 1–2</li> <li>• Orlando di Lasso, “Oculus non vidit” (1577)</li> <li>• Mozart, Sonate in C, KV46d (1768)</li> <li>• John Coltrane, “Bessie’s Blues” (1964)</li> <li>• Chic, “Good Times” (1978)</li> <li>• Dewa Alit, <i>Ngejuk Memedi</i> (2016)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Henry Threadgill, <i>Sixfivetwo</i> (2018)</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Overview of Polyphony and Counterpoint</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Video: Introduction to Counterpoint</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Introduction to Species Counterpoint: Composing a Cantus Firmus and Rules for Melodic Writing</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Review: <a href="#">Modes</a></li> </ul>
2	<b>Consonance and Dissonance, Types of Motion</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review of pieces from Week 1</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Introduction to Species Counterpoint: Consonance and Dissonance and Types of Motion</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #1:</b> Writing a Melody</li> </ul>
3	<b>Types of Counterpoint: 1:1, 2:1, 4:1</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Completed counterpoints from Fux</li> <li>• The Beatles, “Yesterday” (1965)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">1<sup>st</sup> Species Counterpoint</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Video: First Species Counterpoint</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">2<sup>nd</sup> Species Counterpoint</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Video: 2<sup>nd</sup> Species Counterpoint</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">3<sup>rd</sup> Species Counterpoint</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Video: 3<sup>rd</sup> Species Counterpoint</a></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #2:</b> Composing a 1:1 Counterpoint</li> </ul>

4	<b>Free Counterpoint</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Isabella Leonarda, “Non scintilate frigide” (1684), mm. 1–2</li> <li>Julia Perry, “I’m a Poor Little Orphan” (1952)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">5<sup>th</sup> Species Counterpoint</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Guidelines for 5<sup>th</sup> Species</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Example of 5<sup>th</sup> Species</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #3:</b> Building a Counterpoint from 1:1 to 2:1 to 4:1
5	<b>Imitative Counterpoint (Vocal)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Orlando di Lasso, “Oculus non vidit” (1577)</li> <li>Yes, “And You and I” (1972)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">16<sup>th</sup> Century Contrapuntal Style</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Lundberg, 2014. “‘To Let it Be Without Pretense’: Canon, Fugue, and Imitation in Progressive Rock 1968–1979” MTO 20/3.</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #4:</b> Free Counterpoint
6	<b>Duets (Vocal and Instrumental)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mozart, Sonate in C, KV46d (1768)</li> <li>Irving Berlin, “Play a Simple Melody” (1914)</li> <li>Are’are Cyclic Panpipe Music (1970s) - transcribed by Hei-Yeung (John) Lai</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Lai, 2023. “Counterpoint and Formative Process in ‘Are’are Cyclic Panpipe Music” <i>Intégral</i> 36.</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #5:</b> 2-part Imitative Counterpoint for Voice
7	<b>Imitative Counterpoint (Instrumental)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>R. Nathaniel Dett, “Magnolias” from <i>Magnolia Suite</i> (1912), mm. 17–32</li> <li>Ulysses Kay, Eight Inventions for Piano (1946), Invention No. 1</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Invention Expositions</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #6:</b> Duet
8	<b>Counterpoint and Harmony</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>J.S. Bach, “Kein Stündlein geht dahin” BWV 477 (1735)</li> <li>Elfrida Andrée, Ur Drömliv, I. Långsamt</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">18<sup>th</sup> Century Polyphony</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #7:</b> Instrumental Invention
9	<b>3-Voice+ Textures</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>J.S. Bach, “Christ lag in Todesbanden,” BWV 4, Versus III (1707)</li> <li>Dewa Alit, <i>Ngejuk Memedi</i> (2016), mm. 8–11</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Ground Bass</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Tenzer, 2018. “Chasing the Phantom: Features of a Supracultural New Music.” MTO 24/1.</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #8:</b> Elaboration of a Chorale Texture
10	<b>The Fugue</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Amy Beach, Fantasia Fugata, op. 87 (1923)</li> <li>Heitor Villa-Lobos, Bachiana Brasileira No. 9 (1945)</li> <li>Gentle Giant, “Moog Fugue” (2004)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">High Baroque Fugal Exposition</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">The Fugue</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #9:</b> Vocal/Instrumental Trio

