Counterpoint, art of combining different melodic lines in a musical composition. It is among the characteristic elements of Western musical practice.

The word *counterpoint* is frequently used interchangeably with *polyphony*. This is not properly correct, since *polyphony* refers generally to music consisting of two or more distinct melodic lines while *counterpoint* refers to the compositional technique involved in the handling of these melodic lines. Good counterpoint requires two qualities: (1) a meaningful or harmonious relationship between the lines (a “vertical” consideration—*i.e.*, dealing with *harmony*) and (2) some degree of independence or individuality within the lines themselves (a “horizontal” consideration, dealing with melody). *Musical theorists* have tended to emphasize the vertical aspects of counterpoint, defining the combinations of notes that are *consonances* and *dissonances*, and prescribing where consonances and dissonances should occur in the strong and weak beats of musical metre. In contrast, composers, especially the great ones, have shown more interest in the horizontal aspects: the movement of the individual melodic lines and long-range relationships of musical design and texture, the balance between vertical and horizontal forces, existing between these lines. The freedoms taken by composers have in turn influenced theorists to revise their laws.

The word *counterpoint* is occasionally used by ethnomusicologists to describe aspects of *heterophony*—duplication of a basic melodic line, with certain differences of detail or of decoration, by the various performers. This usage is not entirely appropriate, for such instances as the *singing* of a single melody at parallel intervals (*e.g.*, one performer beginning on C, the other on G) lack the truly distinct or separate voice parts found in true polyphony and in counterpoint. Finally, contemporary theorists generally use the word *counterpoint* in a narrow sense for musical styles resembling those of Palestrina or Bach and emphasizing clear melodic relationships (*e.g.*, melodic *imitation*) between the voice parts.

Counterpoint can be considered more broadly, however, as an essential element in many styles within Western music. Composers in different periods have used counterpoint differently: in the *Middle Ages* they used it for the superimposition of different rhythmic groupings; in the Renaissance for melodic imitation; in the Baroque for contrasts between groups of instruments or voices; in the *Classical period* in conjunction with tonality, the organization of music in terms of key; in the Romantic in the combining of leitmotifs, or short melodic fragments; and in 20th-century music in the *arrangement* of isolated components of sound.

**Counterpoint in the Middle Ages**

The earliest examples of actual written counterpoint appear in the late 9th-century treatise *Musica enchiriadis*. Here a *plainchant* melody, or “principal voice” (*vox principalis*), is combined with another part, “organal voice” (*vox organalis*), singing the same melody in parallel motion a perfect fourth or fifth below (*e.g.*, G or F below C).
Such music was called organum, probably because it resembled the sound of contemporary organs. In the early 11th century, the teacher and theorist Guido of Arezzo in his *Micrologus* described a variety of organum in which the accompanying or organal voice had become more individualized. In addition to moving parallel to the main voice, it included oblique (diverging or converging) motion and contrary (opposite) motion. In this era the organal voice remains melodically awkward and subservient to the chant voice, as though it were composed one note at a time simply to colour or ornament each note of the chant. Early organum is thus not far removed from heterophony. Until the end of the 11th century organum was written entirely in note-against-note style, described, in 1336, as *punctus contra punctum* (point against point—i.e., note against note), hence the name counterpoint.

In the 12th century true polyphony comes into being: the melodic lines become individualized mostly by being given different rhythms. There emerges a hierarchy between the voice parts. The emphasis is upon the chant voice, which now becomes the lower part. Its notes are prolonged, or “held,” and this part is now called the tenor, from the Latin *tenere*, to hold. The contrapuntal genius of the Middle Ages realizes itself mostly through the use of rhythmic contrasts between the different voice parts, and such contrasts gradually increase in complexity from c. 1100 to c. 1400. Around 1200 Pérotin, composer at Notre Dame in Paris who wrote some of the earliest music in three and four parts, superimposed different rhythmic modes (short fixed rhythmic patterns) in the voice parts. In his three-part *Alleluia Nativitas*, the voices are in different rhythmic modes, and they are also distinguished by different phrase lengths, consisting of more or fewer repetitions of the rhythmic pattern.

During the 13th century such contrasts were carried still further in the motet, a musical form usually in three voice parts, each in a different rhythmic mode. The theorist Franco of Cologne advocated the use of consonance at the beginning of each measure; such consonances (usually a chord made up of the unison, fifth, and octave, such as C–G–C) served as fixed pillars in terms of which the horizontal extensions of different rhythmic lengths were like soaring arches of sound. The tenor voice part in the motets of the 14th and early 15th centuries was organized by huge rhythmic recurrences known as isorhythm (i.e., the return throughout the piece of a complex rhythmic pattern, not necessarily in conjunction with the same pitches of the melody). During the 14th century, particularly in the works of Guillaume de Machaut, the upper voice part was sometimes displaced by a beat or more in respect to the other parts, giving it further rhythmic independence. In the late 14th century complicated syncopations (displaced accents) and the simultaneous use of different metres characterized some of the most complex counterpoint in history.

The Renaissance

If the medieval composer explored mostly the possibilities of rhythmic counterpoint, the Renaissance composer was concerned primarily with melodic relationships between the voice parts. The predominant technique used was that of imitation; i.e., the successive statement of the same or similar melody in each of the voice parts so that one voice imitates another.
Imitation had appeared earlier in the Italian caccia and French chace, roundlike vocal forms of the 14th century, and in England in the 13th-century round, Sumer is icumen in. These compositions anticipate the Renaissance and also emphasize the rhythmic relationships typical of medieval counterpoint.

During the Renaissance the technique of imitation contributed to a new unity between the voices, as opposed to the hierarchy found in medieval counterpoint. Renaissance composers strove also for clear melodic relationships between voices; consequently imitations usually began on the same beat of a measure and were separated in pitch by simple intervals such as the fifth (as, C–G) or octave (as, C–C). The Renaissance theorists, among them Johannes Tinctoris and Gioseffo Zarlino, categorized dissonances according to type and governed each type by definite rhythmic and melodic restrictions.

What is often proclaimed as the “golden age” of counterpoint—meaning melodic counterpoint—stretches from the late 15th to the late 16th century, from the Flemish master Jean d’Okeghem to the Spanish Tomás Luis de Victoria and the Elizabethan William Byrd. Its leading masters were Josquin des Prez, Giovanni Pierluigi da Palestrina, and Orlando di Lasso. The northern composers in particular showed a penchant for complex melodic relationships. Okeghem’s Missa prolationum (Prolation Mass), for example, involves simultaneous canons in two pairs of voices. (In a canon, one melody is derived from another. It may be identical, as in a round, or it may be given various alterations, as of speed, or metre or omission of certain notes.) The most versatile craftsman of the Renaissance was Josquin, whose music displays a continual variety of contrapuntal ingenuities, including melodic imitation. His use of successive imitation in several voices, as in his Missa da pacem based on the chant melody “Da pacem” (“give peace”), is coupled with melodic smoothness and rhythmic vitality.

The imitative style came to its fullest flowering in the late 16th century not only in the masses and motets of di Lasso and Palestrina but also in secular songs such as the French chanson and Italian madrigal. It also flourished in instrumental music in such contrapuntal forms as fantasias, canzonas, and ricercari.

**The Baroque period**

During the 17th and early 18th centuries the pure linear—i.e., melodic—counterpoint of the Renaissance, now called the first practice, was retained alongside the newer type of counterpoint known as the second practice. This latter type was characterized by a freer treatment of dissonances and a richer employment of tone colour. The new liberties with dissonance disturbed the conservative theorists of the time; but they were justified by their proponents on the ground that they allowed a more expressive treatment of the text. Still more distinct was a new use of tone colour. Although the individual melodic lines often resembled those of the Renaissance, they were intensified and made to stand out through differences of scoring or instrumentation. In figured bass compositions (in which a keyboard instrument improvised the harmonies over a given bass melody) the counterpoint was between the upper melody and the bass line. These stood out clearly from one another because of their differences of instrumental or vocal tone colour. Also significant at this time was the development of concerto-like scoring. In a concerto a soloist or group of instruments is contrasted with the entire orchestra. Hence concerto style emphasized contrasts between the numbers of performers, the high and low registers, and the tone colours of two or more performing groups. This was anticipated in some of the madrigals (Italian part-songs) of the late Renaissance, especially those of Luca Marenzio and Don Carlo Gesualdo, in which two or three voice parts in a high or low register were immediately answered by parts in a contrasting register. Giovanni Gabrieli of Venice expanded this principle in his Symphoniae Sacrae (Sacred Symphonies) by setting off choirs of voices or instruments, thus achieving a counterpoint of contrasting sonorities. Such concerto-like effects became an essential part of the later madrigals and operas of Claudio Monteverdi. In his madrigal Lamento of the Nymph, a single soprano
voice is pitted against three male voices, and both in turn against an instrumental continuo (figured
bass played, for example, by cello and harpsichord) in the background.

This type of counterpoint was ideal for emphasizing dramatic contrasts in the new forms of the opera
and the oratorio. In these forms soloists, ensembles, and instrumental parts were opposed and
combined in a great variety of ways by composers like Heinrich Schütz, Giacomo Carissimi, and Henry
Purcell. In the late Baroque Arcangelo Corelli and Antonio Vivaldi added this style of dramatic contrasts
to the purely instrumental contrasts of the concerto. The Baroque concerto culminated in the
Brandenburg Concertos of J.S. Bach, which are characterized by a remarkable fusion of contrapuntal
lines and instrumental colours.