11	<b>Jazz and Blues Counterpoint: The Walking Bass Line</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Charlie Parker, “Blues for Alice” (1951)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">John Coltrane, “Bessie’s Blues” (1964)</a></li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Blues and Jazz Counterpoint</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Video: 3 Ways to Create Counterpoint in Jazz</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #10:</b> Fugue Analysis
12	<b>Counterpoint in Popular Styles: Loose Verse/Tight Chorus Model and Riffs</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marvin Gaye, “I Heard It Through the Grapevine” (1968)</li> <li>• Stevie Wonder, “Superstition” (1972)</li> <li>• Chic, “Good Times” (1978)</li> <li>• Michael Jackson, “Billie Jean” (1983)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Polyphony in Popular Music</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Video: Songs that Use Counterpoint</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #11:</b> Walking Bass Line for 12-bar Blues
13	<b>8-bit Video Game Music</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Koji Kondo, “Overworld” Theme from <i>Super Mario Bros.</i> (1985)</li> <li>• Koji Kondo, <a href="#">“Dungeon” Theme from Legend of Zelda</a> (1986)</li> <li>• Jun Chikuma, Excerpts from Faxanadu (1987)</li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Video: How Pokemon 8-bit Music Was Inspired by Classical Music</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Karen Cook, 2022. “8-Bit Affordances” MTO 29/3</a> (transcriptions for models come from this article) <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #12:</b> Popular Song Vocals and Bass Line
14	<b>Post-tonal Counterpoint</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Darius Milhaud, <i>Le Printemps</i>, Book I, II, Op. 25, No. 2 (1919)</li> <li>• Steve Reich, <i>Piano Phase</i>, for two pianos or two marimbas (1967)</li> <li>• <a href="#">Ruth Lomon, <i>Songs of Remembrance: Chor der Waisen</i> (1996)</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Henry Threadgill, <i>Sixfiveto</i> (2018)</a></li> </ul>	<input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Western Art Music Counterpoint</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <a href="#">Middle and Late 20<sup>th</sup> Century Counterpoint</a> <input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #13:</b> 8-Bit Video Game Counterpoint
15	<b>Performances of Counterpoint Compositions</b> <b>Final Project One-on-One Consultations</b>	<input type="checkbox"/> <b>Assignment #14:</b> Post-tonal Counterpoint
Finals Week	<b>Final Project Presentations</b>	

## Appendix for “Contextual Counterpoint” Syllabus

### **Form for Student Notetaking when Analyzing Model Compositions**

\*\*Depending on the style of the model, this document may not be fully filled out or may need adapting.

#### **Preparatory Steps for Composing Based on a Model Composition:**

1. Analyze a model composition or two in a similar style (or contrasting styles).
2. Look at how each voice is behaving individually (the features of each melody) and then look at how they behave together (the features of the contrapuntal structure).
3. Examine the rhythmic life of the piece and any other elements you will want to incorporate in yours.
4. Construct a procedural outline to follow while composing a piece in a similar style.

**While analyzing \_\_\_\_\_, describe the following:**

Key, Mode, Scale:

Range of Voices:

Form:

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Imitation:

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Rhythmic Ideas:

Text-Music Relationship:

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Melodic Ideas:

Conjunct/Disjunct Motion:

Voice Crossing:

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Consonance/Dissonance:

Important Intervals + Treatment:

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Beginning:

Ending:

Closes of Phrases:



## **Example Assignment #1 – Popular Song Counterpoint**

**Task:** Write a bass line or riff to go along with an 8-bar melody from one of your favorite popular songs.

- Place the melody on the top line of a grand staff, with chord symbols above.
- Your bass line/riff should be rhythmically active, setting a groove against which the melody is heard.
- The bass line/riff should complement, but not overpower, the original melody when they are played together.
- The bass line/riff can be repetitive, but it should fit and sound good with at least 8 bars of melody.
- The bass line/riff should follow the characteristics of a popular song counterpoint identified during our analysis class on this subject.
- The bass line should have a clear rhythmic structure for the meter.

Lastly, write a short (100–200 word) description of how your bass line follows the idioms of popular music counterpoint.

## **Example Assignment #2 – 8-bit Video Game Counterpoint**

**Task:** Compose a musical theme for a moment of your choice from [Super Mario Bros.](#) or [Legend of Zelda](#).

Your music should adhere to the following parameters:

- It should be written in the style of 8-bit music for Nintendo Gameboy and contain the following:
  - At most 4 parts: Two melodic pulse parts using square waves, one lower bass part using a triangle wave, and a noise parts consisting of 4-6 noises that roughly map to various parts of a standard drum kit.
  - Each of ther 4 parts are only capable of one sound at a time. You may choose to write for 2-4 parts, but they should adhere to the possibilities of this style of music.
  - The counterpoint should follow the characteristics determined in class sessions on Video Game Counterpoint.
- Your music should have at least 8 bars and a clear form: AABA, ABAC, ABA, ABACA, etc. Your music can feature repeats and looping material, as the models did.
- Your music can be submitted in standard staff notation or using a DAW.
- Lastly, submit a short (100–200 word) description of how the music connects to the scene in the video game and involves counterpoint. Be sure to also indicate the moment of the video game you chose with a time stamp.

## **Final Project**

For your final project you will analyze a composition that will serve as your model in-depth, create a list of counterpoint characteristics found in the piece, identify procedures for creating a piece in a similar style, and then compose a short work based on the model. With this project, you will independently complete the process that we have done each week throughout this semester.

The only criteria for the piece you use as the model is that it must have counterpoint as a main feature. The time period and style of the model is open.

During the final exam period, you will present your project to your classmates in these three stages: an analysis + list of characteristics, an outline of procedures, and your finished piece.

During the presentation, the finished piece should be performed: either by yourself and/or your peers in the class or via MIDI instruments through a notation program or DAW.

Remember, you are not composing an original work. Rather, you are using your analytical skills to imitate the style of the piece that you choose as your model.

### **Grading of Final Project:**

Each part of the final project will be worth the following:

1. Analysis + List of Characteristics: 7 points
  2. Outline of Procedures: 3 points
  3. Composition: 10 points
  4. Presentation: 5 points
- Total: 25 points

### **Dates to Remember:**

1 month before presentation: Send an email to instructor stating the model piece you have chosen.

2 weeks before presentation: Submit preliminary analysis and list of characteristics.

1 week before presentation: Meet 1-on-1 for a consultation with the instructor.