Bach's counterpoint has a retrospective side, which uses a mainly melodic approach.

The fugue, a composition using the technique of melodic imitation, became highly developed in Bach's
hands—e.g., the fugues of the Well-Tempered Clavier and his final compendium of contrapuntal
devices, The Art of the Fugue. A similar melodic, rather than tone-colour, approach occurs in works such
as the Inventions and in the canons of the Musical Offering. These works are akin to "the first practice,"
the melodic counterpoint of the Renaissance, although in their use of dissonance and harmony they go
considerably beyond Renaissance convention.

The Classical period

The turn from the Baroque to the Classical period in music was marked by the change from a luxuriant
polyphonic to a relatively simple homophonic texture—i.e., a texture of a single melodic line plus
chordal accompaniment. Composers of the early Classical period (c. 1730–70) largely eschewed
counterpoint altogether, drawing on it only when preparing church music in the "learned style," as the
Renaissance style was then called. Many of the keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti and Carl
Philipp Emanuel Bach, despite a basically homophonic approach, reveal a skillful interplay between
the main melody and accompaniment. In the late Classical period (c. 1770–1820), especially in the
music of the Viennese school of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, there was an ever-increasing
penetration of counterpoint into musical forms based on this homophonic style and its contrasts of
tonality, or key. This counterpoint in turn was tempered by the Classical style and musical forms. For
example, although combined melodic lines are heard as counterpoint, together they can also be heard
as a series of harmonies. In this way they form unified phrases in the homophonic style. This satisfied
demands for symmetrical phrase lengths and clear-cut cadences, or stopping points, necessary to mark
the sections of Classical forms such as the sonata.

Haydn underwent his contrapuntal "crisis," or movement toward counterpoint, during the 1770s, the
period of Sturm und Drang ("Storm and Stress") in German literature, which had a deepening effect on
other arts as well. Three of his *Sun Quartets* (1772) had fugues as final movements, and in the *Russian Quartets* (1781) Haydn proclaimed “an entirely new manner,” in which the thematic material was to be more equally shared by all of the stringed instruments instead of being given to a single principal melody instrument. Haydn heard Handel’s oratorios in London, which inspired him to write his own richly contrapuntal late oratorios, *The Creation* and *The Seasons*.

Mozart’s discovery of the contrapuntal art of Bach and Handel impressed him so deeply that almost all of his later works were affected. The *ensembles* of the operas—*e.g.*, *Don Giovanni* and *Cosi fan tutte*—with their clear delineation of several characters through their vocal lines, only became possible because of his new feeling for counterpoint. And at one point in his *Jupiter Symphony* five different themes are stated simultaneously, singly, or in combination. Nevertheless the counterpoint is kept entirely subservient to the harmonies of the symphony’s tonal design, or its use of keys. Each voice is also governed by an underlying phrase structure applied to all of them, so that the combined parts form unified musical phrases.

Beethoven began his career in Vienna under the tutelage of the noted contrapuntal theorist Johann Albrechtsberger, and this, coupled with his admiration for Handel, probably accounts for his lifetime interest in counterpoint. He drew upon counterpoint to create musical intensity, especially in the development section of *sonata* form (the form prominent in Classical *symphonies* and chamber music), as in the first movement of the *Razumovsky Quartet*, Opus 59, No. 1, for example. In his late sonatas and quartets, except for obvious fugal works such as the first movement of Opus 131, or the *Great Fugue*, Opus 133, almost every movement shows the interpenetration of the principles of counterpoint, which deals with melodic lines, and tonality, which deals with harmonies.

**The Romantic period**

Counterpoint in the 19th century had a retrospective side in addition to a characteristically Romantic style. Richard Wagner admired the counterpoint of Palestrina, and Johannes Brahms revered the Baroque masters. Felix Mendelssohn revived Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in 1829, and this led to numerous Bach-like works, such as the organ sonatas of Mendelssohn and numerous organ works by Max Reger, as well as arrangements of Bach’s works by Franz Liszt. Yet the true bent of Romantic composers was toward combinations of motives (small melodic fragments), use of motivic *accompaniments* against themes, and, later, of the combination of leitmotifs, or motives with significance beyond the music itself. The *lieder* (songs) of Franz Schubert were highly innovative because of their motivic accompaniments, which balance in interest the vocal part itself and contrapuntally interact with it. This technique is still more pronounced in the songs of Robert Schumann and Hugo Wolf. It is also the tendency in 19th-century opera. In the later operas of Giuseppe Verdi the voices often have a parlante character (imitating speech through music) while the orchestra defines the dramatic substance. This, too, is the principle of the Wagner *music dramas*, with their “speech-song” (*Sprechgesang*) in the voice balanced contrapuntally by the leitmotifs of the accompaniment. In *Tristan und Isolde* Wagner set the leitmotifs in counterpoint against one another. Similarly, in the Prelude to Act III of *Siegfried*, a motive known as the “Need of the Gods” is cast against one associated with the “Valkyries.”

![Counterpoint in the Romantic period](from_siegfried_act_ill_by_richard_wagner)

This results in a “counterpoint” of connotations and of emotions as well as in a musical counterpoint. In purely instrumental music a similar joining of motives previously heard separately is encountered in the finale of Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique* when the plainchant melody “Dies Irae” (“Day of Wrath”) is heard together with the theme called “Round of Sabbath.” Richard Strauss, in his tone poem *Ein Heldenleben* (*A Hero’s Life*), skillfully combines several themes taken from his earlier tone poems.
And in the late symphonies of Gustav Mahler there is sometimes a complex of interwoven motives, each of which stands out contrapuntally through its presentation by a solo instrument.

In the 20th century Arnold Schoenberg carried this technique further, especially in his 12-tone works, which are based on a 12-tone row, or specific ordering of the 12 notes of the chromatic scale, arranged in such a way as to avoid a sense of tonality. In some 12-tone operas—e.g., Moses und Aron by Schoenberg and Lulu by Alban Berg—there is but one tone row used in the entire work; nonetheless, several hours of music are spun out of it through a continual variety of thematic shapes and contrapuntal combinations.

The 20th century

The 20th century, like the 19th, has had its counterpoint inspired by earlier music. Anton Webern, for example, advocated a return to the forms of counterpoint used by Renaissance composers such as Heinrich Isaac, and in numerous of his own works (e.g., Symphonie) he makes use of Renaissance contrapuntal devices such as simultaneous canons and retrograde movement between the voice parts—i.e., one voice using the other’s melody but with the notes in reverse order. Out of a similar return to Baroque forms came musical works such as the double fugue (a fugue based on two themes) that forms the second movement of the Symphony of Psalms by Igor Stravinsky.

But the use of older musical forms is no more of the essence of 20th-century counterpoint than it was of the 19th. A basic characteristic of 20th-century counterpoint is the separation of the voice parts into isolated entities of sound that are of themselves rather static. This may take the form of polytonality (the simultaneous use of two or more keys), using as static entities the notes of each key. It may also take the form of contrast of individual tone colour effects, rather than of melodies, found in much electronic music. (This use extends beyond the original definition of counterpoint simply as the combination of melodies.)

Richard Strauss’s Elektra (1909) was one of the earliest works to make use of polytonality; in certain passages the instruments and voice parts are grouped into layers, each of which defines a different tonality, or key, although in this case all of the keys can also be interpreted as complicated aspects of the basic key. Stravinsky’s Three Pieces for String Quartet (No. 1) suggests four keys at the same time: G, B, D, and A♭. In this particular work each instrument is limited throughout the piece to a few notes assigned to it. Thus each part is absolutely individual and, except for the viola, consists of an ostinato melodic and rhythmic pattern. The coming together of these ostinato patterns at different times and in continually shifting arrangements suggests the effect of a mobile. Béla Bartók carried out a similar procedure in many of the short piano pieces of his Mikrokosmos, and in his Fourth Quartet (1928) he set apart tone clusters (chords built up in seconds, as C–D–E–F–G) in this way.

Turning now to a counterpoint purely of tone colours, Intégrales (1925) by Edgard Varèse presents 11-note “sound-clouds” in the wind instruments in opposition to the sounds of a large battery of percussion instruments. This approach probably grew directly out of earlier experiments with polytonality, but here tone colours, rather than keys or tones, are differentiated. Elliott Carter in his Double Concerto (1961) set apart two groups of instruments, one around a piano, another around a harpsichord, each with its distinctive tone colours and its own distinctive harmonic intervals or note combinations. In György Ligeti’s Atmospheres every instrument in a symphony orchestra, including every string part, plays its own unique, melodic pattern; all of these parts coalesce into gigantic bands, or spectra, of tone colour that contrast with one another. In later experiments, the sound-producing groups are further set
off by visual or spatial contrasts in the physical placement of performers; e.g., Ramon Zupko’s *Third Planet from the Sun*, 1970.

**The literature of counterpoint**

Most of the writings on counterpoint have sought to increase the student’s skill in musical composition. From the 18th century onward, textbooks of counterpoint have recommended as a model usually Palestrina or Bach, and in some recent cases 20th-century composers. Medieval and Renaissance treatises also were originally intended for student guidance and reflect the taste and attitudes of their own time. Several 20th-century studies deal with the contrapuntal technique of a particular composer or group of composers.

*Roland John Jackson*

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